

**Marketing a New Football Franchise: Auckland Football Club's
(AFC's) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies in Year
One of Ownership**

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2026

**A research component submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business**

Abstract

As a newly established, highly subscribed club, the Auckland Football Club (AFC) is considered a successful marketing adoption strategy of a new organisation in a highly biased marketplace providing marketers with a fresh, current case in the saturated sports marketing arena. AFC is the second professional football franchise in New Zealand and first originating from Auckland. This following research problem is addressed in this study: how can a new sports franchise build brand equity and fan identification in a saturated, non-football-dominant market during its inaugural season.

In this study we will define the measures of success considered specifically, attendance figures, membership numbers, social media engagement metrics, and brand recognition and explore the marketing strategies and early adoption strategies implemented by the AFC in their inaugural season in the 2024/2025 A-League Men's competition. Despite decades of domination by other ball sports like rugby, netball and cricket, the AFC built a highly subscribed fan base, an engaged audience of ticket buyers, and a recognized brand identity - competing in the small, but patriotic sports landscape.

AFC was launched on March 14, 2024, and their first team made their debut match appearance on 19 October 2024, under the ownership of Bill Foley's Black Knight Football and Entertainment Group. The club achieved exceptional success by breaking various records on the pitch and establishing new attendance records. Average home attendance for AFC was recorded at 18,101 at the Go Media stadium, in Auckland, New Zealand which represents the highest home attendance record in the A-League over the 2024-25 football season. This exceptional turnout provides the prompt to investigate the successful launch and marketing strategies that led to the rapid uptake (adoption) and rapid growth of the AFC fan base and brand identity. Additionally, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of various marketing approaches of the AFC marketing strategy and tactical plans, including niche and target marketing, building customer loyalty with targeted segments, fan or member experiences and engagement and finally (although recently launched, the thus-far) customer loyalty programmes

This qualitative case study investigates the year-one marketing strategies employed by AFC through the lens of the marketing team and professionals who developed and executed these strategies. In-depth semi-structured interviews with the marketing team and fans were used as data collection method supplemented by documentary analysis of publicly available marketing communications and materials. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process was used in the analysis process and findings triangulated across professional interviews, fan perspectives and documentary analysis to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. The findings provide an in-depth, firsthand view of the marketing strategies that contributed to AFC's debut season success.

Furthermore, this study investigates the influence of these marketing strategies and tactical plans on market entry, the development of brand awareness, and fan relationship building strategies. AFC's successful launch is of particularly interest in a complex, patriotic, highly

loyal fan base (fans to other sports teams) and established marketplace, where new teams are highly likely to face various contextual challenges compared to that of long existing established franchises. This study extends existing sport marketing literature by examining how a new franchise builds brand legitimacy in a culturally saturated, non-football-dominant market while it also presents insights into contextual factors such as New Zealand's cultural sporting preferences, ownership structure of the club, focus on local talent and community engagement initiatives, providing valuable insights for new sports organisations trying to establish themselves in cluttered markets, providing practitioners and researcher with contextual insights into the strategic and tactical responses by AFC's marketing team.

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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 used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), 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.

Date: 15th June 2026

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Artificial intelligence Declaration

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Prompts Used:	Prompts for Clarity and Flow “Simplify this paragraph to understand the meaning.” “How to improve academic tone for this paragraph” “How to optimize clarity for this section” “Does this section seem too repetitive for the reader” “How can I improve the flow for this section” “How do I reduce repetitive information but keep the argument as is” “How do I improve readability and flow here” Prompts for brainstorming and early research

“Does a case study on a new football club and it’s marketing a unique idea in NZ sport research”

“Find already existing case studies in NZ sports market”

“Find news and context around Auckland FC that can be important to know before conducting a case study on AFC”

“How can I structure and position this idea into a thesis project”

Prompts for Structure and accurate arguments

“How do I structure my argument in a an academically better way?”

“Does this section require more detailed explanation?”

“How can I better synthesize these thoughts rather than just stating them?”

“Do these themes logically align with the research questions?”

“Does this section align with the stated research objectives”

“Does this claim sound overextended according to the data”

Prompts for theories and literature positioning

“How do I position these ideas within the sport marketing literature discussed above?”

“Help me refine the theories mentioned and also am I using too many theories?”

“Does this theoretical positioning make sense?”

“What gaps in the literature does have I missed?”

Prompts for methodology

“What is the best research design for a case study?”

“Does this methodological approach suit my research questions and the research objectives?”

“Do these philosophical foundations align with my research design and objectives?”

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- Brainstorming assistance for theoretical positioning, research gaps, and thesis structure.
- Guidance and understanding on methodological alignment, research design, and thematic analysis structure
- Appropriate web research and background insights and contextual suggestions related to Auckland FC and sport marketing research

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Date: 15 June 2026

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisors, Dr. Rouxelle De Villiers and Dr. Melody Johnston for their continuous support, guidance, encouragement and valuable feedback throughout this journey. Their support and expertise have played a very important role in shaping this project and helping me face various challenges that came through along the way.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Auckland FC for allowing me to conduct this research and willingly participating. This would have not been possible without them sharing their valuable insights and experiences. Special thanks to the university for facilitating this connection and helping me fully leverage Auckland FC and AUT's valuable partnership.

Lastly, I am truly and deeply thankful to my family and friends for their support, motivation and encouragement throughout this journey. Their belief and backing helped me get through challenging times and helped me stay focused during the completion of my master's degree.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The introduction of a new sports club has its own distinct marketing challenges. Established clubs rely on age old traditions, achievements and inherited fan communities whereas new entrants start fresh without any tradition, no track record and little to no brand equity. According to Bauer et al., 2005, new or expansion teams are sometimes considered “unbranded” (p. 497) due to lack of recognition and awareness in the market. Such teams without an existing customer base or history, must use effective marketing techniques from the beginning to shape strong perceptions and build brand identity (Du et al., 2020).

The launch of AFC in 2024 represents a captivating particularly useful and probably insightful case. New Zealand is a country historically dominated by rugby and other sports such as netball and cricket – all three have a strong supporter and loyal fan base. Although, football in New Zealand enjoys a high turnout of grassroots participation (over 210,000 recreational participants in 2017 while 150,000 were registered to play) (New Zealand Football, 2018), the sport has struggled for sustained attention and commercial visibility. Despite the high entry barriers (Porter, 1980) AFC, achieve rapid growth in terms of a fan base and memberships in their inaugural season (235,316 people attended 13 Auckland FC home games at Go Media Stadium during the 2024/25) (Auckland Stadiums, 2025), making their mark in the competitive New Zealand sports market.

This study examines a clear research problem that is, how do new sports franchises build brand equity and fan identification in saturated and cluttered sports markets dominated by other sports? In New Zealand context football has yet to achieve the commercial and cultural status achieved by other sports such as rugby at the professional level and AFC's inaugural season provides a timely, real-world case through which to examine this problem.

The primary objective of this study is to understand the marketing strategies and tactics employed by Auckland Football Club that enabled them to achieve such a successful response and to draw insights applicable to new sports franchises operating or entering similarly cluttered and saturated markets.

This study aims to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1 – How did AFC establish brand awareness and legitimacy in its inaugural season?

RQ2 – What marketing strategies and activations shaped early fan engagement?

RQ3 – How did these strategies influence fan identification and loyalty formation?

RQ4 – What insights does the case provide for branding new sports teams in monopolistic sports markets?

Investigating this space will hold significant importance for both academics and practical managerial implications. Established academic theories and frameworks such as Keller's (1993) Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, Funk and James's (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), and sport relationship marketing approaches (Abeza et al., 2019) can be put to test and examined whether they reasonably capture the

process of brand building for newly established sports teams using Auckland Football club's case. This study can prove to be valuable for sports marketers and practitioners seeking to establish a new sport team in a cluttered and culturally dominated market from a practical perspective.

1.1 Contextual Overview: New Zealand's Sports Market and Auckland Football Clubs Entry

The context of New Zealand's sports market is essential to understand and situate Auckland Football Clubs rise. The crowded competitive landscape has been dominated by Rugby solely in terms of both participation and cultural value, with the All Blacks representing the country as an identity marker. Rugby is followed by the likes of other dominant sports such as netball further crowding the market. Despite being the fastest growing sport in the country with the highest participation at the grassroots level, football has historically been inconsistent at the professional level. Due to the A-league facing fierce competition in the market against established rugby leagues AFL and NRL (Kunkel et al., 2014), attempts at professional football clubs have struggled to sustained following which reflects the barriers in the New Zealand market. Additionally, Grant et al. (2011) in their study revealed that new sports teams and managers struggle with lack of awareness in New Zealand.

Yet, Auckland Football Club have broken this historical pattern. The clubs branding initiatives, strong digital presence, and community-oriented campaigns have resulted in a rapid growth of a fan base and viral buzz which is not commonly observed in new franchises. Thus, this case offers a valuable opportunity to understand how new clubs can carve market share in saturated markets and how they can gain legitimacy using appropriate marketing strategies.

1.2 Challenges and Opportunities for New Teams

Several consistent challenges are identified by scholars in existing literature. Newly established teams face a lack of brand equity and awareness due to absence of historical achievements and established identities (Heere & James, 2007). Du et al. (2020) highlight an increase in difficulty in terms of awareness in new and expansion teams in sports teams in North America and Southeast Asia. To tackle this absence of traditional and organic brand equity, a need for deliberate branding effort arises. New teams rely heavily on logos, mascots, colours and other visual components to establish identity and connections with fans (Yun et al., 2020). Moreover, formation of fan attitudes is essential for new sports teams to shape how fans think and feel about them. In places such as New Zealand where markets are culturally dominant and clustered with rugby and netball as top sports strong brand awareness can help new football clubs stand out, promote emotional connection, and build lasting fan loyalty (Kunkel et al., 2014). Preseason marketing and clear strategizing are important to ensuring strong first impressions as difficulties may arise to change these impressions in the future (Kunkel et al., 2016). Prior research also demonstrates that fans can form strong psychological attachments to teams prior to direct exposure to them which are based on needs such as belonging or identification (Funk & James, 2001). New clubs can make the most out of this by fulfilling

these needs and cultivating a sense of loyalty. Furthermore, new clubs also have a dynamic opportunity and a challenge as the introduction of a new club can cause disruption in existing loyalties as casual fans may switch allegiances (Adamson et al., 2006), drawing fans away from already established clubs. Thus, these challenges also present opportunities as new teams create their own culture, voice, and community orientation from scratch without a legacy. Auckland Football Clubs case represents how these challenges can be overcome with established marketing strategies.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

This study is guided by three theoretical frameworks: Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (Keller, 1993); Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001) and Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) explains how fans progress from awareness to attachment and loyalty and similarly Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model suggests brand awareness as the first stage in building brand equity. Additionally, Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) establishes that three psychological determinants i.e. attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape intentions. These theoretical frameworks offer a suitable perspective to understand how AFC was successful in building brand equity, facilitated fan movements and improved engagement through digital and community-driven marketing strategies. These theoretical frameworks and concepts will be further discussed in Chapter 2 – Literature review.

1.4 Rationale for Case Study Approach

This study adopts a single case approach and focuses solely on Auckland Football Club. Studying Auckland Football Club's extensive growth in a market which is traditionally resistant to football can provide valuable insights into strategies and processes. A qualitative case study methodology is most appropriate for this research given the relativist and constructivist philosophical positioning. A case study allows a deep study of a phenomenon in a real-world context, justifying its selection to understand AFC's marketing strategies (Yin, 2017). The single case "common case" rationale supports drawing generalizable insights applicable to comparable sports organizations (Yin, 2017).

