

Identifying Unique Brand Associations for a Women's Major Sporting Event

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Abstract

Brand associations, in simple terms, are any links that are made between a consumer and a given brand. With the known positive impact that brand associations have on consumer behaviour, growing the field of knowledge that sports teams have on brand associations could help to develop team image, awareness and revenues. The identified gap in brand association studies is around women's sporting events. Two key phases of data were completed. First, an online screening questionnaire obtained demographic information as well as answers to a free-thought listing task. The second stage was a series of eight semi-structured interviews, where answers of the free-thought listing task were further explored. Analysis of both data sets provided insights into the brand associations of the Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021). Five key brand associations were identified and further explored within the relevant literature. The associations were *Cultural Presence, Athlete Virtue, Camaraderie, Inspiration and Exceeded Expectations*. The findings of this study will be useful for informing event organizers of future major women's sporting events and their marketing strategies.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed by Max Maddocks-Henderson

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background to Research

Women's sport has and continues to, face numerous obstacles as it continues to grow globally. Gender stereotypes and misogyny have both been major contributive factors towards its stunted development when compared to men's sports (Toffoletti, 2017).

Despite the obvious gender inequity within sport, the women's game is on the rise.

Viewership around women's sports is increasing exponentially, with major women's sports leagues such as the National Womens Basketball League, National Women's Soccer League and NCAA tournament showing remarkable growth in America (Samba TV, 2022). A different analytic report completed by the Women's Sports Trust (2023) in the UK showed similar patterns of growth, with record-breaking statistics for domestic women's sports viewership. Unsurprisingly, as women's sport has grown, so has the potential for economic capital through its marketing.

The theme of gender inequity within sports continued through to its marketing. Up until recently, marketing involving female athletes consistently involved a focus on sex and gender roles (Grow, 2008), which in turn has undermined female athletes and their true athletic ability (Shaw & Amis, 2001). These marketing strategies, combined with the limited media coverage of female sport, has led to low perceptions of female athletes by the general public (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). In stark contrast to historical norms, positive growth within women's sports and how they are marketed is continuing to take place (Morgan, 2019). Female athletes are increasingly being recognized for their athletic ability (Morgan, 2019). While the audience of women's sports is not bigger than that of men's

sports, at times it expands to a different target audience (Hess, 2019), therefore providing an incentive to capitalize on the women's sports market.

As the potential capital gain of marketing within women's sports has developed, so has the research. In a similar vein to their respective development in sports, the literature on marketing women's sports is underdeveloped when compared to that of men's sports. Although this gap is slowly being filled, one area of research that needs to be addressed is in the context of brand associations in women's sports. Associations, which simply put are the thoughts that come to mind when prompted with a brand (Keller, 1993), have been a well-researched topic within a male sporting context. As per Keller (1993) brand associations can be separated into three different categories which are: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Authors have learned valuable information regarding how to better market men's sports based on brand association research.

Limited brand association research has been conducted within a women's sports context with Doyle et al (2020) being one of the only significant pieces of literature in the field. That piece of research however was focused on women's sports teams within Australia. To this date, no research has been developed which has a specific focus on brand associations of a major women's sporting event. Therefore, the Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021) provided a great opportunity to address this gap in the literature and gain valuable insight for event organizers of future major women's sporting events.

The current study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate brand associations of the WRWC2021 among young people. The study was separated into two distinct phases. Phase 1 was a quantitative stage, which came in the form of an online questionnaire. Phase 2 was a series of 8 semi-structured interviews which were informed by the results of the first phase of data collection. The second phase looked to further investigate the

associations unearthed through the online questionnaire, while also seeing if there were previously unmentioned associations held by interviewees.

Aim & Research Questions

The aim of this research was to identify and build an understanding of the unique brand associations of WRWC2021 that are held by young people. The findings generated from this study will be useful to inform event organizers of future major women's sporting events, as well as provide some potential angles for marketing strategies around women's sports. The following research question is explored:

- What are the brand associations presented by young people in regard to the (Women's) Rugby World Cup?

Structure of Dissertation

The present dissertation is presented in five chapters. Within Chapter 1, a brief overview of the research gap related to brand associations of major women's sporting events is discussed, along with an overview and aim of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the current literature related to brand associations of a major women's sporting event.

Branding and its key contributors are discussed before specifically looking into brand associations and their relation to major sporting events and women's sports. Chapter 3 outlines and justifies the methodology used within the current research. Chapter 4 presents the results of the current research gained from the data collected. Within this chapter, the key brand associations found through both phases of data collection are presented. Finally, chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and their relationship to the current literature. Managerial implications are also discussed, before talking about the limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research of a similar focus.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, a comprehensive literature review is presented as it relates to the topic of brand associations and major women's sports events. First, an examination of the current state of marketing research in the women's sport context is provided. Next, an overview of branding and its key components is presented covered. This includes content around branding, brand awareness, brand imagery, brand equity and brand loyalty. Next, the fundamentals of brand associations are explained, as well as their importance within a sporting context. This section of the chapter covers both brand associations in sports generally, before narrowing down to the literature around brand associations in women's sports. From there, a brief overview is provided regarding brand association research in the context of a major sports event.

Brand associations were first described in Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity framework. The model establishes that building a strong brand involves four key stages. As Keller (1993) and Del Rio et al., (2001) explain, these stages are: (1) establishing brand identity, (2) creating the appropriate brand meaning through strong and unique associations, (3) eliciting positive brand responses, and (4) forging brand relationships with loyal customers. While all four steps are important to building a strong brand, the focus of the proposed study are brand associations as there a particular opportunity to explore this in a women's sport context.

Marketing Women's Sport

The importance of marketing in women's sports has continued to increase in recent years. As has been well documented by the likes of Toffoletti (2017), the advancement of women's sport has had several obstacles including a patriarchal hierarchy and gender stereotyping. Initially, the marketing of female sports was focused on advertisement and was often sexualized (Morgan, 2019). One of the major ramifications of the consistent objectification of the female body in earlier sports marketing approaches was the decreased recognition of female athletic performance (Shaw & Amis, 2001). In the context of events like the Olympics, media coverage consistently focused on male sports as the main events, while female events were portrayed as less significant (Shaw & Amis, 2001).

Media representation plays an important role in whether managers decide to sponsor a particular athlete or not (Copeland et al., 1996). Therefore, the constant undermining of women's athletes had a significant effect on their sponsorship opportunities (Shaw & Amis, 2001). Due to the way the media portrayed female athletes, they were often perceived as being supportive, and encouraging (Messner, 1988) rather than powerful and successful which was an image then believed to be sought after by sponsors (Shaw & Amis, 2001). The only true recognition female athletes were given historically was to do with their health and beauty, rather than their competitive attributes (Theberge, 1991). As a result, the very few women that were present in sports adverts or sponsorship were shown in 'supportive' roles of athletes, such as family members, girlfriends or cheerleaders (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998).

Despite the early focus on sex and gender roles, there are positive signs about the growth of women's sport and specifically how athletes are being portrayed (Morgan, 2019). Nowadays, female athletes are being increasingly recognized for their athletic abilities and

on-field performance (Morgan, 2019). This change in perception around female athletes has happened in parallel to a significant increase in viewership. The growth of female sports has provided an opportunity for businesses to reach a wider target audience beyond what male sports offer (Hess, 2019). An important example of growth was the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup (FWWC), which set a record viewership of 14.3 million Americans watching the final between the Netherlands and the United States (Hess, 2019). Incredibly this was 22% more than the total American viewers for the 2018 Men's FIFA World Cup (Hess, 2019). To fully capitalize on the remarkable growth of women's sports, effective branding strategies need to be utilized. The concept of branding, related processes and component parts are discussed below.

Branding

Brands have been defined as “a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity and to build a reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization.” (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015, p. 1). Branding is the wider process and allows a product to communicate characteristics, values and attributes (Kapferer, 2001). Branding has become a major priority for businesses in recent decades due to the growing recognition of importance (Cid et al., 2022). Allowing differentiation from competition, branding has become an essential component of a marketing strategy (Kapferer, 2015).

Managing a brand involves consideration of product design, packaging, advertising, and customer service (Keller, 2019). These are all pathways for brand development and ultimately outdoing competition (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). As Keller (2019) noted, branding success comes down to differentiation and offering unique value.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is the first step and refers to consumers recognising and/or comprehending a specific brand, and is an essential component of brand equity and is a significant factor when it comes to subsequent consumer behaviours (Bauer et al., 2008; Keller, 2008). Awareness of a specific brand has a significant impact on market performance, consumer-decision making and brand equity (Zhang, 2020).

In the early stages of brand awareness research, Rossiter and Percy (1987) presented a model that explained the two key contributors towards brand awareness. These two elements are 'brand recall' and 'brand recognition' (Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Brand recall is a consumer's ability to remember a brand when presented with a cue, such as the type of service or product (Keller, 1993). While brand recall requires the consumer to recognize a brand from memory, brand recognition relies only on familiarity (Aaker, 1991). For example, brand recognition can be measured by prompting consumers with the specific cues that the brand used to advertise (Keller, 1993). These cues can be visual or auditory, such as packaging, advertisements, slogans, and logos (Aaker, 1991).

Aaker (1991) also presented a model that encompasses brand awareness and was labelled 'The Awareness Pyramid'. This pyramid consists of four levels of brand awareness within a consumer's mind. The model starts with 'unaware of brand', before 'brand recognition' and 'brand recall', finishing with 'top of mind'. Keller (2008) also explained brand recognition as reliant on recall and recognition, both of which contribute to sustaining brand equity.

The most significant means to increase brand awareness is advertising (Keller, 1993). Advertising has been used to promote brands across a multitude of platforms, including television, radio or digital media, to reinforce a brand in consumers' memory (Einstein,

2017). The importance of advertising to build brand awareness has long been highlighted in the body of related literature (Krugman, 1966; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). More recent support for this important relationship has also emerged (Tellis, 2004; Zhang, 2020). There are several other means of building brand awareness that have been well documented, such as positioning the brand, sponsorship, event marketing, sports marketing, advertising and integrated marketing communications (Latif et al., 2014).

Brand Image

Brand image has an important effect on the ultimate success of a branding strategy (Keller, 1993). According to Yu (2022), brand image refers to consumers' perception and overall impression of a brand. This definition is consistent with Keller (1993) who, based on Herzog (1963) and Newman (1957), defined brand image as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (p.3). If a brand's image is perceived favourably by a consumer, then an increase in customer purchases and greater brand loyalty can occur (Aaker, 1991). Zhang (2015) stated that numerous factors such as brand personality, values, attributes and benefits contribute towards brand image.

Brand Equity

Brand equity is a widely researched topic within marketing and brand management literature. It refers to the value that has been added to a product or service beyond itself in the instance that there was no brand (Stahl et al., 2012). According to Keller (1993), brand equity can be separated into two separate categories: customer-based brand equity and company-based brand equity. Customer-based brand equity refers to the value that a brand adds from the perspective of the customer, while company-based brand equity refers to the added value of the brand from the eyes of the company (Keller, 1993). As has been well documented in previous literature (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), branding can increase

customer perceptions of a product or service. Therefore brand equity is the measure of this added value that can be constructed through a strong brand, which leads to greater consumer behaviour (Keller, 1993). Products or services that have strong brand equity are generally more profitable and often feature a brand loyal following as well (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Measuring brand equity is important so an organisation can learn how strong their brand is (Keller, 1993). Through measurement, a better idea of customer perceptions of their brand is possible as is the potential to identify potential weaknesses that can be addressed in pursuit of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). The insights from measuring and understanding brand's equity can help inform future strategy (Aaker, 1991).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the ultimate outcome that organisations seek from their products and services. It is the single most important factor leading to continued purchases from existing customers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Gladden and Funk (2001) highlighted two reasons underpinning the importance of brand loyalty. The first reason is that “brand loyalty ensures a more stable following even when the core product’s performance falters (i.e., the team has a losing season)” (Gladden & Funk, 2001, p. 68). This is especially crucial for a brand going through change or tough times, as it will have continued support from its loyal customers (Oliver, 1999). On the other hand, if a company was struggling and had a lack of loyal consumers, its position in the market would fall drastically (Keller, 2013). The second reason brand loyalty is so important is that “brand loyalty creates opportunities for product extensions beyond the core product” (Gladden & Funk, 2001, p. 68).

For many brands, maintaining consumer loyalty continues to be a top priority. Various strategies may be used to accomplish this. One tactic involves incentives, product trials, and loyalty programmes to maintain clients' interest in their services (Malik & Bhargaw, 2019). Another important factor is the commitment to provide great customer service and a positive brand experience, which in turn increases loyalty (Arisandi, 2022). Additionally, customer loyalty is positively impacted by brand satisfaction and trust as well as the overall brand experience. These elements work together to generate a consistent, positive, and distinctive perception of a brand, known as brand image, which ultimately increases customer loyalty (Bauer, 2008).

Brand Associations

Brand associations, in simple terms, are any links that are made between a consumer and a brand (Keller, 1993). Examples of these linkages are product attributes, customer benefits, uses, product classes, competitors, lifestyles and countries of origin (Tuominen, 1999). These associations aid the consumer in product choice by facilitating the processing, organizing, and retrieving of information linked to specific brands from memory (Aaker, 1991). For all companies, big or small, brand association are an important part of brand expansion and making their brand stand out from others (Tuominen, 1999). Del Rio et al., (2001) made the argument that due to the way a brand is created it communicates a certain brand image. This 'image' would be designed to make specific associations in consumers' minds. Therefore, organisations seek to create associations in the consumer's mind, in hopes that strong, positive links develop.

The positive impacts of brand associations have been well-documented. Brand associations have a positive effect on brand loyalty, brand purchasing intentions, and brand fondness (Susilowati et al., 2019; Foroudi et al., 2018). Therefore, positive associations have

also been shown to contribute to positive brand equity (Faircloth et al., 2001; del Rio et al., 2001). Keller (1993) made the argument that companies looking to increase their brand equity need to offer and search for unique brand associations, so they stand out from the competition. Bauer et al., (2004) agreed highlighting the importance of developing favourable and unique associations among customers. Keller and Lehman (2006) made the suggestion that companies looking to increase brand associations need to craft an identity that is both unique and similar to their rival brands.

Keller (1993) identified three major categories of brand associations: attributes, benefits and attitudes. The first category, attributes, are the identifiable features that individualize a brand. From a consumer's perspective, attributes would be what they feel a specific brand is and what is involved with its consumption (del Rio et al., 2001). Two types of attributes can be identified. The first type is product-related attributes, which are defined as components required for the product to perform as sought by customers (Ross et al., 2006). The other type are non-product related attributes, which refer to external aspects of a service that relate to its consumption but are not an essential requirement (Ross et al., 2006). Benefits as brand associations develop directly from brand attributes, referring to how customers perceive these benefits will enhance whatever the topic at hand is (Keller, 1993). Finally, attitudes as brand associations are a basic yet important part of brand associations and refer to the consumer's overall evaluations (del Rio et al., 2001), which in turn influence consumer behaviour, emotional connection and brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

Brand Associations in Sport

Brand associations in a sport context are the specific focus of the current study and the research in this area is therefore worth further description. Ross et al. (2006) outlined the necessity of conducting brand association research and related impacts for sport teams. With the known positive impact that brand associations have on consumer behaviour, Ross et al. (2006) argued that growing the field knowledge that sports teams have on brand associations could help to develop team image, awareness and revenues. The authors noted that sports teams could also work to reinforce any positive brand associations that already exist. Bauer et al., (2004) are also supportive of the need for more focus on brand associations in sport contexts, pointing out the specific need for a method for measuring brand associations.

The obvious lack of a brand association measurement model within a sporting context was not only recognized by Bauer et al., (2004). Alongside Bauer et al (2004), Gladden and Funk (2002) and Ross et al. (2006) were some of the first researchers to construct scales that measured brand associations in sports teams and put them into practice. Gladden and Funk's (2002) North American study was conducted using supporters of American Football, baseball, ice hockey and basketball teams. The Team Association Scale (TAS) which they created had three categories, directly resembling Keller's (1993, 1998) breakdown of brand association into attributes, benefits and attitudes. Within the TAS, dimensions of brand associations are categorized as attributes (success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product distribution and traditions), benefits (identification, nostalgia, regional honour, escape and acceptance of peer group) and attitudes (significance, knowledge and interaction-emotions). Gladden and Funk (2002) concluded that the fan-team relationships were strongest when attributes including skill,

competition and excitement were present. Benefits such as entertainment value and team loyalty were also significant and strong associations.

Bauer et al., (2004) conducted a unique and valuable piece of research in this area. Their study was some of the first research completed investigating brand associations within a European sporting context. Once again, this research measured brand associations with football teams using Keller's (1993) conceptual study as the foundation. This study, however, only categorized associations into attributes and benefits, excluding attitudes. The findings of Bauer et al. (2004) suggested that those in charge of brand management of German football teams need to put more focus into creating strong, favourable and unique brand associations in the minds of their customers. They also found that when looking at sports consumption, non-product-related brand attributes have a greater impact on economic measures than product-related brand attributes.

Brand Associations in Women's Sport

Research in men's sports has shown that brand associations are positively related to consumers' behaviours, attitudes and team identification (Doyle et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2016; Wear & Heere, 2020). However, these observations are yet to be considered in the context of women's sports. Lobpries et al. (2018), among others, outlined the need for growth in the understanding of how consumers perceive women's sports brands.

While from a broader perspective, some may argue that the same frameworks and rationale could be applied to both men's and women's sports teams, women's sport is unique and requires specific focus. For example, women's sports and female athletes have traditionally been marketed sexually (Morgan, 2019). One of the key detrimental effects of this is that due to these existing, misdirected, perceptions, female athletes and their

sporting achievements are trivialized (Shaw & Amis, 2001; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). In the case of females being successful in their sport, they are also faced with the issue of meeting the demands of maintaining a certain degree of femininity that appeases societal demands (Harris, 2005). Basham (2018) argued that associations of rough sports may affect women's willingness to play them as well as others' perceptions of the women who play them. The associations made around women's sports have often supported Basham's (2018) claim, however, there is a desire to move in the right direction.