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This work consists of six chapters which are organised as follows:

Chapter 1 – Introduction outlines the study, research problems and objectives of studying Auckland FC and its marketing strategies as a case study. Chapter 2- Literature Review, reviews scholarly literature on sport brand building, fan engagement, and digital marketing and establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations that guide this research. Chapter 3- Context and Background provides an overview of the case and Auckland FC's entry into the New Zealand sports landscape describing their strategical marketing initiatives. Chapter 4- Methodology describes the theoretical framework and methodological approach which justifies the case study design and data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 5- Findings, reveals the findings obtained from the interviews using thematic analysis highlighting the key

marketing and fan engagement strategies. Chapter 6- Interpretation, draws back the findings to existing theory and broader sport marketing scholarship. Chapter 6 – Discussion concludes this thesis by summarising the contributions to theory and practice, along with identifying limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.0 Introduction

In the modern sports landscape, the launch of a new sports club is more than just forming a new team but rather represents an act of strategic brand building. New franchises begin with little more than a name, logo and a promise which is very different from legacy clubs that benefit from long-standing histories, established commercial structures, successful stories and generational loyalty (Kunkel et al., 2016).

The most fundamental part of this challenge of launching a new sports team is building psychological connections with prospective fans despite lacking the historical cues and narratives available to established teams (Funk & James, 2001). It is vital for new franchises to establish authentic emotional connections, a distinct brand identity, and initial commercial viability through marketing and communications before the team even appears on the field (Kunkel et al., 2016). The first step in creating something people care about from the outset is effective brand awareness (Wear et al., 2016) as awareness functions as a prerequisite for attitude formation which is also aligns with AIDA model (Awareness Interest Desire Action) that suggests that consumers must first recognise the brand's existence before they can process attributes and form connections. (Barry, 1987)

Past literature on newly established clubs like Atlanta United FC – a Major League Soccer franchise in the USA – reveals the importance of effective marketing strategies for building identity, cultural relevance, and a sense of belonging in their inaugural seasons (Grover & Bell, 2023). Marketing efforts frequently involve fans creating value for the club through non-product-based elements such as mascots, chants and supporter groups, creating a sense of community and identity that emerges organically among fans (Yun et al., 2020). Auckland FC's marketing efforts show parallels with these findings through branding initiatives such as the "Collaborating with Auckland" campaign and its "Day One" partnership with ANZ.

Apart from psychological connections, it is equally important for new clubs to be distinctive in order to stand out in the saturated sport landscape. New clubs must rely on attributes such as visual identity, city-centric symbolism, and carefully curated cultural associations to differentiate themselves due to the lack of performance-based attributes (Lock et al., 2011). Some new clubs adopt global naming practices such as 'United' or 'FC', which may confuse audiences in markets where football culture is still emerging – such as New Zealand (Davies et al., 2023). At the same time, it is essential for clubs aspiring to achieve global stature to strike the appropriate balance between global aspirations and local customs; for instance, the City Football Group has been successful in balancing local belonging and elite global branding. In AFC's case, branding and engagement activities are mainly focused on local identity branding and engagement activities and place-based representation while it is also embedded in the wider global football network under the ownership of Bill Foley's Black Knight Football and Entertainment Group.

Along with creating emotional connections and a strong brand identity, over time the franchise must focus on financial results as an outcome of these efforts. Forming positive connections with the audience through brand awareness is the first step that encourages behaviours like buying tickets, merchandise or memberships (Du et al., 2020). It is crucial that new teams allow adequate lead time for marketing activities: to gain traction before the first game, enabling fans to notice and connect with the brand. This awareness drive alone is not enough; it must be reinforced consistently through various touchpoints such as social media, news media, and community events (Du et al., 2020). Some clubs also benefit from being part of a large ownership group that enhances commercial viability and provides access to shared resources, leading to faster growth. This approach enables new clubs to grow commercially even in developing football markets such as the USA, India and Australia (Davies et al., 2023).

This chapter provides a foundation for understanding Auckland FC's early brand-building strategies by first examining the New Zealand sport ecosystem and then reviewing sport marketing scholarship relevant to new franchise launches

2.1 Contextual Analysis of the New Zealand Sports Ecosystem

Understanding the dynamics of the New Zealand sports ecosystem is an essential foundation for examining the contextual factors within which Auckland Football Club (AFC) operates. New Zealand represents a highly competitive and culturally influenced sports market. This section explores cultural, demographic, and global dimensions of sport in New Zealand using peer-reviewed journal articles, national participation data, and industry statistics. It outlines the dominance of rugby, the influence of Māori and Pacific cultures, growing football participation, gender-related factors, and global football trends.

2.1.1 Sports Fandom in New Zealand

Rugby remains the most popular and powerful sport in New Zealand, both as a form of entertainment and as a shaper of national identity. Rugby is central to the national identity and the Māori culture (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002). The haka performed by the All Blacks has been widely adopted as a symbol of national identity, distinguishing the All Blacks from other international rugby teams (Thomas & Dyll, 1999).

Industry reports underscore rugby's dominance in the sporting landscape. Super Rugby recorded 1.53 million viewers across the first nine rounds of 2025, and the National Rugby League recorded 1.2 million viewers across the first six weeks of the season (FootyIndustry, 2025). According to NZME Sports Insights (2023), 75% of respondents indicated they were likely to watch, listen to, or read about rugby; 53% reported the same for cricket, and 33% for netball. These numbers reveal that rugby attracts a larger audience than other major domestic sports. Davis and McGinnis (2015) describe rugby fandom in New Zealand as "excessive identification," where fans exhibit a high level of identification that aligns closely with personal identity and lifestyle. Furthermore, the All-Blacks brand is valued at NZD \$3.5 billion, placing it alongside leading global sports franchises (New Zealand Rugby, 2022).

For a newly established football franchise such as AFC, this entrenched loyalty structure creates significant barriers to early legitimacy but also opportunities to occupy cultural spaces underserved by traditional sports.

2.1.2 Dominance of Rugby, Cricket, and Netball

The sports ecosystem remains anchored around rugby as the most dominant spectator sport, while cricket, football and netball occupy secondary positions in the New Zealand marketplace in terms of media and sport content consumption (NZME Sports Insights, 2023). According to the Sports Media and Gender Report 2024, Rugby Union and Rugby league command combined of 32.1 %, nearly one-third of all sports news coverage while cricket (15%) and football (12.2%) occupy secondary tiers. The NRL attracted 1.59 million New Zealanders across its first nine rounds in 2024, recording a 14% year-on-year growth (Warriors, 2024). In addition, Super Rugby recorded 1.53 million viewers across the first nine rounds of 2025 (FootyIndustry, 2025).

Broadcast initiatives such as free-to-air coverage have improved cricket viewership and resulted in 1.33 million people watching the Black Caps or White Ferns, making cricket the second most popular sport in New Zealand (New Zealand Cricket, 2023).

Netball holds a substantial share of female sport engagement and holds a unique status as the primary driver for female centric sports media coverage (98.2%) (Isentia / Sport New Zealand, 2024). Between the initial trial and full-year implementation of broadcasting by Netball NZ, fan engagement increased by 78% in 2024. Netball NZ also saw 60% of viewers opt in for communications, indicating sustained engagement (Tradable Bits, 2024).

Furthermore, a notable contradiction can be observed in participation trends where football continued to be the most popular team participation sport in New Zealand (RNZ News, 2026) and challenges the traditionally dominant sports in youth participation (Active NZ Survey, 2024). Even though football holds a significant number in terms of participation, it struggles to convert this base into a sustained domestic viewership and media coverage enjoyed by enjoyed by Rugby and Cricket.

These statistics reveal persistent traditional and cultural dominance of these sports within the NZ sports marketplace for new entrants like AFC, such entrenched fandoms present structural challenges,

2.1.3 Socio-Cultural Influences

Māori and Pasifika values and participation strongly influence the New Zealand sporting ecosystem. Historically, rugby has been central to Pākehā ethnicity formation, interracial integration, and community bonding (Watson, 2007). The All Blacks attract global recognition, especially through the haka, which has strong emotive impact and strengthens cultural pride and feelings of patriotism. The All Blacks are described as a “living artefact” of national history and identity (Davis & McGinnis, 2015).

Even though rugby has been a cultural focal point, it does not go uncontested. Despite Māori players representing 34% of professional rugby athletes (Hapeta et al., 2019), Sport NZ (2021)

reports that Māori, Pasifika, Asian, urban youth, migrant communities, and women face various structural barriers to participation.

Football's global identity and multicultural participation trends allow the sport to position itself differently within the NZ ecosystem. NZ Football (2025) recorded a 14% increase in Māori, Pasifika, and Asian participants following partnerships with Māori Football Aotearoa and targeted Pasifika engagement programmes.

Sports teams serve as key identity drivers for fans who form a sense of belonging and psychological connection to the club (Funk & James, 2001). They also draw upon wider social identities such as regional, cultural, and community ties (Heere & James, 2007). However, the importance of an inclusive identity for new sports teams such as AFC is not well understood and forms a critical area this study addresses. This gap motivates the research questions guiding this study. RQ1 and RQ3 focus on the marketing strategies and activations that enabled AFC to rapid adoption while RQ2 and RQ4 explore how these efforts shaped brand meaning, resonance, and fan loyalty.

2.1.4 Global Football Context

According to FIFA's global census (2006), 270 million people were actively involved in football worldwide. Football's exponential growth is evident in the statistics released after the 2022 Qatar FIFA World Cup: an estimated 5 billion people watched the tournament, with 1.5 billion watching the final (Statista, 2025).

Alongside the rise of men's football, interest and participation in women's football has also accelerated. The inaugural Women's Club World Cup, to be held in 2026, marks a significant moment in global women's football. New Zealand's co-hosting of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup further intensified local visibility and participation. The tournament drew over 700,000 spectators across NZ stadiums (RNZ News, 2024) and generated sustained interest evidenced by a 13% increase in female registrations.

In New Zealand, football commands a strong grassroots participation and is now the largest team sport by player numbers. More than 180,000 registrations across organised football and futsal programmes in 2025 and substantial involvement at secondary-school level were recorded. Nearly 148,500 players took part in formal competitions and female participation has increased significantly since the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup (RNZ News, 2026). Despite this trend in participation professional opportunities within the sport still remain very limited. Historically, New Zealand's first professional club Football Kingz FC struggled in the Australian National Soccer League and could not sustain for long, and the Wellington Phoenix has been representing New Zealand in the A-League since 2007, there has always been a lack of sustained domestic professional pathways.

These global developments and shifting participation trends create favourable conditions for AFC's emergence, leveraging both rising football interest and New Zealand's heightened visibility in the global football ecosystem.

2.1.5 Participation Trends and Demographics

Organised sport has faced a decline in participation especially at youth level. A Sport New Zealand (2024) survey revealed participation remained below pre-COVID levels, with the 12–17 age group recording the steepest decline.

Football, however, defies this downward trend and now leads in national participation. Over 170,000 registered players in 2024 represented a 6% year-on-year increase, with 142,000 registered through NZ Football programmes and another 30,000 through schools (NZ Football, 2024). This accelerated growth was further fuelled by the 2023 Women's World Cup, which generated a 13% rise in female registrations and a 27% increase in girls' and women's programmes (NZ Football, 2025). The FIFA Women's World Cup recorded over 700,000 attendees in NZ stadiums (RNZ News, 2024).