In reflection on the social, historical, and economic differences between male and female sports, Doyle et al. (2020) looked to further investigate how consumers may hold unique associations with women's sports teams by studying Australian Football League Women's (AFLW). In Doyle et al.'s (2020) study, five unique brand associations were uncovered through a set of interviews, three of which were positive and two were negative. These findings are in contrast with male-focused studies that have only identified positive associations (Doyle et al., 2020). Doyle et al. (2020) noted that these two negative associations, *Lack of Coverage* and *Funding Limitations*, suggest that consumers' perceptions of women's sports brands are influenced by well-known inequities. The presence of these negative associations within the interviewee's mind was not a complete surprise however, as previous research (Delia, 2020; Farrell et al., 2011) has shown that consumers' perceptions of women's brands can be impacted by historical, societal and economic conditions. On the other hand, the three newly identified positive associations: *Diversity and Inclusion*, *Role Models* and *New Opportunities* provide marketing managers with some useful information on how they can promote women's sport. In the case of these three positive associations, they provide a unique insight into how marketing strategies can be used within the women's sporting context. This is partially due to the

suggestion that consumers may be drawn toward women's sports due to the societal contribution they make (Funk et al., 2002; Mumcu et al., 2016).

Knowledge of brand associations within the women's sporting context is certainly limited, and there are still gaps related to this topic. The importance of understanding brand associations cannot be underestimated and therefore should be a focus for those working in the women's sport sector.

Brand Associations in an Event Setting

Another identified gap in brand association literature is within a sports event context. For example, Doyle et al. (2020) focused on specific women's competition, not an event. While there have been studies analysing branding around sports events, this is a significantly underdeveloped field. Caslavova and Petrackova (2011) conducted a study focused on evaluating the brand personality of large sports events. The events within this study were the FIFA World Cup, the Tour de France cycling championship, and the Summer Olympic Games. While brand personality is not the specific focus of the current study, brand associations do fall under the wider 'brand personality' umbrella, therefore providing value in a similar context of research. The authors utilized a mixed-method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect their data. They surveyed 217 attendees of the major sports events, before conducting a series of 10 interviews with the event organizers of their respective events. The results indicated that fans viewed the Summer Olympics as a prestigious and sophisticated event, while the FIFA World Cup was recognized as more exciting and dynamic. The the Tour de France, however, was perceived as less exciting and prestigious than the FIFA World Cup and Summer Olympic Games. This unique piece of research provided a brief insight into brand associations and major sporting events.

One study that specifically focused on brand associations around a sporting event was completed by Tsuji and Schlueter (2021). The authors identified the social significance of the annual Okinawa Marathon in Japan and aimed to explore associations held of it. Utilising a common data collection method within brand association research, Tsuji and Schlueter (2021) used a free-thought listing task. The authors elicited responses from 188 participants, who between them identified 938 brand associations. Tsuji and Schlueter (2021) categorized the most common associations based on Keller's (1993) attributes, benefits and attitudes. Some of the identified attributes were 'scenery', 'volunteers', 'support on the streets' and 'cultural events'. An interesting takeaway from the 'support on the streets' and 'cultural events' associations was that it seems a large number of participants place a lot of value in these cultural and community-oriented components of the event. The main benefits that were associated with the event were 'personal goal achievement', 'self-esteem' and 'feeling close to others'. Finally, the significant attitudes that were perceived were 'pleasant', 'entertaining' and 'valuable'. Overall, Tsuji and Schlueter (2021) recognized the need for sports events to understand the brand associations towards their event. Gaining this understanding is useful as that can inform marketing strategies and therefore create stronger brand associations.

These two event-based brand association studies are a good start, but there is an overall lack of research in the context of major sports events and women's events in particular. The (Women's) Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021) hosted by New Zealand was an ideal context within which to implement a study and add to the body of related literature.

Chapter 3 - Methods

Introduction

This research project involved two phases of data collection. In the first phase, an online questionnaire including a thought listing was deployed (n = 54). The second phase consisted of eight semi-structured interviews. In this chapter, the research design is outlined, as well as a description of participants, data-collection instruments and an overview of how the data was analysed. As a young male studying women's sport, my positionality was one of openness and curiosity throughout the project.

Research Design

The philosophical approach that underpinned the current study was pragmatism. As a philosophy, pragmatism prioritizes consequences, and in doing so incorporates ideas and theories that guide action (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). One of the key underpinnings of this approach is that flexibility and adaptation is valued in order to achieve the desired quality of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the context of the current study, pragmatism was an appropriate approach as it allowed for flexibility within the design process. With pragmatism in mind, the key question is "what will work best?" With the explicit focus here on brand associations, a design to best capture these unique sentiments was essential.

Consistent with a pragmatic approach, the current study was structured as a mixed-method design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative elements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is a general acceptance among scholars that pragmatism is a well-suited philosophical approach to mixed-methods study due to its prioritization of exploring the research question at hand, no matter the method (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Johnson and

Onwuegbuzie (2004) define a mixed-methods design as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study, or a series of studies, in order to enhance the overall research process” (p.17). This research design was used to enable the collection of rich data through complementary means.

This research project featured an initial quantitative phase, followed by a qualitative phase. This aligns with Creswell et al.’s (2003) mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Creswell et al. (2003) describe a sequential explanatory design as featuring five different stages. These stages are quantitative data collection, quantitative data analysis, qualitative data collection, qualitative data analysis, and finally a joint analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative stages (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A design of this type takes advantage of the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods to build a greater understanding of the topic (Creswell et al., 2003)

The initial quantitative stage in a design of this type typically involves the implementation of a survey (Creswell et al., 2003). Once the analysis of quantitative data has been carried out, the focus shifts onto the qualitative phase (Creswell et al., 2003). The role of this qualitative stage is to provide context and a deeper understanding to insights from the first stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The second phase typically involves interviews and/or focus groups but can also feature other qualitative research methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). From that point, the qualitative data is analysed in isolation, before being considered in conjunction with the quantitative data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Creswell et al.’s (2003) sequential explanatory design is robust and its benefits align well with the current study. The general strength held within this design method that allows for initial insights to be gathered at first before being investigated further, provided grounds

for its incorporation in the current study. However, when it came to the stage to further investigate the initial findings, new themes and associations were discovered. With the benefits of a mixed design in mind, a study was conceived in which data were to be collected through two separate phases.

Online Questionnaire

The first phase was an online screening questionnaire which was promoted widely across social media using the research team and research institute network. The social media posts invited individuals, aged between 18 and 25, who identified as fans of women's rugby to complete the questionnaire. By participating in the questionnaire, participants entered themselves into the draw for a \$100 gift card.

In the questionnaire, participants were asked a series of demographic questions which queried their name, age and gender. From there, the respondents were asked to complete a self-perception fandom measure as related to women's rugby. The scale has been used in various other sport marketing studies, such as Karg et al. (2019), McDonald et al. (2015), and Kunkel et al. (2020). This single scale item is simple and sufficient to capture data required in this project. The item reads, "when you think about (specific sport/team/league) I consider myself a..." Participants then rank their interest from casual observer (1) to hard-core fanatic (7). In this study, the question was adapted to read "When I think about women's rugby I consider myself...". This allowed the researcher to consider the depth of fandom alongside the brand associations that were provided. At the outset, it was a priority to capture Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021) brand associations across varying levels of fandom. This knowledge would allow for marketing strategies to be utilized which can target those of varying levels of fandom.

The key component of the online questionnaire was the free-thought listing section in which the aim was to have participants convey their associations of WRWC2021. A free-thought list is “a mental inventory of items an individual think of within a given category” (Quinlan, 2019, p.1431). This common qualitative research method reveals the natural associations that participants make with a certain topic (Quinlan, 2019). When a participant has only a few unproven hypotheses or no preconceived notions about the important cognitive aspects, the free thought-listing technique is an effective tactic (Cacioppo et al., 1997). The free thought listing method is highly valued because of the potential to capture “knowledge, attitudes and practices” (Quinlan, 2019, p.1432). Keddem et al., (2021) highlighted the potential to elicit spontaneous responses that are easily collected and analysed as a benefit of this method. Free-thought listings are ideal for extracting instant thoughts and emotions which aligns very well with the nature of brand associations – the focus of the current research.

Although thought listings have traditionally been completed within a face-to-face interview setting, there are other strategies that can be used (Keddem et al., 2021). Gravlee et al. (2012) completed a study comparing the free-list responses of face-to-face oral interviews, hand-written, and online free-lists. These findings showed that all three modes of free-list extraction resulted in no significant differences in the quality of results. However, it was concluded that the face-to-face method generated the fewest listed items. In this study, the online method also allowed participants to convey their associations in an unpressured environment (Gravelee et al., 2012; Keddem et al., 2021).

Free-thought listings are a common research design element within the brand association literature. This method has been used effectively in a number of sports brand association studies (Doyle et al., 2020; Tsuji and Schleter, 2021). Within the Doyle et al.

(2020) study, the participants were asked to complete the thought-listing exercise while thinking of their favourite women's sports team, before being asked to further explain the meaning behind the associations they made. On the other hand, Tsuji and Schleiter (2021) focused only on the free-thought listings results and opted not to interview the respondents on their in-depth thoughts of the Okinawa Marathon.

In this project, respondents were prompted with the question, "what comes to mind when you think of the (W)RWC2021?". A text-box was then provided for respondents to list associations. Upon the close of the online questionnaire, the results were considered but not yet comprehensively as is more common within Creswell et al.'s, (2003) mixed-methods sequential design. The focus at this stage was to identify thorough responses reflecting careful thought and engagement with the topic – such that these respondents could be invited for a follow-up interview.