This evidence suggests that despite declining organised sport participation overall, football is resisting this trend and continuing to grow. For AFC, this rapid rise represents both a commercial opportunity and a strategic imperative to invest in youth academies, school partnerships, and family-oriented marketing to secure long-term fan engagement.

A 40% increase in A-League viewership was recorded in New Zealand, reaching 1.31 million viewers an uplift driven partly by AFC's early success. These collective developments demonstrate a sport undergoing transformation and expansion within NZ.

In summary, the NZ sporting landscape historically dominated by rugby, is now characterised by shifting participation trends and growing acceptance of football. This evolving environment presents both obstacles and openings for AFC as a new franchise seeking cultural relevance and competitive visibility.

2.2 Brand Building in New Clubs

Brand building for a new sports team is a complex process that begins long before the team makes its first competitive appearance and continues to evolve throughout the franchise's lifecycle. New teams must overcome multiple challenges arising from their lack of history and established institutional structures and must strategically cultivate brand associations as well as awareness, nurturing connections with potential consumers

2.2.1 Initial Challenges and Pre-Inaugural Branding

Challenges faced by newly established teams differ significantly from those faced by already established teams, as new teams must first make potential consumers aware of their brand (Du et al., 2020). New teams do not have the benefit of historical achievements, performance records or existing traditions (Daniels et al., 2018).

Therefore, to overcome this challenge new sports teams must start the branding process early, focusing on pre-season marketing campaigns: designed to foster connections with potential fans. Building these early fan connections is essential because fans often develop emotional and psychological connections and brand associations with a new team even before the first competitive match occurs (Wear & Heere, 2020). These initial brand associations are often the

product of strategic marketing and communication efforts rather than fans' direct experiences (Kunkel et al., 2016).

For example, Atlanta United in the MLS successfully utilized press releases to communicate brand attributes including long-term ambitions and alignment with broader football culture before their first match (Grover & Bell, 2023). Furthermore, expansion teams need to plan for a "sufficient runway" before their first game, ensuring marketing and communication efforts have enough time to generate awareness (Du et al., 2020). Teams may face low awareness if they fail to establish a brand environment early in the inaugural season.

Apart from an absence of history, traditions, and past achievements, a lack of brand identity and brand markers is one of the most significant barriers for new sports organisations for developing facing new sports organisations in developing brand equity. They usually enter the market without established markers such as logos, traditions and culturally anchored rituals that fans can recognise and associate with (Davies et al., 2023). New teams build their brand equity by clarifying their identity through foundational elements such as a name and logo, serving as a starting point for building brand equity (Aaker, 1992).

Additionally, new teams face challenge forming a dedicated supporter base capable of becoming deeply engaged, as they enter the market with very small or non-existent fanbase (Wear et al., 2016; Kunkel et al., 2016). They further struggle to develop strong community identification due to a lack of established traditions, making early fan attachment more difficult (Heere & James, 2007).

New teams also face external challenges as they grow within highly competitive sports environments. They must compete with long-standing established teams for fan attention, market share and media coverage particularly in markets dominated by legacy leagues such as the NRL and Super Rugby (Boehmer, 2025). This challenge intensifies for teams in niche sports, particularly when attempting to generate identification when fans already identify with superior international franchises (Grant et al., 2011).

Another important aspect related to sport branding is the core product the on-field performance which is unpredictable. Early poor performance, a typical challenge for expansion teams, can limit attendance, media attention and attractiveness, hindering the early development of brand associations (Grant et al., 2011).

2.2.2 Core Strategies for Brand Building

Team-Led Branding Processes

The brand building process is driven by both the organisation and the expectations of fans. Team-led branding processes usually include marketing communications, team announcements, brand releases, and season-ticket promotions, whereas fan-led processes include expectations, identity development and social interaction (Du et al., 2020).

Consumer Involvement and Co-Creation

It is crucial for teams to involve consumers to successfully build a new brand. Du et al. (2020) describe sport brand building as a value co-creation process in which consumers and the team

collaboratively shape brand identity. Managers conduct: targeted market research with early supporters. This may include brainstorming sessions, pub visits during match screenings, and surveys regarding ticket pricing, stadium design, and logo selection (Davies et al., 2023)

Creating Multiple Brand Touchpoints

Managers of new sports teams need to develop a variety of physical and digital touchpoints where people can experience the brand. These may include social media platforms, team websites, local festivals, news coverage, public screenings and billboards (Du et al., 2020). Teams often blend informative messaging (e.g., player announcements) with persuasive communication (e.g., “Buy tickets now”) to encourage engagement (Grover & Bell, 2023).

A primary strategy for teams without history is to create meaningful links with the home city through team name, logo, crest, slogans, and chants (Davies et al., 2023).

Supporter-Led Initiatives

Supporter-led initiatives are a unique aspect of early brand building, where fans drive the creation of traditions such as chants, supporter groups and banners. Teams often facilitate and not control this process to encourage authenticity (Lock et al., 2011). Such organic behaviours can enhance perceived legitimacy, which is critical for a new franchise.

Leveraging Pre-Existing Attachments

Fans often judge the relevance of a new team using pre-existing attachments to the sport, city, league or notable individuals. People with strong prior connections are more likely to seek further information and engage with the team (Du et al., 2020; Lock et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2015).

2.2.3 Visual Identity and Semiotic Values

For new teams, visual identity becomes a central aspect of creating authenticity and early brand meaning in the absence of history. Non-product attributes operate independently of team performance and are crucial for shaping brand equity (Kaynak et al., 2007). Attributes including logo design, stadium environment, spectator experience, and traditions help create stable brand associations.

Brand markers defined as visual identifiers such as logo, colours, uniforms, and merchandise serve as influential drivers of team identity (Biscaia et al., 2013). Logos and colours : signal and reinforce meaning and team image (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

A team’s logo has become a symbolic brand artefact; once a sign of allegiance, it now reflects broader cultural identity due to increased marketing and media exposure (Bishop, 2001). Teams create ongoing revenue streams by producing branded merchandise.

Atlanta United used 13 press releases during its launch to discuss brand markers highlighting the importance of fan involvement in logo and kit design (Grover & Bell, 2023). Similarly, Yun et al. (2020) found logos and colours to be key determinants of team brand image.

Stadium Arena and Social Space

Another important non-product component is the physical facility as it directly affects the viewer experience and brand identity. The social space or Stadium/Arena serves as the most tangible distinctive brand attribute due to its visual representation ability for the sports brand (Underwood et al., 2001). It plays an important role in developing brand associations, especially through the atmosphere created during games. The overall layout, aesthetics, cleanliness and a sense of community the facility provides can develop positive associations (Funk & James, 2001). For new teams, the impact a stadium has in terms of team identification is statistically very high. A study by H. Wear and Heere (2020) revealed that for one team in its inaugural season, the high positive consumer perceptions of the social space facilitated fans to have positive perceptions regarding their newly launched stadium. Stadium characteristics such as layout, aesthetics, cleanliness etc. can positively influence fan behaviours from a marketing perspective but a branding restriction exists for teams that do not own their own stadium, as has been noted in the A- League (Yun et al., 2020).

2.2.4 Models of New Teams Creation in Professional Football

According to literature, new clubs don't rely on one standard model for branding rather they rely on strategies based on league structures, fan cultures, and organizational objectives. Four distinct models of entry can be identified through the literature across the MLS, A-League, and global multi-club systems.

Collaborative and Community-Driven Expansion (MLS Context)

In the MLS, new and expansion teams usually adopt a model based on deep community integration and early supporter involvement. Club professionals carry out an extensive market research and value feedback from potential fans on important areas such as pricing, matchday experiences and stadium layouts and designs prior to the inaugural season. These efforts were often conducted in spaces like local sports bars and clubs to learn and understand the cultural importance for local fans (Davies et al., 2023). In this model, brand elements such as name, logo and colours are aligned with the local identity making the branding highly city centric. For example, FC Cincinnati used the name of the city to ensure geographic association and LAFC used black and gold colours to resonate with Los Angeles' glamorous entertainment industry (Davies et al., 2023; Lock et al., 2011). Space for supporter lead initiatives are also a very important aspect for this model. Fans initiate and control activities such as banner painting parties, with minimal club involvement making it a collaborative framework where the club creates early brand equity through empowering supporters and forming new traditions (Davies et al., 2023).

Global Multi-Club Ownership and Identity Standardisation (City Football Group Context)

The City Football Group (CFG) employs a contrasting model to MLS expansion teams. This model integrates a top-down and globally integrated branding model based on standardisation across all the clubs owned by the group throughout the world. CFG maintains a standardised brand architecture by applying the word "City" in the names of their flagship teams (Manchester City FC, Melbourne City FC, New York City FC) and employing consistent visual

brand elements such as the sky-blue kit and shared global sponsors. CFG's strategic expansion often targets demographics that are less developed in terms of the sport and less globally recognised, which can be seen in club acquisitions such as Melbourne City FC, Montevideo City Torque, and Palermo FC (Richardson, 2023).

Regional Authenticity and Identity-Conscious Positioning (A-League Context)

In the Australian A-League, contrasting sets of approaches for building team identity can be observed. Western Sydney Wanderers (WSW) entered the league by associating themselves to the multicultural and working-class culture and the demographic make-up of Western Sydney. They built their team identity based on ideas of inclusivity, diversity, and "raw humanness" which was highly relatable to the target demographic. This identity building strategy led to rapid fan growth and competitive success (Hale, 2025).

In contrast, Sydney FC's (SFC) approach was based on the interests and preferences of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture. SFC designed itself to be "respectable" and highly suitable for sponsors and the media (Hale, 2025). Together, these clubs demonstrate two different approaches employed for building team identity in the A-League.

Strategic Publicity and Co-Created Brand Attributes (Atlanta United FC)

Atlanta United FC's (AUFC) approach focused on non-product brand attributes and experiential communication helped them achieve successful results in their pre-launch visibility and branding. The club focused on elements such as fan culture, emerging traditions, history even before the club played their first ever game. AUFC also framed supporters and fans as history makers by promoting the idea of "Making history now" promoting a feeling of co-creation with potential supporters. The club successfully laid down new traditions such as an installation of a large rail segment in the stadium, regarded as the "Golden Spike" segment. This strategy created multiple touchpoints targeting emotions, senses and fan behaviour. Another key strategy employed by AUFC was organising watch parties for international games even before the club played their first ever game, giving fans a chance to interact with the brand before the product was launched (Grover & Bell, 2023).

The above-described models reveal that new football club brands are shaped by different logics, positioning and rationale. Some clubs rely on global standardisation and growth while some clubs prioritise local integration and cultural resonance.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations

2.3.1 Conceptualizing Brand Equity in Football Clubs (Customer-Based Brand Equity)

Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model serves as a foundational framework for understanding how brand knowledge influences consumer responses to the marketing of a brand. This framework is grounded in brand knowledge as the central construct comprising of brand image and awareness. Keller proposed that to build brand equity, strong, favourable, and unique brand associations conveyed through attributes, benefits, and attitudes are important. Foundational frameworks related to brand equity by Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993) have shaped how scholars approach brand equity. Sport

brands are similar, but not exactly the same, as illustrated by the Fan-based brand equity pyramid.

2.3.2 CBBE and FBBE in Sport

Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand building as a process that involves identity, meaning and differential effect (responses). Naik and Gupta (2013) adapted Keller's framework for sport in the Fan based brand equity pyramid (FBBE) which reframes it into stages and terms specific for teams.