Interviews

Within the qualitative phase of data collection, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured format due to the flexibility that is offered to the interviewer (Galletta, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are a popular method of data collection within qualitative research for this reason (Kallio, 2016). This format allows the interviewer to adapt their questions in reaction to the responses given by the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All eight of the interviews were conducted online, each lasting between 20 and 35 minutes. The interview guide (Table 2) provided base questions to structure the interview around. However, multiple additional questions were posed within each interview to further explore responses and their underlying meaning.

Participants

Within the first phase of data collection, 54 individuals responded to the online screening questionnaire. The 54 respondents ranged from the ages of 18-25 years old. A total of 24 respondents identified themselves as female (44%), while the remaining 30 identified themselves as male (56%).

Eight participants took part in the interview phase of the study and were given pseudonyms (Table 2). In the online questionnaire, four of the interviewees identified themselves as male and four female.

Table 1

Interview participants including pseudonyms

Name	Sarah	Anthony	Sophie	Ella	Luke	Bruno	Marcus	Chloe
Age	22	22	23	23	23	21	23	24
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female

Instruments and Ethics

Two mechanisms were used within the current study to generate data. These were the online questionnaire itself in used in the first phase (Figure 1) and an interview guide (Table 2) used in the second phase.

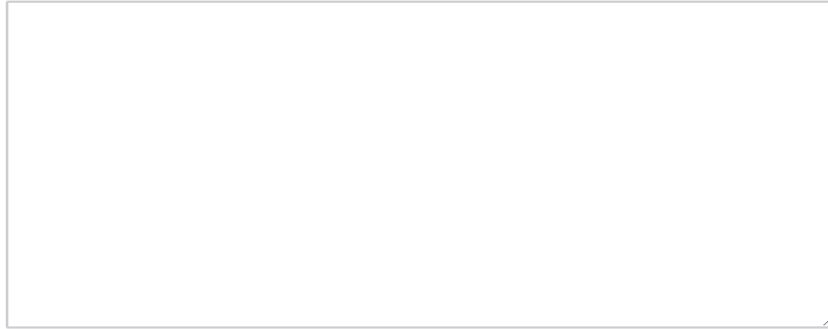
When I think about women's rugby I consider myself:

0 1 1 2 3 4 4 5 6 6 7

Casual Observer



What comes to mind when you think of the Women's Rugby World Cup?



Would you be willing to take part in stage 2 of this project which will involve a follow-up interview about brand associations of the WRWC 2021?

- YES
- NO



What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your email address?

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

Figure 1
Questionnaire layout in Qualtrics

Table 2
Interview Guide

1. In the online questionnaire, you listed “X” as a brand association for the (W)RWC2011. Can you expand on the nature of this association? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does this association relate to another association you listed (i.e., “Y”)?
2. In regards to “X”, how do you think you developed this association? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you believe this was an association developed internally, or through external influences?
3. An oft-mentioned association in either the other online questionnaire and/or the other interviews that you did NOT make, was “Y”. Why did you think you did not make this link?
4. An often mentioned association in other interviews was “Y”. Why do you think others make this association?
5. How do you feel the associations that you’ve made would compare to the men’s RWC?

Ethics approval was granted by AUT’s AUTEK Committee. The approval number is 22/209 (Appendix A). Consent forms, email script and information sheets were approved as part of this process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in two different stages aligned to each phase of the research. The first stage of data analysis focused on the text responses in the free-thought listing. There are three ways that can be used to collate and present free-thought listing results (Koll et al., 2010). First, associations can be sorted by frequency, capturing the number of times a specific association has been referred to across participants (Koll et al., 2010). The second is through valence, which aims to capture whether the association is positive or negative (Koll et al., 2010). The final method for categorizing associations is through the

ranking in which they occur on participants free-thought lists. For example, if one specific association is mentioned first in several participants lists then it can be concluded that it is a strong association (i.e., ranked first).

The second part of the data analysis focused on the transcribed interview data. A traditional thematic analysis was utilised. Thematic analysis is recognized as a commonly used method of analysis in qualitative sports research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The term thematic analysis refers to a wide range of methods used to analyze qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In modern day research, the most common approach to thematic analysis provides a means to code and develop themes from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2012) describe reflexive thematic analysis as a “theoretically flexible method” (p.4) for “developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (p.5). Therefore, the data collected throughout the interview stage was analysed and sorted into common themes, or in the context of this study, associations.

The process of converting raw data into themes was completed through a six phase process which Braun and Clarke (2006) explained. From beginning to end the phases were: 1) familiarising yourself with your data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report

As per Cresswell et al.'s (2003) sequential design, the joint analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative stages is an important part of interpreting the overall findings. Within this phase of the research, the data collected from the questionnaire, and the interviews, was integrated and analysed to explore commonality and distinctions.

Chapter 4 - Results

Introduction

The research question aligned to this study was around identifying unique brand associations. Several emerged from the two phases of data collection. Data were collected via an online questionnaire featuring a thought listing (Phase 1) as well as a set of eight interviews (Phase 2). The overall aim was to generate and understand brand associations related to the Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021). Analyses of the data have resulted in some important insights related to the focal event and potentially other major women's sporting events as well. From the online questionnaire, three brand associations were provided by many participants. A further five prominent brand associations emerged from the interviews. These specific associations are outlined in this chapter.

Phase 1 - Online Questionnaire

The first phase of this multi-method research project was the implementation of an online questionnaire with WRWC2021 as the focal event. The questionnaire queried age, gender and fandom level. The key question that participants responded to was presented as an open-text, free thought listing with this prompt: "What comes to mind when you think of the WRWC2021?". There were 54 respondents. As per Koll et al., (2010) there are three methods by which free-thought listing results can be analyzed: valance, frequency and ranking. Valance considers whether the association is a negative or positive one, frequency captures how often the associations were mentioned, and ranking establishes in what priority order the associations are placed. Ranking the free-thought listing results was not viable, as the majority of respondents listed only a single association.

By far the most frequent association was *The Growth of Women's Sport*. A total of 14 of the 54 respondents alluded to this in one way or another. These responses either referenced the promotion of women's rugby specifically, or women's sport more generally. The next most common association provided in the free-thought listing was *The Black Ferns*, which is the name of New Zealand's national women's team that ultimately won the World Cup. This association was listed by eight of the respondents. The third most common association was reference to the event being *Exciting/Entertaining*. This association was made five times in total, with the respondents referring specifically to how the style of rugby that was played throughout the tournament led to excitement and entertainment.

When considering thought listing responses in terms of valance (i.e., positivity and negativity), it was clear that most associations of the event were constructive and/or optimistic in nature. Indeed, all three of the most frequent associations noted earlier were clearly positive. This theme of positivity was also evident considering the full set of associations that were offered by respondents. From the 54 respondents, 80 different associations were made and just 12 of them could be considered negative. Examples of the negative associations identified include *unfair/unequal, discrimination, not as popular as men's rugby*.

Fandom Levels

Using Karg et al.'s (2019) fan measurement scale, fandom levels were recorded for each questionnaire respondent. Although initially the relationship between the fan scale measures and free-thought listing responses was investigated, there was a lack of significant meaning that could be drawn between the two data sets. This was a similar case for the interviewees and the brand associations that they identified. Due to this reason the initial

plan to relate associations to fandom level was abandoned, with more attention being put into other areas of interest.

Phase 2 - Interviews

In the second phase of this research project, eight individuals who completed the online questionnaire were interviewed. Participants were asked to expand upon and explain further the associations of the event they had provided in the thought listing. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide additional associations and reflect on the associations of other participants.

Throughout the interviews, dozens of brand associations were identified and discussed. However, five associations stood out as prominent, each having been described by several of the participants in an emphatic and convincing manner. The five associations are presented next alongside Keller's (1993) model of brand associations. Within this model, there are three key types of brand associations: attributes, attitudes and benefits. Although this model did not guide the analysis per se, it turned out that the five prominent associations fit neatly within the model and the model provides some useful structure to present the results.

Attributes

Attributes are a type of brand association that are defined as the identifiable features that consumers relate with a brand (Keller, 1993). Del Rio et al., (2001) describe attributes from a consumer's perspective as what they feel a specific brand is and what is involved with its consumption. Below, three attributes that were identified through the interviews are presented.

Camaraderie

The first brand association of the event identified within the 'attribute' category is *Camaraderie*. Within the context of the tournament, the interviewees made this association based on their observation of players from all nations showing their support for each other, and women's rugby as a whole. What was conveyed by participants aligns neatly to Filo et al's., (2009) description of camaraderie in a sport context: "community, sense of solidarity, being a part of something bigger than themselves, and a sense of belonging" (p.368). Not only was this association made by several of the participants, but they also framed it against men's rugby, a context to which the association is apparently not aligned.

"one characteristic women's rugby had that was far better than the men's was that camaraderie and supporting the other team at the end of the game. They all seemed to really care about promoting women's rugby as a whole and working together, all the different teams, rather than the men." – **Marcus**

Marcus specifically refers to the difference between the men's and women's teams when it comes to camaraderie. He also suggests that women's teams involved in the WRWC2021 had a genuine interest in the growth of women's rugby as a whole. The difference in on-field attitudes around the individual male and female athletes was articulated by Marcus, however, Ella made the point that this was present off the field too.