Team Salience (Identity)

This is the first step in creating any brand equity for a team which explores why a team exists and how aware are the fans about attributes of the team such as name, logo and symbols. The purpose of this step is to become a dominant name among consumers.

Team Meaning (Performance and Imagery)

This step of the FBBE pyramid involves creation of a brand meaning which is further categorized into "team performance" (effectiveness and reliability) and "team imagery" (abstract and imaginative associations).

Fan Responses (Judgements and Feelings)

This stage of the pyramid reflects how fans evaluate the teams marketing activities. This reflects how the fans feel about the club and what they feel about the marketing efforts, resulting in judgements and emotional reactions evoked by the team.

Team Resonance

The final tier of the pyramid focuses on the psychological bond between the fans and the team. Team resonance includes factors such as behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, and active engagement. Naik and Gupta (2013) expand Keller's (1993) model by also including Team Social Responsibility as an important component of the relationship between fans and teams, emphasizing on the importance of fan welfare.

Complementing this, Ross (2006) integrated service-based brand equity (SBBE) concepts with Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model proposing a conceptual framework for the spectator-based domain. The SBBE model asserts that brand equity is driven by three key antecedents: organisation-induced factors (marketing strategies), market-induced factors (publicity, word-of-mouth), and experience-induced factors (the actual service experience). His model emphasizes that brand equity in sports is driven by the consumers' perceptions of the marketing efforts and their experience with the brand and products associated with the brand (CITE). The SBBE model is conceptualized around brand awareness and associations and has been empirically tested and validated as a reliable model.

These models reveal that brand meaning, and equity is not just a result of marketing or performance and is also shaped by constant interaction between the club and the fans, the fans and the team, and the marketing efforts to the fans. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model becomes especially relevant in the context of new sport teams as they may face challenges with brand awareness which is a foundational step in building a brand

strategy (Ross, 2006). Grant and co-researchers revealed in their research (2011) managers of new sport teams from New Zealand faced a challenge in spreading brand awareness. As these teams lack long term recognition and visibility, they must focus on making potential customers aware of their brand and offerings (value to them) before more meaningful brand associations are formed. However traditional brand equity models such as the CBBE model falls short in explaining how awareness is formed in the early stages as they are based on associative memory-based frameworks (Du et al., 2020).

2.3.3 Components of Brand Equity (Awareness and Associations)

Brand equity for sports consists of two main components; brand awareness and associations (Biscaia et al., 2013; Ross, 2006)

Brand awareness

Brand awareness refers to the strength of the brands presence in a consumer's mind and their ability to recall and recognize the brand (Aaker, 1992; Ross, 2006). It is the foundation on which all further associations are built. Building brand awareness is an important yet difficult objective for new teams, which makes it a priority for new teams in the early brand building process (Du et al., 2020).

Brand Associations

Brand associations are thoughts, images and perceptions linked to a brand in the consumer's mind (Aaker, 1992; Ross, 2006). Brand associations often guide consumer behaviour (Daniels et al., 2018). Brand Associations are further categorised into "attributes" (characteristics like a stadium or star player) and "benefits" (the value extracted, such as pride or community). Attributes help form team perceptions whereas benefits help extract the meaning and the value the team brings to the fans (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

In the sports context, scholars have further segmented associations into the following (Biscaia et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, 2006):

- Team/Product-Related: Success, star players, head coaches, and playing style.
- Organization/Non-Product-Related: Logos, history, stadium infrastructure, and management quality.
- Communal/Experiential: Social interactions, rituals, and shared group experiences.

According to several studies, non-product attributes such as logos and traditions have a larger impact on fan attitudes and commitment as compared to product related attributes such as on field success (Bauer et al., 2008; Biscaia et al., 2013; Yun et al., 2020).

2.3.4 Strategic Value of Brand Equity for Football Teams

Managing a sports team as a brand is an increasingly recognised pattern (Ross, 2006). Having a strong brand is considered a football club's most valuable asset (Yun et al., 2020), as a positive brand equity generates revenue, drives financial gains, influences consumers buying intentions, and increases the overall value of the brand in terms of sponsorship and broadcasting deals (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Ross, 2006).

From a consumer behaviour point of view, brand equity helps foster team identification which refers to the psychological connection and how the fans feel about the club (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2011; Underwood et al., 2001). Fans that identify strongly with the team, and display high levels of loyalty, are more likely to engage with the team by regularly attending games and by purchasing the team's merchandise (Kunkel et al., 2013). A study by Gray and Wert-Gray (2011) also emphasizes on the factors beyond match results, as identification has a stronger effect on consumption than mere satisfaction with team performance. As the core product in terms of sport is unpredictable, identification helps teams deal with negative on field performances, ensuring that the fans support is sustained even when performance declines (Kunkel et al., 2016).

New football teams face challenges in developing early brand equity as they struggle with awareness (Du et al., 2020). Brand associations are often formed before the first game for new teams based on marketing efforts and perceived future experiences (Kunkel et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important for new teams to develop an informed strategy for early messaging as initial fan impressions are resistant to change (Kunkel et al., 2016). A longitudinal study by Daniels et al. (2018) suggests that early associations are driven by attributes such as logo, name, star players etc. but these associations evolve towards benefit driven associations such as value, experience and personal meaning. To address this brand managers, need to develop a strategy to address this change in brand associations.

2.3.5 Fan Engagement and Loyalty Formation (Psychological Continuum Model)

Fan engagement is a form of customer engagement in sport that operates as a mechanism that connects brand perceptions and fans decisions to act, working as a set of non-transactional behaviours (Yoshida et al., 2014). Customer engagement reflects the fans behavioural manifestations that are beyond purchase and are psychologically motivated (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Yoshida et al. (2014) conceptualize fan engagement as a multidimensional, behavioural concept that comprises of three primary behaviours by fans that helps the club, management and other fans. Fan engagement is an important aspect for loyalty, brand image, and satisfaction (Yun et al., 2020), thus playing an important role in progressing fans through the stages of the Psychological Continuum Model.

Dimensions and Drivers of Fan Engagement

According to the research by Yoshida et al. (2014), fan engagement in the sport context is conceptualized as a consumer's non-transactional, extra role behaviours that benefit their favourite sport team, the team's management, and other fans

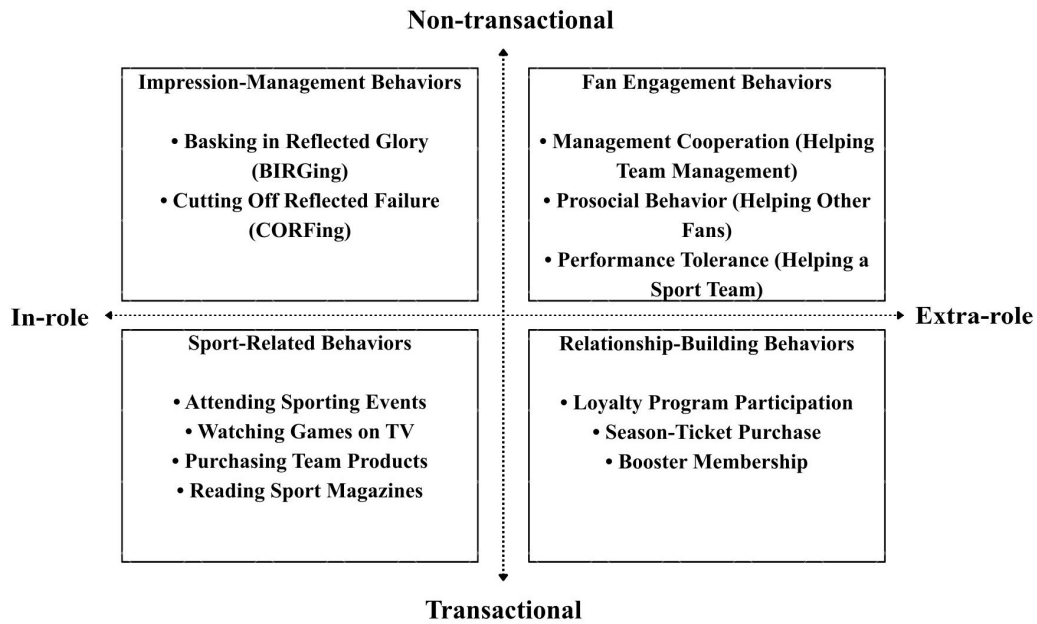


Figure 1: Four types of engagement behaviour in spectator sport

The three dimensions of non-transactional fan engagement behaviours identified by Yoshida et al. (2014) are as follows:

Management Cooperation (MC)

MC refers to the fans willingness to contribute to the managements service delivery protocols through constructive feedback, assisting staff, or helping maintain safety. Team identification shapes these fans behaviours which is further enhanced by BIRGing (basking in reflected glory) which also refers to fans aligning themselves to positive outcomes of the team.

Prosocial Behaviours (PB)

PB refers to fan's social behaviours such as supportive social interactions on social media or helping other fans at events. PB is also highly driven by team identification and BIRGing and strengthens fan's intentions on acting on behalf of the wider community. PB also influences referral intentions which encourages fans to introduce new potential supporters to the team.

Performance Tolerance (PT)

PT refers to fans capacity to continuously showcase supportive behaviours regardless of negative outcomes on the field. This includes behaviours such as continuous display of team merchandise or defending the team during poor on field results. PT has a positive influence on purchase intentions, which reflects commitment and loyalty even in difficult conditions. This makes fans who exhibit high PT as highly valuable to the team.

Antecedents and Outcomes of Fan Engagement

Team identification is the primary antecedent of all the dimensions of fan engagement describe above (Yoshida et al., 2014). In terms of digital platforms, social content that brings out shared memories or nostalgia produce the highest levels of engagement (Annamalai et al., 2021). Fan engagement has proven effects on key brand and behavioural outcomes such as purchase intentions, referral intentions, fan satisfaction and team brand image (Yoshida et al., 2014; Yun et al., 2020).

Thus, engagement works as a crucial component in a brands strategy to gain advantage over its competitors.

2.3.6 The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM): Understanding Fan Movement

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) developed by Funk and James (2001) is the foundational framework that helps understand how psychological connections are developed between fans and sports through objects, such as teams, players, or the sport itself. PCM was developed to fill the gap in studies on sports spectatorship and fandom and outlines a four-step continuum- Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance, which trails positive development of fan engagement and identity over time. It adds value by conceptualizing fan behaviour as dynamic psychological journey which responds to various social, emotional, and environmental influences.

The Four Stages of the PCM

Awareness is the first level which refers to an individual's recognition of the sport or the team which is mediated by factors such as friends and family, advertising and media exposure.

This stage is followed by **Attraction** wherein an individual develops a preference such as favourite team or a player which is shaped by hedonic motives (e.g. Entertainment, escape), dispositional needs (e.g., psychological traits), or situational contexts (e.g., desire to belong). However, the connection at this level could be temporary and fans at this level can easily switch allegiance due to poor performances or lack of novelty.

Attachment, which is the third stage, is a stage where a significant shift in psychological connection can be observed towards the sport. At this stage, attributes of a team or sport such as players, coaches, or symbols with personal meaning become ingrained in the fan's identification with the team. The bond between becomes much stronger at this stage translating to direct experiences like live attendance or merchandise ownership.

The most committed form of fan behaviour is represented by the last stage of the model- **Allegiance**. In this stage, fans showcase a strong identity and loyalty towards the team and engage with joining supporter clubs, learning team history, and participating in community-building rituals.