"(WRWC2021 has) been a lot more (than the men's event) around sisterhood, around relationships, around connections... there's emotional, mental, spiritual connections that are made in friendships and bonds, of camaraderie that sport facilitates." – **Ella**

In a similar line of thought to Luke, Ella makes the comparison between a perceived attitudinal difference among players in the men's and women's game. The implication here is that the players and organizations involved in WRWC2021 prioritised relationships within women's rugby, while in the men's tournament this is perceived less. Sophie also described this feeling of camaraderie, and that it seemed to carry beyond the players, as the tournament brought spectators and fans together as one group who were there to enjoy women's rugby and its continued growth.

“Whereas this (the WRWC2021), the chats were like, “we’re all here as one”, and doing sing alongs for everyone to join in with. “Thank you all for coming, thank you for the support, thank you to the other team.’ It was way more sort of community driven, positive affirmations around that.” – **Sophie**

Sophie's remark is further evidence of the camaraderie brand association. She highlights the tournament's emphasis on fostering a sense of community and uplifting support for all participants. This quote captures the togetherness that was present between those participating in the game, and those there to spectate.

Cultural Presence

The second association with this high-profile women's rugby event that was categorized as an attribute has been labeled as *Cultural Presence*. The cultural component that interviewees spoke about as being an association of the event specifically refers to the representation of Māori culture. The most significant way that Māori culture was

highlighted within the tournament was through the use of the 'poi', a traditional Māori performance instrument. Thousands of poi were made in preparation for the tournament, and this aspect of the event was impactful.

“The poi is, I guess, bringing attention to Māori culture and because the poi is specific to women, it’s like quite a nice link between women’s rugby and Māori culture.” – **Sarah**

In this quote, Sarah not only refers to the poi, but also shows that she understands the meaning behind its inclusion within the tournament. Sarah also recognized that the poi is traditionally a female performance instrument. She notes the “link” between Māori culture and the tournament, which was a perception also articulated by other interviewees.

“Yeah, really interesting. Like in some ways, I think there was a huge celebration of Te ao Māori as represented through the poi.” – **Ella**

This reference of a “huge celebration” explains the apparent impact of the poi and its presence within the tournament. Not only was the poi prominent as a representation of Māori women, but also Māori culture as a whole. This was recognized by Sophie as well, who explains the positive impact she had seen.

“I think it (the tournament) aided to the Māori culture in New Zealand, like with the poi at all the games. That was a really cool thing.” – **Sophie**

Here, Sophie refers to the poi and how she believes it's presence within the tournament has had a positive impact on Māori culture. Anthony agrees with Sophie's point on the benefits of incorporating Māori culture within the tournament.

"I reckon (the poi) is really good. That's really good to see. It just kind of shows how it's the same as, a lot of, not just New Zealand sports, but a lot of, you know, New Zealand culture around Māori and Pasifika which is awesome. Really embracing our culture and to take that to a world cup, it shows the rest of the world a little bit more." – **Anthony**.

Athlete Virtue

A third prominent event attribute association that that was evident from the interviews was the virtue on display from athletes off the field. Put another way, the interviewees took notice of the exemplary behaviour of the athletes. This brand association relating to virtue encompasses notions of humility, gratitude and selflessness. Ruby Tui, a prominent member of the Black Ferns, was described by several of the interviewees as being one of the athletes who best displayed virtuous behaviour.

"I think Ruby Tui really brought that energy that I don't think I've seen before in sport at all, really. Just a real thankfulness for playing." – **Sarah**

Sarah's recognition of Ruby Tui's gratitude is a clear example of the virtue association being made. The quote also suggests that this is a unique showcase of this behaviour when

compared to other sports and major tournaments. On a similar note to Sarah, Anthony described Ruby Tui's behaviour as being exemplary, but instead highlighted her humility.

"I mean, because out of all of them, you know, she's (Ruby Tui) definitely up there with one of the most, one of the most covered. Which I mean the more they show, you know, she shows how good she is on the field and then she shows kind of humbleness off the field." – **Anthony**

Anthony's statement captures that Ruby's virtue was on display despite all the attention that the athletes were receiving. He makes specific reference to her virtue alongside on-field talent, which is noteworthy for a superstar athlete. Chloe shares this sentiment, recognizing Tui and her teammates' exemplary behaviour.

"I guess Ruby Tui as an example, like she loves and adores her fans and she gives her fans the time of day. And just the, press conferences, speeches I've briefly watched on social media. Just the way they conduct themselves." – **Chloe**

Here, Chloe references two specific components of virtue shown by the Black Ferns. First, she recognized the fact that Ruby Tui, one of the star players of the tournament, consistently took the time to interact with her young fans. Second, Chloe acknowledged Ruby's virtuous behaviour during her engagement with media. Using the word "they", is noteworthy, as it is an indication of the attitude transcending other athletes. While the previous three examples make specific reference to Ruby Tui, the virtue shown by lower profile athletes was picked up by Ella:

“Renee Workcliffe who didn't get didn't get selected, didn't get much game time, but who was just really gracious, and in a dignified way just stood to the side and, and cheered and clapped for the others.” – **Ella**

This association to virtue is perhaps less pronounced than the aforementioned commentary about Ruby Tui, but is another display of the high standard of behaviour shown within the WRWC2021. Here, Renee Workcliffe's selfless attitude is described, as she encouraged her team the whole way through. Ella makes the point that she did not get any game time and infers that this sometimes leads to less virtuous behaviour. However, this was not the case and was yet another example of the athletes involved in the tournament conducting themselves in an exemplary manner.

Benefits

Benefits are the next category of associations and refer to the advantages that consumers believe they will gain from engaging with a specific brand (Keller, 1993). Benefits often are a direct result of attributes, for example if a car's attribute is 'durable', then a benefit would be 'long-lasting'. In this study, one benefit emerged and it is referred to as *Inspiration*.

Inspiration

The brand association that was consistently identified alongside the event throughout the interviews that fits under Keller's (1991) 'benefit' category is *Inspiration*. According to Chan et al. (2014) and Oleynick et al. (2014), inspiration is a powerful feeling of excitement and motivation that sparks new and creative ideas and enables people to see opportunities even in difficult circumstances. This empowers people to turn their ideas into

reality. Over the course of the WRWC2021, *inspiration* was something that seemed to be prominent in the minds of the participants. This is a particularly interesting association that was recognized due to the links that *inspiration* has to another prominent association. *Inspiration* is certainly a broad term that without context could refer to the impact on anyone, however Sarah specifically highlighted how the tournament may have inspired young people.

“Young people, seeing someone like them being successful in something, even like, in some ways, even in any sport, it can relate back to, you can't be a female sports person, I guess.” – **Sarah**

With her answer, Sarah refers to both young people and females being inspired through the tournament. This is robust evidence of the *Inspiration* association as Sarah conveyed her sense that the success of the female players within the tournament could inspire the females watching, who may or may not believe they can be successful in sport. Sophie shared a similar sentiment to Sarah, but references young Māori and Pacifica populations as well.

“I feel like for a lot of young women, it could be quite inspirational, something to look up to, especially for Māori and Pacifica populations, it could have long lasting effects for women's rugby.” – **Sophie**

This quote specifically refers to the population of young Māori and Pacifica women within New Zealand that may have been inspired watching the tournament. Sophie believes that

these young women would be encouraged by seeing other Māori and Pacifica women succeed with their performances on the field. The final part of her statement sums up the potential impact of this apparent *inspiration*, that it could result in continued growth and participation of the sport from those who were inspired by what they saw.

- “Those young girls that got to watch that (the RWC Final) in person, s***, that’s massive. Hugely inspirational, you know, some of them are going to follow their dream of potentially becoming a Black Fern, or at least follow the rugby union pathway.” – **Chloe**

While the level of *inspiration* that one feels no doubt differs among those watching, Chloe touches on the highest end of that spectrum. She believes that the young girls who were able to witness the WRWC2021 in person would be inspired to the point that they follow their dreams. While the previous three interviewees spoke specifically about young women being inspired, Marcus references more generally to what he believes was the goal of the Black Ferns.

“I think they, they plan, they want to inspire like the younger generation of New Zealanders, be it boys or girls, I think as athletes, which is really awesome.” – **Marcus**

This quote from Marcus shows an example of the well-known potential that sport has to inspire all kinds of people, but specifically the younger fans who look up to athletes. He also makes clear that he believes this was the goal of the athletes participating, to provide an example and therefore inspire the next generation of athletes watching.

Attitudes

The final category of brand associations that Keller (1993) identified is attitudes. Simply put, attitudes refer to the overall evaluation of a brand by a consumer (del Rio et al., 2001). In turn these attitudes influence consumer behaviour, emotional connection and brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

Exceeded Expectations

Exceeded expectations is the attitude that was most strongly identified as a brand association of the event throughout the course of the eight interviews. This association of *Exceeded Expectations* captures the change in perception amongst the interviewees when it came to the skill and level of play that was on show at WRWC2021. The participants made clear that what they witnessed unfold at the tournament was a superior 'product' than what they had envisioned. This thought process was shared by Sarah who reflects on her initial perceptions being negative.

“Yeah, I was actually impressed. I didn't like think they were going to play that well, , like in some ways it's very real negative thing to think, but I was kind of like, oh, women's rugby. But then they actually impressed me.” – **Sarah**

This quote provides both Sarah's initial perception, as well as an acknowledgement of the change. Sarah admits that she did not expect much at the outset, before being impressed when she actually watched the games. A similar thought process was articulated by Luke who, like Sarah, initially felt the quality was not going to be that high before watching any of the games.

“To be honest I was so pleasantly surprised watching the games that I did watch about how actually skilful they are. There is a legitimate argument to be made that when you watch the ABs (All Blacks, NZ’s men’s rugby team) those guys are always fumbling around, dropping the ball and missing passes and doing stupid stuff. To be honest the women were no worse, maybe they were even better in terms of level of skill. I was also surprised by how hard-core it was. There was no part of me that thought oh this isn’t as fast, or they aren’t as powerful or whatever. It was like legit.”

– **Luke**

With this statement, Luke described himself as being surprised by the skill during the tournament on multiple occasions. He also weighs in on the topic of the men’s versus women’s game, going as far to say that the level of the female athletes is at the same standard as the men’s. While Luke and Sarah explained how their personal expectations were exceeded, Anthony talks about the change in perception that he witnessed in the wider community.

“ I was just saying like, because it just showed the, the actual, the level of, of all of the teams, in the women's rugby cup, they’re a lot better than what people may have thought. Which obviously is really good.” – **Anthony**

Here Anthony provides a different angle of the idea of expectations being exceeded. Instead of referring to his own perceptions changing, he described that this sentiment is likely more

widespread. Similarly, Ella explained how she saw people become more aware of the true quality of women's rugby in the WRWC2021.

“I think this Rugby World Cup really flipped things on its head in terms of spectatorship and there being kind of this revelation of women's rugby as a really exciting sporting product to watch and to enjoy it. Actually, this is really entertaining.” – Ella

Here, Ella provides further evidence in support of this brand association that the level of women's rugby actually resulted in the exceeding of the wider community's general expectations of the event itself. She notes that the tournament has played a role in changing people's initial perceptions of women's rugby, coming to realise that the level of quality in the women's game is at an elite level.

Summary

In summary, the two phases of data collection revealed some interesting findings that will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Through the online questionnaire, several different brand associations were identified such as *Growth of Women's Rugby, Black Ferns and Exciting/Entertaining*. Five brand associations were identified through the interview phase of data collection. These five brand associations consisted of three attributes (*camaraderie, cultural presence, athlete virtue*), one benefit (*inspiration*) and one attitude (*exceeded expectations*). Having now laid out the results, chapter five will discuss the presented associations and their significance in more depth, before looking into limitations of the

current study as well as some ideas for future research. The joint analysis of these two phases of data collection is discussed further within Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Introduction

This study was designed around a research question on the unique brand associations of the Women's Rugby World Cup. The analyses of Phase 1 and Phase 2 data are novel and well worth investigating further. This chapter starts with a discussion about the major women's sport event associations from the online questionnaire. Next, the five event associations from the interviewees is interpreted. A combined analysis of the two respective data sets is then provided. Finally, managerial implications, limitations and ideas for future research are discussed to conclude the chapter.

Phase 1 - Online Questionnaire

Associations gathered through Phase 1 (i.e., the online thought-listing task) were analysed via frequency and valence. The three most frequent associations were the *Growth of Women's Sport*, the *Black Ferns*, and *Exciting/Entertaining* each of which are discussed below.

The most frequent association put forth by respondents was the *Growth of Women's Sport*. This association captures how the promotion and overall growth of both women's rugby and women's sport were noted as an important event dimension. This is not unexpected considering how rapidly women's sport is growing (UN Women, 2020). Despite the many obstacles that women's sport faces, progress is being made and sport appears to be getting closer to gender equity (Schleader & Wagstaff, 2018). This sentiment was put forth by respondents and forms a prominent association of this major women's sport event, and perhaps others too.

The next most frequent association was the national women's rugby team of New Zealand – the *Black Ferns*. Although this was not tracked explicitly, the majority of respondents were very likely from New Zealand so it makes sense that when asked to identify event associations, the home team was front of mind. Participants likely consumed domestic television content in which the home team and nationalism themes came through (Guo et al., 2007; L'Etang, 2006). For Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (WRWC2021) a heavy focus of domestic media coverage was specifically on the Black Ferns and their progress throughout the tournament. Indeed, a sense of national pride within these media broadcasts is used to create a stronger connection between the viewers and the networks (Scott et al., 2012).

Another important factor that may have contributed to the strength of the *Black Ferns* association is the desire to present the home team as positively and impactfully as possible. According to Maennig and Porsche (2008), who studied the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, success of the home-team of a major-event, or at the very least the perception of strength, is an important contributor to the feel-good effect within domestic populations of tournaments and therefore its overall success. So, all in all, it makes sense that the home team came through as a prominent event association.

The third most frequently mentioned association from Phase 1 was *Exciting/Entertaining*. While this association was not as prominent as the first two, it is one of the few associations that was made related to the on-field product at the event. Maennig and Porsche (2008) noted the importance of an exciting style of play on display during major tournaments and how this contributes to its success. So, event organizers will have been pleased this came through as an association.

The free-thought listing associations were also analyzed through valence – or the extent to which they were negative or positive. The majority of associations identified from Phase 1 were positive, with only 12 of the 80 associations being inherently negative. The Doyle et al (2020) study is the most similar to the current research, so makes for an important comparison on valence. In that study, five unique brand associations were identified, with two of them being negative. It is not a perfect comparison, but noteworthy nonetheless that the approximately 40% of negative associations in that study are far more than the approximately 15% in the current study. With the rapid growth of elite women’s sport and the time lapse between Doyle et al. (2020) and the current study, it may be that brand associations with women’s sport are becoming more positive. Further research is needed to have more assurance about that possible trend. While the Phase 1 associations that have been reported and discussed here are important and interesting, there was an opportunity to dig deeper and that was done in Phase 2.

Phase 2 - Interviews

Through the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts from Phase 2, five significant brand associations were identified. These associations fall neatly into Keller’s (1993) brand association categories. Three of the associations fit the attribute category, while the remaining two associations can be characterized as benefits and attitudes respectively. The three attributes that were identified were labelled as *Camaraderie*, *Athlete Virtue* and *Cultural Presence*. The remaining two associations, *Inspiration* and *Exceeded Expectations* were categorized as a benefit and an attitude respectively.

When looking at the five most prominent associations found from the interviews, one significant theme emerges that makes for an interesting comparison to previous

literature in the field, and that is that they are all inherently positive. One of the major findings within Doyle et al.'s, (2020) study was that two of the five associations reported were negative in nature. Although Doyle et al. (2020) noted that only emerging associations were reported, the differences between the positive and negative associations still makes for an interesting comparison. Doyle et al., (2020) described *Funding limitation* and *Lack of Coverage* as “negative perceptions associated with the general support provided to women’s sport teams” (p.10). It is noteworthy that neither of these emerged in the current study in any meaningful way. As suggested in the previous analysis of the Phase 1 data, the fact that all five associations in Phase 2 were also positive could indicate a growing positive mind-set around women’s sport in general, or it could relate to a feel-good factor that was present within WRWC2021.

Camaraderie

The first event association (attribute) that emerged from Phase 2 is *Camaraderie*. The concept of camaraderie refers to a sense of community, solidarity, being part of something bigger than oneself, and a feeling of belonging (Filo et al., 2009). Interviewees repeatedly described their perception of camaraderie throughout the tournament. According to the interviewees, camaraderie was most prominently shown through the interactions between teammates and opposing players. Despite the seemingly fierce competition on the field, interviewees noted that players seemed to recognize that they were involved in a larger movement of growing women’s rugby.

Evens and Losifidis (2013) describe camaraderie in sport as “contributing to social inclusion, fostering and developing health-enhancing physical activity, forging identity and bringing citizens together” (p.51). Andersen et al. (2019) spoke about positive social health outcomes that can occur, such as social support and a sense of belonging. It has been

reported that young male Australian rules football players participate due to the peer support and camaraderie that they feel (Thorpe et al., 2014). Likewise, Brunn et al., (2014) found that young male football players were motivated to play due to their team spirit and feelings of collectivity. Despite most of the research on the topic being conducted around male sport, the link between camaraderie and team-sport is present within a female context too. Kirkby and Kluge (2013) found that female volleyball players were encouraged to turn up to practice due to the camaraderie, bond, support and loyalty that they felt was present within their team. Evidence here suggests that the camaraderie we know to be prominent in youth and community sport, seems to be present at the highest level of women's sport too.

A number of the interviewees spoke about unity shown between the rival players and compared it to the lack of such behaviour within the men's game. The contrast drawn on this association between men's and women's events is noteworthy. Players in major men's sporting events are likely not as compelled to see the big picture promotion and prioritize growing the wider game. In 2021, World Rugby announced their plan 'Accelerate', which aims to fast-track the development of women's rugby by the 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup. This involves plans to improve all levels of rugby both on and off the field. Due to this well-established goal of World Rugby, there is no doubt that the athletes viewed WRWC2021 as an important opportunity to promote their sport and encourage the expansion of the women's rugby community. Future research could explore whether this gender-based contrast is inherent or a reflection of the growth stage of the women's game and a collective buy-in as a result.