Application and Relevance of the PCM

The PCM has been applied in the field across various contexts including the Australian Football League and other events to understand the attitude formation providing a conceptual and theoretical lens (Lock et al., 2011). This model is highly relevant for new sport franchises and

especially for this study. Recent studies have revealed that fans develop bonds with the clubs even before a ball is kicked and these bonds are driven by existing attachments with factors such as geography, the sport, or individual athletes (Lock et al., 2011).

To summarise, the PCM remains a fundamental model in sport marketing literature which is grounded in psychology revealing how fan identity and engagement progress through different stages (Funk & James, 2001). Its integration with other theories helps practitioners as well as researchers understand fandom in emerging sports teams or brands.

2.3.7 Fan Behaviour and Decision-Making for Fans of New Sport Teams

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) establishes that three psychological determinants i.e., attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape intentions. Sports marketing and management literature explicate constructs that are central to TPB, namely attitudes, social norms, and behavioural intention and use psychological and behavioural models such as the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) and social identity theory which are closely related to TPB.

Motivations for Forming New Team Identification

Fan behaviour around established franchises and teams is fundamentally different to new or expanded teams (including many new members????), as new teams lack history, traditions, and established fan communities (Lock et al., 2011). Evidence from their study reveals that by BIRGing (basking in reflected glory) plays little to no role in early team identification formation. In this absence of historical narratives, new team identification formation is characterized by three key primary drivers.

The strongest driver is Sports- first identity where in fans existing general passion for the sport encourages them to follow the domestic league and watch live games (D. Funk et al., 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Lock et al., 2011) Community and origin is also another major driver as fans look to support a club which is authentic and represents the city or locality (Kolbe & James, 2000). However, in the case of Sydney FC community was not a key driver of team identification due to the lack of history but origin strengthened team identification formation (Lock et al., 2011). Another driver of team identification is occasion and experience which includes factors such as game-day atmosphere, rituals, social interaction, and communal experiences (Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock et al., 2011). These factors demonstrate the role of shared group experiences and communal brand associations which are crucial in early identity formation (H. Wear & Heere, 2020).

Apart from these three drivers, attachment decisions can also be influenced by recognisable personnel such as star players and head coaches. These personnel can offer early touchpoints for potential fans (Kunkel et al., 2016). In their study, Kolbe and James (2000) revealed that players and coaches strongly influence adolescents and adults both in terms of deciding whom to support. Additionally, early interest and trial behaviour is also generated through curiosity and novelty around the new franchisee (Davies et al., 2023; James & Ross, 2004).

Early Behavioural Decisions and Commitments

Fans start forming early behaviours such as developing emotional, psychological connections and brand associations with a new team even before they play their first match (H. Wear & Heere, 2020), progressing through the early PCM stages from awareness to attraction. Promotional efforts and expectations enable strong cognitive and emotional bonds among fans even before the ball is kicked (Kunkel et al., 2016; Lock et al., 2011). This early connection can be observed in purchasing decisions demonstrated by the fans such as buying season tickets to solidify their connection, which offers the fans a sense of belonging and group association (James et al., 2002). Pre-existing attachments to the city, league, sport, or key personnel shape awareness around the new franchise and plays a crucial part for fans to decide the relevance of the new team (Du et al., 2020)

As identification develops, fans seek to maintain identity by frequent news around the club which is driven by a desire to demonstrate knowledge and legitimacy within the in-group (Lock et al., 2011). Further, fans display strong identification through proactive promotion of the club to others that helps shape a distinct and positive group identity. This fan behaviour is termed as “active advocacy or spruiking” which allows highly identified fans to act as social advocates for the team and draw new fans to join in (Lock et al., 2011). Team identification further becomes a core identity of the highly identified fans which influences their daily routines and decisions (Lock et al., 2011).

Managerial Influence on Early Fan Decisions

In the early stages of a new team, managers actively seek to influence fan behaviour to accelerate the psychological progression of new fans. Fans or consumers of new sport teams are usually motivated towards their existing connection with a league more than the new team itself. Leveraging this connection with the league brand can be a central strategy for managers. Marketing campaigns aligned with the broader league brand helps new teams enhance consumer involvement (Kunkel et al., 2013). In addition, managers rely on prior market research including initial supporters and conducting surveys focused on ticket pricing, stadium design, and cultural elements and incorporating fan ideas to develop a new sports team brand (Davies et al., 2023).

Another crucial factor to be considered by new or expansion sports teams is that initial impressions are formed in the consumers mind rapidly and fan perceptions and evaluations of the team can be formed in the initial few games and are hard to change later. To utilize early brand associations managers craft marketing and communications focusing on early interactions (Kunkel et al., 2016).

Additionally, as new teams do not have historical on field success to rely on, managers focus on communal benefits such as rituals, social spaces, and shared group experiences, that together showcase collective fandom (Wear & Heere, 2020).

Lastly, managers of new teams prioritize direct consumer experiences, like live match exposure, meet-and-greets, and special events. These experiences are important interactions

with the team as they are intended to act as key mechanisms in moving fans from attraction to a deeper attachment (Funk & James, 2001; Lock et al., 2011).

2.4 Theoretical Integrations of Brand Equity (CBBE), Behavioural Intentions (TPB) and Psychological Connection (PCM)

This research synthesizes three key theoretical frameworks to understand the formation of a fanbase for a new football club; namely the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). Each theory addresses a different dimension of the fan formation process and together they explain the process better than separate single frameworks. CBBE explains how marketing activity and campaigns shape brand perception formation while TPB explains how those perceptions translate into behavioural intention. Furthermore, PCM explains how those intentions translate into fan loyalty progression from initial awareness through to allegiance. Collectively, these three frameworks provide an integrated explanation of how a new sports franchise can build brand equity, convert it into fan behaviour, and sustain that behaviour in terms of loyalty over time. Sports marketing literature is heavily reliant on psychological models such as the PCM and often explicates antecedent conditions constructs such as attitudes, social norms, and behavioural intention central to TPB.

Complementarity between the Frameworks

The input (CBBE - Brand Perceptions): Brand building and brand awareness are the focal starting points of the process. New teams must start with establishing “Team salience” as the first step in creating brand equity (Naik & Gupta, 2013). Brand associations are characterized into attributes (e.g., logo, star players) and benefits (e.g., pride, community). These initial brand perceptions act as a strong cognitive basis for fans connection with the team (Ross, 2006).

The process (TPB- cognitive or behavioural intentions): Initial brand associations formed due to these attributes and benefits shape fan attitudes as it informs fans perceptions and the value of the team (Daniels et al. 2018). Although, traditional TPB (Ajzen, 1991) is not explicitly applied in sports context, its core constructs are reflected in the above-mentioned attributes and benefits and their influence on fan attitudes.

The outcome (PCM- Progression to Loyalty): The fans progress through the PCM stages as they keep acting on their intentions.

- Awareness: The initial learning that the team exists usually driven by media and socialization agents .
- Attraction: A low-level connection based on hedonic motives or novelty.
- Attachment: The bond stabilizes as the team gains intrinsic meaning.
- Allegiance: The final stage where fans exhibit high Performance Tolerance and act as social advocates to draw new fans to the team.

2.5 Research Gaps

The theoretical frameworks discussed above are highly robust when applied individually and to a range of contexts similar to the original theory creation context. But, significant gaps

remain when applying them within the unique context sports marketplace and new sport teams(/clubs) in New Zealand (NZ).

- 1- Existing sport marketing literature largely examines established clubs or expansion teams in established markets such as MLS franchises in the United States or A-League clubs entering a relatively literate Australian market compared to NZ (Lock et al., 2011). There is limited research examining how new football franchises build brand legitimacy in saturated and cluttered sport markets where other sports dominate, such as New Zealand, where rugby dominates the market and professional football has yet to achieve equivalent standing (Bradbury & Catley, 2007). This study addresses that gap using AFC's inaugural season as a case through which to examine how the CBBE–TPB–PCM framework operates in a saturated market.
- 2- The newness contradiction: Building brand identity is heavily reliant on history, heritage, and nostalgia (Underwood et al., 2001; Yun et al., 2020). However, new teams lack this historical narrative of achievement, traditions and culture (Daniels et al., 2018). In the NZ context, Grant et al. (2011) highlighted that managers of new NZ sports franchises often struggle to implement brand community markers (such as rituals and traditions) because they do not yet exist. These further highlights a gap in understanding how these historical associations are substituted by new teams in NZ.
- 3- Awareness formation in a cluttered market: NZ sports market is a cluttered market with “excessive identification” towards rugby where fans lifestyle and social identity are connected to the sport (Davis & McGinnis, 2015) and other strongly represented, well established ball sports. Traditional CBBE models also fall short in explaining how awareness is formed in very early stages for new teams (Du et al., 2020). Research is needed to understand how a new team establishes itself in this cluttered and competitive NZ sporting ecosystem, where sports like rugby have a strong cultural hold.
- 4- Limitations in current understanding of football brand equity in NZ: Traditional antecedents such as success, narrative, community connection, and identity cues may operate differently than in established markets for non-dominant sports in a market like NZ. The NZ Knights case highlights a need for context-specific research on how new football franchises in NZ can strategically construct meaningful brand equity and how new clubs can overcome low awareness and past negative legacies such as the Football Kingz. (Bradbury & Catley, 2007)

Table 1: Synthesis Table for Theoretical Frameworks and Research Gaps

Theoretical Perspective	Key Constructs	Measures/Focus	Role in Synthesis	Identified Gaps (NZ Context)
Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) (Keller, 1993; Ross, 2006)	Brand Awareness Brand Associations (Attributes & Benefits) Team Salience	Perceptions: Recall, recognition, and strength of brand presence.	Establishes the initial brand knowledge and "Team Meaning."	Traditional models fail to explain awareness formation for new teams (Du et al., 2020). NZ managers struggle to implement brand community markers like rituals (Grant et al., 2011). Lack of understanding of how "history-free" brands build equity in NZ
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991)	Attitudes Subjective Norms Behavioural Intention	Decisions: The psychological determinants shaping the decision to act.	Explains how perceptions convert into intentions to attend or purchase.	Sports marketing often uses these constructs rather than explicitly testing TPB in sports Influence of specific NZ social norms (e.g., rugby dominance) on intention to support football.
Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001)	Awareness Attraction Attachment Allegiance	Progression: The staged development of the fan relationship and psychological connection	Maps the movement from initial awareness to loyalty and advocacy	Need to understand how pre-existing attachments (to league/sport) influence the "awareness" stage for new NZ teams (Lock et al., 2011).

2.6 Conceptual Framework

This research uses three foundational theoretical frameworks, namely the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to understand the formation of a fanbase and brand identity of a new football club.

The below conceptual framework proposes that marketing strategies such as community initiatives, experiential game-day themes, pricing/accessibility, social media storytelling, and grassroots programs align with the following theoretical frameworks.

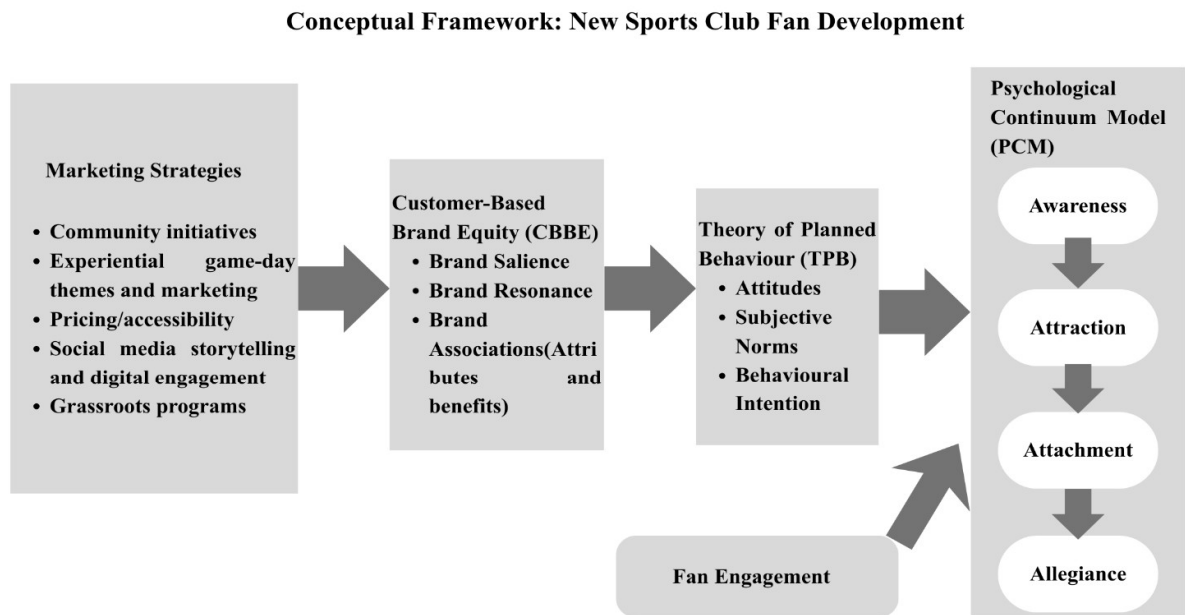


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) constructs: According to the conceptualized framework, marketing strategies initially focus on creating brand perceptions. New teams must begin with establishing strong “Team Salience” (Naik & Gupta, 2013). Marketing efforts initiate the formation of brand associations, which are further classified into attributes (e.g., logo, star players) and benefits (e.g., pride, community). These initial associations and perceptions act as important cognitive basis for a fan’s connection with the team (Ross, 2006).

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) construct: Decision making- mechanisms are influenced by brand knowledge (perceptions and associations) (Ajzen, 1991). Sports marketing literally often underpins constructs of TPB rather than using it explicitly, this conceptual framework utilizes TPB to explain how perceptions convert into intentions. Initial brand associations shape fan attitudes as it informs fans perceptions and the value of the team (Daniels et al. 2018). According to Ajzen (1991), brand knowledge and associations specifically influence the "attitude toward the behaviour".

The Psychological Continuum Model stages (PCM): The progression of fans through these stages: Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance is the outcome of fan intentions (Funk & James, 2001). Fans move from initial awareness (learning the team exists) to attraction (low-level connection based on hedonic motives) as they act on their intentions. This bond further solidifies to attachment and finally towards allegiance as a result of continuous interaction. In these stages fan showcase high performance tolerance (PT) and active voluntary advocacy.

Propositions: Based on the conceptual framework and theoretical synthesis, the following propositions are presented.

P1: Marketing initiatives build club brand equity (Customer-Based Brand Equity)

Initial brand perceptions and associations are often the product of the marketing and communications efforts rather than direct experiences for new teams (Kunkel et al. 2016).

P2: Club brand equity and marketing initiatives influence fan attitudes, norms, and intentions (Theory of Planned Behaviour).

According to Daniels et al. (2018) brand associations guide consumer behaviour. The conceptual framework posits that brand equity (salience and resonance) influences the psychological determinants decision making such as attitudes and social norms. This shapes the fans behavioural intention to attend games or purchase official merchandise.

P3: Fan engagement accelerates Psychological Continuum Model progression.

Fan engagement works as a mechanism which connects brand perceptions and fans decision to act (Yoshida et al., 2014). Direct consumer experiences and interactions are key movers of fans from attraction to deeper attachment (Funk and James, 2001; Lock et al., 2011).

P4: Combined pathways explain rapid growth in fanbase and membership uptake.

Rapid growth in fanbase and membership uptake is explained by integrating these three pathways in new football clubs; marketing builds equity (CBBE), equity drives intentions (TPB), and engagement solidifies loyalty (PCM)

Chapter 3 Method

3.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the research methodology used in this study to understand how AFC built early fan engagement, brand identity and ultimately long-term loyalty in a monosport market. We will focus on their inaugural season (2024-25); AFC's marketing strategies and fan engagement efforts and various engagement tactics over the period (2024 to 2025). This chapter begins with an explanation of the philosophical foundations behind this research, which are guided by a relativist ontology, a constructivist epistemology, and an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gray, 2021). As guided by the work of Yin (2017) regarding rationales that support single case study designs in several circumstances such as having a unusual or revelatory case, a qualitative case study methodology is most appropriate for this research. This methodology also aligns well with the philosophical positioning described above. This chapter proceeds to describe the methodological framework, sampling and participant selection techniques used in this research. The chapter concludes with an outline of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation techniques used and addresses the methodological limitations and ethical considerations of this primary research study.

3.2 Philosophical Foundations

This research is grounded in relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology, and interpretivist research paradigm. This study asserts that reality is not fixed but is constructed through the perceptions and lived experiences of fans and organisational personnel. This means that AFC's marketing effectiveness and brand formation exist as multiple realities rather than a single subjective truth. Additionally, this study also asserts that knowledge about these realities is gained via interpretive qualitative inquiry. This inquiry thus provides insights into the practices, actions and meanings that shaped AFC's fan engagement and brand identity during their inaugural season. A relativist ontology presumes that reality is subjective in nature and can be constructed through individual experiences and social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 18). In the researchers' view, AFC's marketing strategies and early fan engagement, brand identity and its resulting success as late entrant and challenger brand are shaped by perceptions of these strategies by marketers, social media users, football professionals, fans and the New Zealand society as a key stakeholder. Various opinions regarding the planned and actual marketing strategies and tactical execution thereof are likely to be reported by reported by AFC's internal marketing team and intended audience such as causal and committed fans - each offering valid insights regarding perceptions, impact made and resulting outcomes. Hence, a relativist approach fits best as different perspectives of individuals can be reported using their actual words giving insights about multiple realities.

A constructivist epistemology complements the chosen relativist approach as it asserts that meaning is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants (Gray, 2021, p.24). The relation participants have with the phenomenon (in this study, the marketers/fans and marketing strategies) can be different in their own ways. Truth and meaning can be derived from these relationships through interactions during interviews (Gray, 2021, p.24). Therefore, the findings of this study are derived from shared meanings and

narratives of the participants about AFC's marketing effectiveness, fan engagement, and brand identity using interviews. Through this lens knowledge is not discovered but rather constructed through interpretation of lived experiences of marketing professionals and fans.

This philosophical stance is further strengthened by using an interpretivist paradigm for this research as "Interpretivism is closely linked to constructivism" (Gray, 2021, p.20). Interpretivist research is the most used qualitative research method which assumes that reality is socially created, suggesting there are multiple visible realities. The same event or phenomenon may have several realities or interpretations. The terms constructivism and interpretivism are frequently used interchangeably (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this research, an interpretivist approach helps understand deeper meanings and interpretation of marketing strategies and brand building from the professional as well as fan perspective.

Together, these philosophical foundations provide a strong basis for a qualitative case study approach which enables the researcher to capture valuable insights to understand AFC's marketing, fan engagement, and identity formation.

3.3 Research Methodology

This research implements a qualitative case study methodology, given the philosophical underpinnings described in the section above and as it is also the most appropriate methodology to produce accurate and valuable insights around AFC and its early marketing and identity formation. A case study is a deep study of a phenomenon in a real-world context where the boundaries of the context and the phenomenon itself are not clearly distinguishable. Case study research draws upon various sources of evidence to uncover contextual complexity through an in-depth empirical investigation. Additionally, a case study includes systematic procedures that include clear definition of the case and its boundaries, the use of informed research questions, the collection of multiple forms of data, and the application of analytic strategies that link evidence to theory, making it a robust approach to understand a phenomenon in its real-world context. This justifies the selection of the methodology as we aim to understand important contextual conditions relevant to AFC and the marketing strategies (Yin, 2017). This approach helps researchers investigate dynamic interactions and relationships within a specific organizational setting (Eisenhardt, 1989). A qualitative case study research design focuses deeply on perspective and meaning. Unique insights and interpretations can be captured through interviews reflecting the participants' perspectives (Stake, 2005). According to Yin (2017), a compelling feature of case study research is that it begins with a desire to attain an "up-close" and "in-depth" understanding of a single or multiple small number of cases. This study focuses solely on AFC as a single case to investigate variables such as fan engagement, community engagement, media campaigns, and audience perceptions etc. that influence the marketing strategies. The exploratory and interpretive goals of this research are also well complemented by a case study methodological approach as it is particularly suited to answer "how" and "why" questions, which are appropriate to meet the research aim of understanding "how" AFC established an early fan engagement and brand identity using various marketing and fan engagement efforts and "why" certain strategies were perceived as effective. Since this study is based on a contemporary phenomenon rather than a historical one, a case study

methodology is highly suitable for examining the AFC's first year of operations as a club (Yin, 2017).

In summary, a qualitative research methodology aligns well with the philosophical approach, which allows for an in-depth and rich analysis of AFC's marketing effort, and how they helped the club create an early fan base and brand identity.

3.4 Research Context and Case Selection

Auckland Football Club (AFC) was selected as the unit on analysis (a single case) due to its novel entry and establishment in the New Zealand professional sport ecosystem. A case study can provide a fresh perspective on already existing theories, frameworks and the wider research topic, further strengthening AFC as case selection (Eisenhardt, 1989). AFC was established in 2024 in the A-League of football (soccer in some countries), which provides a strong and compelling case to explore how newly established professional sports clubs develop its brand identity and fan base. This case reflects a contemporary case in a real-world context which aligns with the research approach and methodology described in the above sections.

The boundaries of this case are restricted to AFC's inaugural season (2024-2025) and focuses on its marketing strategies, media and social media campaigns and fan engagement efforts. This approach helps explore the club's brand identity development from a contextual as well as operational point of view. Therefore, the selection of AFC as a case allows this research to gain insights into how a brand-new club establishes itself in a competitive sports market.

3.5 Participants and Sampling

The study involved two key participant groups: (1) marketing professionals from AFC and (2) fans/supporters of the club. Marketing professionals were selected as they are the primary custodians of brand strategy and campaigns and fans/supporters were selected as they have indicated their willingness to "buy" and they are central to understanding formation of loyalty and fandom. This study employs purposive sampling as an approach to selecting participants, which is a commonly used sampling strategy used widely in qualitative research. Purposive sampling is based on the idea that most useful and insightful knowledge can be gained from participants who are most capable of providing information which can be valuable to the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). With regards to this study, 6 professionals were selected based on their direct involvement in AFC's marketing efforts and launch as participants for group (1) and participants for group (2) were selected based on their direct involvement as a fan/supporter. This ensures that each participant involved can contribute to this research based on their firsthand lived experience and perspectives

A snowball sampling approach was also used for selecting participants that fall under the "fan" category in the participant pool. Early fan participants were asked to refer individuals who fit in the inclusion criteria to gain new information from rich perspectives.

A clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were outlined to maintain relevance to the research objective.

The criteria for the Marketing Professionals category were as follows:

- Be currently employed by Auckland FC.
- Have been involved in inaugural-year marketing, fan engagement, or branding activities.
- Be willing and able to provide informed consent and communicate in English.
- Be willing to voluntarily share your insights in a semi-structured interview.