Although the camaraderie that interviewees spoke of as being associated with the event was mostly among the participating athletes, there was reference to this extending to fans experiencing camaraderie amongst each other. There is evidence from previous

research on fan communities in support of this. The benefits of supporting a sports team or individual have been reported within numerous studies, with social connections being one (Wann et al, 2015). According to Wann et al., (2015) members of a sports fan community can have their overall life satisfaction improved due to the reinforcement of their sense of camaraderie and identification. The communities that are created in support of a sports team provides individuals with a sense of belonging, which in turn positively effects self-esteem and mood (Wann, 2006). The togetherness that was reflected upon in conjunction with WRWC2021 is not uncommon within the context of major sporting events either. Whannel (1992) discussed the 'identification effect of sport', which explores the idea of sport providing opportunity to give one a sense of belonging to a group. The 'identification effect' was alluded to by the interviewees, with a strong sense of camaraderie being obvious among teams, extending to opponents, and resonating within the larger community.

Cultural Presence

Cultural Presence was another one of the three prominent attribute associations that came out of the interview data. This association refers specifically to the representation of Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, within WRWC2021. Sport, and rugby in particular is a significant component of Māori identity and society (Hapeta et al., 2019; Te Rito, 2007), providing another crucial reason why Māori representation within the WRWC2021 was so important. While there were numerous ways in which Māori culture was embedded in the tournament, including Māori language (Te Reo) greetings over the public-address system and the mihi (Māori greeting) that players made, it was the use of the poi that was most commonly identified by the participants. As has been discussed previously, the poi is a traditional Māori performance instrument, made with flax strings attached to

balls and used most commonly by female Māori. Thousands of poi were distributed to fans throughout the tournament and they became an important brand association of the event.

The intent by organizers to embed Māori culture in the event was articulated in the pre-event phase and it was evident throughout the event itself that it was a priority. Through this deliberate strategy, the event organizers were able to create a unique dimension of culture across the tournament, that was visible both in person and on television. Therefore, it is not surprising that this was recognized so prominently by the interviewees.

The significance of embedding local culture into events has been recognized by several scholars. Jarvie (2017) wrote extensively about culture in sport, making the case that sports events are not just about competition, they also provide a unique opportunity to express social and cultural values. Nair (2021) spoke about how sports events are capable of generating a unique interaction, or exchange, between local and global culture. Furthermore, sports events, like the WRWC2021, can be used to promote cultural understanding (Jarvie, 2017). Therefore, that *Cultural Presence* emerged as a prominent event association is consistent with the intersection of culture and sport that has existed for some time. This spotlight on Māori culture has no doubt increased the awareness and knowledge of Te Ao Māori (customs and protocols) not only for domestic fans but also those from across the world.

Athlete Virtue

The final 'attribute' that was perceived by the participants was *Athlete Virtue*. *Athlete Virtue* as an association refers to the idea that WRWC2021 athletes adhered to very high standards of behaviour. Several of the participants made note of the way in which the athletes carried themselves. There were multiple accounts of them displaying gratitude,

humility and selflessness. The association labeled here as *Athlete Virtue* encompasses these three behaviors particularly.

Athletes demonstrating virtue in and around WRWC2021 may be attributable to several factors. First, this virtuous behaviour may simply relate to the character development that has long been associated with sport. While there is still some debate, the majority of the research conducted around the matter has found evidence that shows sport can indeed develop character (Ghildiyal, 2015). This development occurs especially when the individual is participating in a supportive environment that has positive role models (Agans et al., 2017). There are a variety of traits that can be enhanced through sport participation, such as team spirit, leadership skills and fair play (Ghildiyal, 2015). Participation in sport can also guide developing athletes on how to act in sport when it comes to rules, norms and moral principles (Yildiz et al., 2021). The display of gratitude, humility, and selflessness from the athletes involved within WRWC2021 could therefore be a direct result of their character development through their years of participation in sport.

Another explanation for *Athlete Virtue* as a brand association of WRWC2021 links to self-presentation theory. According to Baumeister and Hutton (1984), self-presentation theory refers to how people are motivated to specific action based on how they want to convey information or an image of themselves. The concept of self-presentation theory originated within Erving Goffman's (1959) 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'. Goffman's theory suggests that people present themselves in a way in which they believe will increase their favorability to others. Goffman (1959) used the metaphor of a theatrical performance to account for people's actions. He suggested that the 'front stage' was how people act when they had an audience, while in the 'back stage', they are able to be their true selves with people they are comfortable with. Front stage behaviour is usually shaped

in the form of the cultural norms or social expectations of the setting (Goffman, 1959).

Therefore, WRWC021 athletes may well have perceived standards of behaviour appropriate for the front stage and fell into line. This is not to suggest that athletes only demonstrated virtue because they were being watched, but it seems plausible that this may in part explain the strength of this association.

The difference between how female and male athletes present themselves was noted by the interviewees as well. While there has been limited research on self-presentation of elite athletes, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) conducted a gendered analysis of Olympic athlete's visual self-presentation on Instagram. The authors found that female and male athletes present themselves differently through social media, with female athletes having a far greater emphasis on posts relating to their personal life. These findings were in accordance with research conducted on females within traditional media, where there were far more pictures and media content based around their personal lives, rather than sport-related action shots (Bissell & Duke, 2007). As was previously mentioned, the data on professional athletes and self-presentation is not plentiful but based on what we do know, it stands to reason there may also be differences in the way they present themselves in the context of a major sports event. As Goffman (1959) stated, front stage behaviour is impacted by the social norms of the setting, therefore it is likely that social-media and more traditional media may have had some influence in how the athletes of the WRWC2021 behaved.

Another possible explanation for the virtuous behaviour on display at WRWC2021 is a function of the reality of women's sport. Over time, female sport participation - from recreational to professional levels - has not been equitable (Appleby & Foster, 2013). Women's sporting achievements have been trivialized at times (Morgan, 2019; Shaw &

Amis, 2001). All of this adds weight to events like WRWC2021, making them essential 'show windows' for the growth of sport and environments in which athletes and others must be on their best behavior to create positive impressions. Female athletes are at times made to feel as though they should be grateful for opportunities like this. Interviewees noted that the gratitude from athletes in the context of WRWC2021 is in contrast to what is perceived in conjunction with men's events. Although this association at face value is inherently positive, it may also be a vestige of the past that women's sport may move past in the future.

Inspiration

Inspiration was the one and only prominent benefit association that was identified from the interview data. The *Inspiration* association refers to the way in which aspects of the event seemed to stir or uplift those who watched. Oleynick et al. (2014) refer to inspiration as a state of motivation that results in an individual acting on ideas or thoughts. The interviewees perceived that WRWC2021 was inspirational for a couple of specific groups of people. Several of the interviewees made reference to their belief that the on and off-field performance by the athletes involved in the tournament would inspire young women watching. In addition, the event was perceived to be potentially inspiring for Māori and Pacifica young people. As Keller (1993) discussed, benefits are a direct result of attributes, so in this context the argument could be made that *Inspiration* was the result of *Cultural Presence, Camaraderie and Athlete Virtue*.

The link between major sporting events and inspiration is well founded, having been addressed in recent research. For example, in a study of UK SPORT (2011), it was noted that a large percentage of major sporting event viewers were inspired to participate in sport as a result of attending. Specifically, 67% of live spectators and 28% of television viewers

reported that they had been inspired. According to Frawley and Cush (2011), directly after the hosting of the 2003 Rugby World Cup, in Australia there was an increase in organized rugby memberships, no doubt linked to event consumers being inspired to play themselves. This was also noted in study of Scottish curling in the aftermath of the British Women's Olympic victory (Sport Scotland, 2004).

The interviewees in the current study spoke repeatedly about how the younger generation of females were likely to be inspired because of WRWC2021, and previous literature supports this claim too. According to UK SPORT's (2011) study on the inspiration effect of major sporting events, younger people were the most likely to be inspired. This seems to come down to the fact that athletes can be role models who can inspire young people to start, or continue participating, in sport (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008). We know that adolescent females overwhelmingly select female athletes rather than male athletes as role models (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008). After gender, fame is the next most important factor for young people to look up to sporting role models (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Fleming et al., 2005) and then is their athletic ability, skill, endurance and talent (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999; Fleming et al., 2005). These factors almost certainly have played a part in the emergence of *Inspiration* as a prominent WRWC2011 brand association.

While fame and athletic ability are important factors in athlete role model choice for young people, other studies (May, 2009; Guest and Cox, 2009) have found that off the field behaviour can be a major contributing factor as well. In particular, Guest and Cox (2009) discussed how personal characteristics such as morality and wisdom have become important traits in role models. Therefore in the context of the WRWC2021, one could argue that spectators could have been inspired by the virtuous behaviour of the athletes noted previously as well as the camaraderie .

Exceeded Expectations

The *Exceeded Expectations* brand association attitude for WRWC221 captures the sentiment that onlookers' pre-conceived notions about the quality of the event had been topped. This association has a close relation to the *Entertaining/Exciting* association that was identified within the online questionnaire; however *Exceeding Expectations* captured the attitude that goes beyond a general description of play. Instead, the interviewees made reference to the skill and ability on display being far better than what they, or their peers, anticipated. The interviewees used words such as "impressed", "surprised" and "revelation" to describe this change in mindset of the skill on show. These words indicate a genuine change in opinion, and it just shows how significantly this small sample had their perceptions of women's rugby altered.