And the criteria for Fans/ Supporters were as follows:

- Be 18 years or older.
- Self-identify as an Auckland FC supporter, follower, or attendee during the inaugural A-League Men's season.
- Have attended at least one AFC home game and/or engaged with AFC through social media, club communications, or official activities.
- Currently live in Auckland or the wider Auckland region.
- Be willing and able to provide informed consent and communicate in English

A total of 12 participants (6 from each participant group) were recruited keeping the criterion of saturation in place wherein sampling was stopped whenever saturation is achieved, and no new information or contribution can be attained from further sampling (Margrit Schreier, 2018).

Participant	Group	Role /Description
P1	AFC Professional	Chief Executive Officer
P2	AFC Professional	Chief Commercial Officer
P3	AFC Professional	Head Of Communications
P4	AFC Professional	Marketing Manager
P5	AFC Professional	Content Producer
P6	AFC Professional	Partnerships Activations Manager
F1-F6	AFC Fan	AFC supporters

Table 2: Summary of all participants, their group and role

All six marketing professionals represent AFC staff directly involved in the club's inaugural-year marketing and launch activities(N=6). Fan participants (N=6) were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The selection was based on the inclusion criteria outlined above.

3.6 Participants and Access Procedures

Obtaining access to participants was a very important step in the entire research process. Access to AFC marketing professionals was initiated by contacting a representative from the organization to present the research details and obtain organizational consent and approval to participate. AFC was provided with a detailed organisational and participant information sheet outlining the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study, which was passed on to the professionals directly involved in the clubs marketing and fan engagement efforts in the inaugural year. Interested AFC marketing professionals were asked to contact the primary

researcher to express their interest to participate, after which participation was confirmed and interview was scheduled either in person or via Microsoft Teams, according to the participants preference.

Furthermore, fan/supporter participants were recruited through social media posts. These announcements included a brief description of the study, the inclusion criteria, and the researcher's contact details. Additionally, snowball sampling was also used by asking initial participants to refer fans who might be interested in participating and fit the inclusion criteria.

These recruitment processes made sure that both participant groups with direct and relevant experience were included in the study for a meaningful, unbiased and accurate data collection process. This entire process was conducted in accordance with AUTECH ethics guidelines and approval (Reference No. 25/276, granted 10 September 2025).

3.7 Data Collection Methods

This study employs semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews are widely used as a method of data collection in various disciplines as they are flexible and allow follow-up questions according to the participants responses to engage in a free ranging conversation to gain additional insights (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Semi-structured interviews resemble guided conversations rather than rigid pre-defined conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), which makes them an important source of evidence for case studies (Yin, 2017).

Interviews were conducted with Marketing professionals from AFC who were an integral part of the Club's launch and who have played key roles in the club's inaugural-year marketing and brand building campaigns. (See Appendices A, B and C....) The interviews were aimed at gathering data around planning, strategizing, implementation, and its impact on early fan engagement and brand building. Interviews will be conducted either in person or via online methods according to the participants' preferences. The duration of each interview was approximately 60 minutes, either in-person or online according to each participant's preference.

A dual level inquiry format was used during the interviews which included: (1) a consistent mental framework related to the case, and (2) a conversational verbal line of questioning which help to guide the researcher to adapt to participant responses (Yin, 2017). Two sets of interview guides were used to guide the researcher for both the participant groups. (See Appendix A/B?C)

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (with prior written consent from participants) for accurate data analysis.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis which as applied method in qualitative research was used to analyse the data gathered throughout the interview processes. The 6-step thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was meticulously implemented for accurate analyses. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method for "developing, analysing and

interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 3). Thematic analysis was used in this research as it provides consistency and flexibility aligning to relativist and constructivist approach of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The following steps were used for a thorough data analysis process:

- Familiarization with the data- This stage involved sustained engagement with the dataset through repeated reading of interview transcripts and recording notes for initial observations of the dataset
- Generating initial codes – In this stage initial codes were generated across the dataset to capture segments relating to key areas of the research focus. Each transcript was read line by line and meaningful words, phrases, or passages related to the research focus were assigned descriptive codes. NVivo was used to manage and store all codes, enabling systematic management across all transcripts.
- Searching for themes – This stage involved finding patterns across the coded data and grouping related codes into potential themes and subthemes. Codes were grouped into themes based on conceptual similarity
- Reviewing themes- This stage involved reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset
- Defining and naming themes- This stage involved defining the concept of each theme, clarifying its scope and boundaries
- producing the final report

Additionally, NVivo Software was used to manage transcripts and coding to ensure accuracy and systematic organization thematic analysis. NVivo was used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) because it can assist with coding, organising, retrieving, and grouping large volumes of textual data. Using a (CAQDAS) software such as NVivo can serve as an assistant and reliable tool while leaving analytic interpretation and meaning making with the researcher rather than the software (Yin, 2017).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study followed and maintained the ethical standards and regulations laid down by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). A formal ethics approval was obtained from AUTEC which was granted on 10 September 2025 and is valid for 3 years until 10 September 2028 (Reference No. 25/276). All AUTEC research procedures and frameworks were duly maintained and followed throughout the research process prioritizing participants' privacy, informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and secure data management.

The researcher provided each participant with a detailed information sheet before participation, outlining the purpose, scope and voluntary nature of the research. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study up to a certain deadline after the interview process without any reasoning and consequences.

All participants were asked to sign a consent form before starting the interview process to safeguard the rights of both, the participant and the researcher. All recordings, interview

transcripts and signed consent forms were stored securely on AUT's one drive cloud storage. Identifiable information such as names and roles was removed during the transcription, replaced by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained utmost ethical integrity, abiding by the rules and regulations of AUTECH to ascertain trust between the participants and the researcher and behave ethically and fairly towards all participants.

3.10 Document Analysis and Triangulation

Interview data from AFC marketing professionals and fans will be complemented by document analysis as an additional source of evidence to make the research findings more robust. According to Yin (2017), documentation is recognised as an important source that helps enhance findings obtained from other results. AFC's inaugural-year marketing campaigns, social media content, press releases, media coverage and other relevant documents were reviewed systematically to add contextual depth to insights derived from participant interviews, noting that at the time of the study the club had been in existence for only a year.

The document analysis served three purposes to strengthen the research findings (Yin, 2017):

- 1) Verify and cross check data obtained through interviews.
- 2) Offer additional cues and inferences.
- 3) Situate participant perspectives in broader context.

As these documents were aimed at audiences and not researchers, the documents were interpreted with an intention to understand the wider mass media and organisational context limiting potential bias.

Triangulation is a process that involves using multiple sources of data to ideate a complete picture of the area you are trying to research instead of just one fraction of it (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The study employed methodological triangulation by integrating document analysis with marketing professional and fan interviews. Each source serves a distinct purpose in this study. These three sources were compared systematically during analysis. Table below demonstrates the purpose of each data source.

Data Source	Purpose
AFC Professional Interviews	Understand club's strategic intent and execution
AFC Fan Interviews	Understand audience experience and interpretation of the executed strategies by the club
Document Analysis	Observe and examine club actions and communications

Table 3: Triangulation framework

Any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of data that reveals a unified or common point (Yin, 2017). Additionally, this process enhances credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings and

provides richer insights by providing various dimensions to understand AFC's marketing and fan engagement strategies.

The following documents were analysed to ensure a robust process:

National data on soccer: League and national media sources (e.g., A-Leagues, RNZ, New Zealand Herald, The Guardian)

Club data: Official Auckland FC, stadium, and partner materials (e.g., Auckland FC website, matchday guides, youth pathways, sponsorship and community announcements)

Social Media data: Campaign materials, Official social media channels, media coverage (e.g., TBWA, ANZ campaigns, Campaign Brief, Branding in Asia, NZME, The Spinoff)

See Appendix D for the references and links relevant to the documents used in this analysis.

3.11 Limitations

The methodological design employed in this research provides valuable insights and an in-depth contextual understanding of the case, but it has its some limitations. Researcher subjectivity and potential bias is one of the main concerns of a qualitative inquiry (Ruddin, 2006) as it may affect interpretation of data. This potential bias was overcome by complete transparency, reflexivity, and triangulation across interviews and document analysis were maintained throughout the process. Restricted generalizability of findings is another limitation of case study research, as it focuses on a single case (Yin, 2017). A key limitation of the study is recall bias among staff, subjectivity in fan perspectives, and the restricted insight beyond individual experiences, given that the club is unlikely to disclose details of negative outcomes or details. Additionally, extensive time and effort is required to manage qualitative data which makes it difficult to maintain methodological rigour. This limitation was addressed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) structured analytical framework and NVivo to efficiently manage data. The methodological framework employed in this study provides a nuanced understanding of AFC's marketing strategies in their inaugural season despite the few limitations mentioned in this section.

3.12 Summary

The above chapter outlines the methodological framework used throughout this research. This study is guided by relativist ontology, a constructivist epistemology, framed using an interpretivist paradigm and adopts a qualitative single case study design to gain rich insights into AFC's marketing and fan engagement strategies. Semi structured interviews with marketing professionals and fans served as primary data sources, supported by a document analysis of AFC's marketing campaigns and other relevant media materials for triangulation. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework was used to analyse the data and NVivo software was used for systematic coding and data management. The research process was conducted with highest ethical standards by obtaining AUTC approval and following rules and guidelines established by them. Despite a few limitations, the employed methodological framework ensures credible and trustworthy results from this research

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis of publicly available data between the initial license grant in November 2023 to the end of the 2024-2025 football season in June. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework was used to analyse the in-depth interviews and a source separated analytical structure was used to analyse data from the three distinct data sources.

Three distinct data sources informed the analysis:

1. Semi-structured interviews with AFC professionals,
2. Semi-structured interviews with AFC fans/supporters, and
3. Document analysis of AFC's inaugural year annual reports, documented campaigns and brand efforts and media materials

The source separated analytical structure was used to ensure clarity and transparency. Therefore, each data source is analysed independently in this chapter. This approach ensures accurate interpretation of organisational perspectives, fan reception and official communications which are later synthesized after thorough examination. Two distinct codebooks were developed for analysing (1) AFC Professional interviews and (2) AFC fan interviews. (See Appendix A: Table A1 and Table A2). The triangulation and theoretical interpretation will be undertaken in the subsequent Findings and Discussion chapter, where findings will be integrated with theory, research questions, the conceptual framework, and the propositions. While each source is analysed independently in this chapter, each theme already begins to signal interpretive and analytical connections where they are evident. These connections are developed and discussed with depth in Chapter 5.

4.2 AFC professional Interviews Thematic Analysis

4.2.1 Overview of Participants

Six semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with AFC professionals who were directly involved in the clubs inaugural- year strategy and execution. Participants included club personnel from senior and operational roles, including executive leadership, marketing, communications, content production, and partnerships.

Table 4: Respondent Position and Abbreviations

Position	Abbreviated
Chief Executive Officer	CEO
Chief Commercial Officer	CCO
Head Of Communications	HOC
Marketing Manager	MM
Content Producer	CP
Partnerships Activations Manager	PAM

Codebook 1(AFC professionals) (See Appendix A: Table A1) was used to guide analysis of AFC professional interviews. Coding of interviews focused on finding recurring patterns and themes around strategic intent, market entry decisions, fan engagement philosophy, and perceptions of success.