Whatever the reason for participants' initially modest expectations for the event, it is safe to say that for many, their attitude about the event became more positive. Media coverage of female sports has historically been poor, with it taking until 1992 for women's sport to be prioritized over dog and horse racing (Lopiano, 2000). While the current climate of women's sport coverage has most definitely improved, female athletes still receive far less media coverage than male athletes (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). According to Lebel and Danylchuk's (2009) study, participants described women's sport as less exciting and slower than men's sport while at the same time reporting that they don't follow women's sport and only watch it if it is broadcast on television. Minimal coverage of women's sport contributes to the lack of interest from sports fans (Fink, 2015), while also maintaining the negative perceptions that are present by those who do not actively engage with it (Tuggle et

al., 2007). These factors likely contributed to onlookers' initially lower expectations, but once the event started, attitudes became more positive.

Scheidler and Wagstaff (2018) noted several theoretical possibilities for why these misconceptions are in place and therefore how they can be changed. First, they discussed Agenda-Setting Theory, which argues that a certain agenda is presented to viewers through the topics that mainstream media provide more coverage of (McCombs, 1977). In this case, the small amount of coverage of women's compared to men's sport, may lead to a perception that women's sport is less important and of lower quality. Another theory that Scheidler and Wagstaff (2018) put forth relates to the Mere Exposure Effect, which refers to the idea that the more an individual is exposed to a certain stimulus, the more they will like it (Zajonc, 1968). This works both ways, as the lack of coverage means women's sport is not being perceived any more favorably, but if it was given better coverage then the long-held perceptions theoretically would change.

One important takeaway about the *Exceeded Expectations* association is that the media has a significant influence on perceptions of women's sport. Initially lower expectations would have been shaped in part by the media, but of course the media can play a role in presenting major women's sport events more prominently and positively.

Phase 1 and Phase 2 Discussion

Having now discussed the key findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 separately, it is appropriate to synthesize and consider how they relate. The Phase 2 associations seem to be deeper and more meaningful and a fuller understanding of how they were shaped and what they specifically represent has emerged. Some overlap is also evident. For example, a consistent theme across the results of the two phases is that the majority of associations

are positive in nature. In Phase 1, the ratio of positive to negative was 68-12, and of the five prominent Phase 2 associations, none were negative.

Other parallels are evident between several of the associations from Phase 1 and 2. The *Exceeded Expectations* association from Phase 2 seems to have some relation to the *Exciting/Entertaining* and the *Growth of Women's Sport* associations from Phase 1. The sense that the event was perceived to be *Exciting/Entertaining* must be related to the fact that for many, their expectations were exceeded. Many of the interviewees spoke to a degree about how they did not expect high quality, entertaining rugby initially, before they actually watched some of the games, but later realized that the skill level was high. Both of these associations also lead into the *Growth of Women's Sport* association. A growing sense that women's rugby is actually exciting and entertaining will hopefully continue the growth of the women's game.

Another overlap between Phase 1 and Phase 2 associations is *Cultural Presence* (Phase 2) and the *Black Ferns* (Phase 1). Although many of the statements contributing to the *Cultural Presence* association were in reference to the poi, the Black Ferns team at WRWC2021 prominently embraced Māori culture as well. Numerous Black Ferns players have Māori heritage, and they proudly represented their culture throughout WRWC2021.

Managerial Implications

Identifying these WRWC2021 brand associations provides an insight into the measure of a brand, and therefore can be used to inform strategies going forward (Keller, 1993). The associations that have been identified in this project should be used to inform marketing strategies and can help differentiate major women's sport events from men's (Doyle et al., 2020).

The results of the current research indicate that there are distinct associations connected to major women's sport events. Managers and organizers within the women's sport context need to understand the uniqueness of women's sport and use it to their advantage. Major women's sport events have the potential to engage completely new audiences beyond more well-established men's sport events. The fact that these unique associations were identified at all is significant. Those organizing major women's sporting events should embrace these unique associations and embed related themes within marketing and the wider event structure.

Each of the five prominent event brand associations from Phase 2 provide valuable information for the future branding of a major women's sports event. The *Cultural Presence* association noted here is an illustration of how impactful the integration of local culture can be within a tournament, adding a unique element to the structure of the event that could vary based on the host country. By inserting a component of the host country's culture, organizers can facilitate an exchange of culture between fans on-site as well as those watching from around the world. If the home team of a major event embraces culture, it may be particularly powerful in future events as it was for WRW2021. As Maennig (2008) reported, the demeanor of the home team can have a meaningful impact to the feel-good factor of a major sports-event and can even make up for lack of on-field success.

The *Athlete Virtue* association should be recognized as a building block towards marketing female athletes participating in major events. For example, in the lead up to an event, promoters should include images and video of players behaving in this way in order to connect with potential major women's sport event attendees. It has emerged here that conveying virtuous behaviour may have significant impacts on the success of major sporting events.

The *Camaraderie* brand association that was present within WRWC2021 should be taken into consideration by those managing future women's events. Clearly the feeling of togetherness and unity within the tournament was a strong association, a theme which should be embedded in the marketing of future events. In order to best convey this theme, managers of future events can present images and video that showcases camaraderie within a women's sport context.

Building on other studies, we now have further evidence from this study that including notions of *inspiration* within major women's sport event branding has good potential to succeed. Keller (1993) argued that attributes directly lead to benefits, so creating a marketing campaign which showcases how women's rugby can influence young people is likely to be a good brand development strategy.

The potential for these associations to be used within sponsorship pitches is also profound. Major women's sport event rights holders can highlight the unique (and positive) associations that potential sponsors can align with. Athlete virtue, inspiration, and exceeding expectations should all be appealing brand associations to sponsors. Doyle et al (2020) suggested that their emergent associations of *Diversity & Inclusion, Role Models, and New Opportunities* could be used as an appeal for sponsors and the same is true here. In addition, the positive event associations noted here serve as a point of differentiation from elite men's sport contexts (Doyle et al., 2020).

Limitations

Although novel and a valuable contribution to the related body of literature, this study does have limitations that should be noted. One limitation of the study was the relatively modest number of interviews that were conducted (i.e., eight). A larger sample size for a study on

this topic in future could provide greater depth and reliability. For example, Guest et al. (2006) suggest that when using purposive sampling, 12 interviews were enough to reach data saturation, while Hagaman and Wutich (2016) felt that 20-40 interviews was a better range. In the Doyle et al (2020) study which is most similar to this study, a total of 31 interviews were conducted.

Another limitation of the study is the relatively narrow age range. Although literature suggests that youth's perceptions of brands are vitally important (Casswell, 2004), there still a large gap in terms of what children and older adults perceive in terms of major women's sport event brand associations. Finding the associations present within those in older age demographics would have added further depth, while also adding other association that may only be present outside of the age range used within the study.

Upon reflection, the instructions given to participants completing the free-thought listing task in Phase 1 could have been clearer. The instruction of "What comes to mind when you think of WRWC2021" resulted in several single association answers being provided, rather than a list of multiple associations, which would have been better. In future, researchers are urged to more explicitly invite participants to list as many associations as come to mind. In Phase 2, this was not an issue as interviewees were given lots of opportunity to offer as many associations as came to mind.

Future Research

The research question of the current study was "What are the brand associations presented by young people in regard to the (Women's) Rugby World Cup?". Through the two separate phases of data collection, a series of varying brand associations of the WRWC2021 were identified. There has been a significant lack of research around brand associations in

womens sport, and prior to this study none focused specifically on brand associations of a major women's sporting event. This study has worked towards filling this large gap in the literature, with several valuable findings being generated which will help to inform future events of a similar context.

Although the findings of this study no doubt had high value, there are several areas of interest related to major women's sport events that could be targeted in future research. For example, different samples and contexts could be utilized in order to generate new insights. It is exciting to think of other potential avenues for future research.

One significant aspect of the design of this study is that the data collection mostly took place after the tournament had concluded. Future research could investigate brand associations of a major women's sporting event before, during, and after the tournament has finished. For example, associations could be gathered a couple of months before the tournament started, again when the group stages finished, and then a final round of data collection at the conclusion of the tournament. This design would provide a unique insight into how brand associations develop throughout the course of a major women's sporting event. A further data collection point several months after the event finishes would also provide time for attitudes to develop more as well. As noted previously *Exceeding Expectations* was the only prominent attitude that emerged from the interviews phase, but interviewees may develop new attitudes of the tournament when given time to reflect on its significance after its conclusion.

Another suggestion for future research would be to target fans of other competing national teams as well. Although there was no intention to interview mostly Black Fern's fans, the nature of the study taking place in New Zealand resulted in the majority of respondents being from the host country. Interviewing other fan bases would provide a

different angle of understanding the brand association of major women's sport event.

Collecting data from a variety of fan-bases would provide a unique insight into what people from different parts of the world associate to major women's sport events.

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Appendix A – AUTECH Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

13 October 2022

Michael Naylor
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Michael

Re Ethics Application: **22/209 Identifying Unique Brand Associations for a Women's Major Sporting Event**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 13 October 2025.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

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