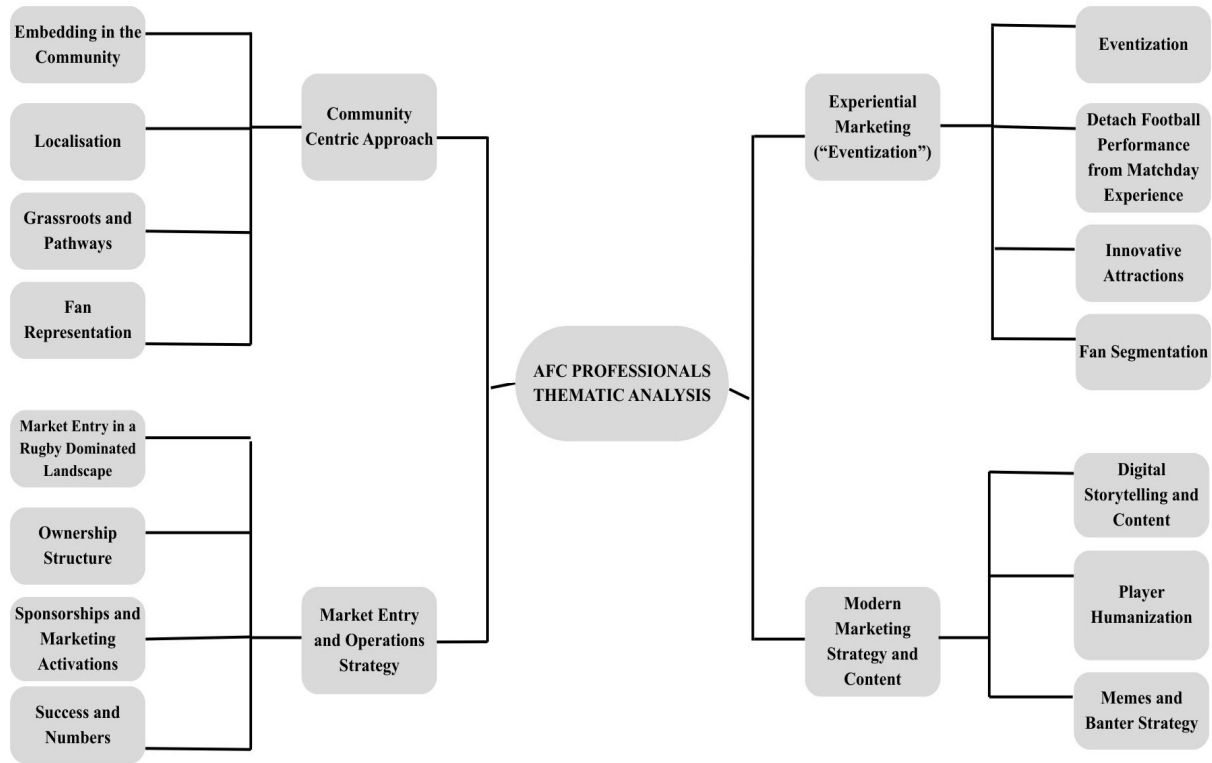


Figure 3: AFC Professionals Thematic Analysis Mind Map

4.2.2 Theme 1- Community First Strategy and Authentic Connection (See Appendix B: Table B1)

The first theme showcases AFC’s community first philosophy. AFC professionals described the community first approach to be central to the club’s identity and decision-making process. Participants described community engagement as a foundation aspect rather than a supplementary activity to the on-field football performance and commercial objectives. “Embedding the club into the community” was a key code within this theme. Participants described a varied range of engagement initiatives across schools, grassroots clubs, cultural organisations, and social initiatives.

One participant stated that *“Embedding ourselves into the community was at the heart of every decision we’ve made, and it continues to be at the heart of every decision that we make”* (CCO). This emphasizes the community first approach to be central to AFC’s identity.

Another participant highlighted the extent and importance of this approach, saying that *“I didn’t realise how big the community piece was when I first joined AFC, but it’s almost as big as the high-performance team because there’s so much happening in the Community and that’s so important to us”* (PAM).

“Localisation” was closely linked to this code where participants described the local Auckland identity as the clubs primary and intentional identity focus. Participants emphasized on AFC being intentionally embedded locally to Auckland as a city, noting that *“We were obviously really focused at home first, even Auckland, before we talked about New Zealand because that's where we're from, that's our home, that's our name.”* Another participant (CP) further described localisation extending into visual identity, with brand elements like logo and content explicitly referencing Auckland landmarks and symbolism.

“Grassroots and Pathways development” is also an important code that contributes to this theme, where participants express a responsibility to contribute to the development of the broader New Zealand Football ecosystem. Participants described player development as a key part of community engagement and commitment, with one stating that *“We want New Zealand football to be better off because we exist. That's part of embedding ourselves in the community. Part of doing that is we have to develop Kiwi talent.”* Another participant (MM) highlighted the importance of showcasing young players journey to underpin the pathway to professional football narrative.

Lastly, “Fan representation and feedback” proved to be an important component of this theme. Participants described how fan perspectives are gathered and integrated through structured groups and discussions. One participant explained these mechanisms stating, *“We have something called our fan rep group and I sit in that group, and we have maybe 10 fans that give us feedback around what's going on in the current climate, what fans are feeling at games, what they like dislike.”* (MM). These practices were described as important steps in maintaining authenticity and trust.

This community-first approach reflects what Keller (1993) describes as brand salience formation that is the process by which a new brand establishes recognition and relevance in consumers' minds. Brand salience was not built through performance records or legacy for AFC rather it was constructed through repeated locality based and community touchpoints. Each community initiative worked as touchpoints for the brand that conveyed the same message that is this club belongs to Auckland and is for the community. This aligns with the awareness stage of Funk and James's (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) where initial recognition of the team takes place through social activities or agents such as local clubs, community events, and peer networks. This approach explains how potential supporters moved from no awareness to active interest which directly addresses RQ1 and RQ2.

4.2.3 Theme 2 – Experiential Marketing “Eventization” (See Appendix B: Table B2)

This theme reveals AFC’s focus on “eventization” where every matchday was intentionally designed as events with a keen focus on entertainment and experiences beyond the football performance on the pitch. A common trend in the perspectives provided and amply described by the interviewed AFC staff, was detailed and emotive description of matchdays as events that catered to audiences wide range of motivations to attend.

Participants specifically expressed this approach, with one stating that *“So, we never approached our match days as if we are putting 13 football games. We've always approached from the beginning as like we are putting 13 events together. Football just happens to be there”* (CCO) Another participant noted that *“It's all the stuff we do in the family fun zone. It's all the*

stuff that we do in terms of that's not on the pitch that really counts." (HOC), which suggests that off pitch activities were central to the value proposition of attending an AFC match.

"Detach football performance from matchday experience" is another code in this theme which is closely related to eventization. One participant (CCO) clearly explained this intention by stating, *"How do we detach football performance as much as we can from the matchday experience...?"* Another participant supports this decoupling suggesting that experiential markers can be drivers of matchday attendance rather than being just sport specific, stating *"So that's a reason to drive people to a game and it's not necessarily because of the sport, it's decoupling product from performance. For us, we want people to come to the game because they're like, 'Oh, I saw online, there's a beach.'"* (MM)

"Innovative attractions" is another code that adds to the wider experiential marketing theme. Participants mention various innovative attractions such as ferris wheels, slides, beaches, and obstacle courses. Participants also described these as intentional, attractive, and culturally resonant, with one participant stating, *"We have a Ferris wheel... We had the biggest inland beach in New Zealand. We built it... Why? Because it's somewhere, every Kiwi likes to go."* Participants also noted that these unique attractions resulted in early fan arrival and extended fan engagement (PAM).

Another important contributor to this eventization theme is the code "matchday atmosphere". The "matchday atmosphere" code encompasses the various ways in which participants describe the supporter culture and the active supporters group. Participants describe "the port", which is the official active supporters' group of the club as an important contributor to the overall matchday experience. One participant noted that, *"And those guys [the port] are awesome and they're kind of an attraction in themselves, like people go to see"* (HOC) and another participant emphasized on their importance by saying, *"They [the port] bring the atmosphere, the support that is very valued by us."* (PAM)

The final code allocated to eventization is "fan segmentation". Participants describe how AFC categorizes fans into distinct groups such as hardcore supporters, families, and casual attendees and how these segments help inform communications that are sent out to fans and in designing matchday experiences.

A unique challenge to new sports franchises can be addressed through eventization. In the absence of history there is no basis for a first-time attendee to form a liking or preference towards the team. This can be resolved by eventization as it helps in decoupling the reason to attend from just the sporting result. This also maps directly onto the attraction stage of Funk and James's (2001) PCM where an individual develops a preference based on motives such as entertainment, novelty etc. and situational contexts such as the desire to belong or to share an experience. Treating each game as an event and designing matchdays around ferris wheels, beaches, and family activities alongside football, AFC successfully created multiple entry points that did not depend on just football, loyalty, or prior connection with the sport. The fans attending the game due to these eventization features may leave having formed an emotional association with the club leading to progressing from awareness to attraction stage on the PCM through a non- traditional sports route addressing RQ3.

4.2.4 Theme 3- - Market Entry and Operations Strategy (See Appendix B: Table B3)

The third theme considers AFC's market entry and operational strategy within New Zealand's dynamic and competitive sporting landscape. In this theme participants staff refer to New Zealand's rugby dominated market and its implications in establishing and differentiating AFC as a new entrant.

Participants described Auckland as an opportunity and pointed out a gap to fill with one participant stating: *"Auckland was the largest city in the world without a professional football team."*(CCO). Another important aspect emphasized by a different participant was that AFC did not seek to replace existing fanbases but rather offer an alternative experience, noting *"We're not trying to necessarily take away all the All-Blacks fans, they're just two different experiences. That's a key part in differentiating us."* (CEO).

Another crucial aspect that is central to the operational strategy is "Ownership". Participants described the role of Bill Foley in shaping AFC, with one participant explaining, *"His advice was simple: embed yourself in the community."*(CEO) and highlighting that AFC followed a proven ownership blueprint emphasising ambition, community connection, and rapid establishment (CEO).

Furthermore, this coding theme also encompasses another important sub-code that is "Sponsorships and Marketing activations". Participants describe AFC's partnerships and sponsorship approach as value driven. *One participant described the sponsorship selection process based on value alignment by noting that, "We're very values driven: working hard, playing fair, being in it for the community. The sales team don't just go out and pick anyone, they're strategic and picking brands that align with us."* (PAM). Activations around these sponsors included family-oriented and experiential activations such as McDonald's and the inflatable football pitch on matchdays designed to enhance matchday engagement.

Another aspect which was majorly expressed by the participants was "Success and Numbers". Here participants cited attendance figures and digital growth as measures of early performance. One participant noted, *"We've had 18,000 average attendees at games. We had over 250,000 people come across games. And if you look at the league's average, which other teams that are there for three decades, is 9,000."* (CCO) and another mentioned the rapid social media growth from launch (CP). Lastly, the component in this theme that revealed operational alignment with community values was "Player recruitment". Participants explained the importance of focusing on local talent and pathways including the intentional recruitment of New Zealand players (CCO; CEO).

4.2.5 Theme 4- Modern Marketing Strategy: Story-telling and Content Marketing (See Appendix B: Table B4)

AFC's modern marketing strategy has been captured through this fourth theme. AFC emphasizes on a strongly on digital platforms and informal communication styles. "Digital storytelling and content" were consistently referred to by participants and was explained as focal for fan engagement. One participant explained what the content was aimed at stating that, *"So, we always try to look for what are the nuggets there that actually give them[(players)] some personality beyond the pitch...that's some of storytelling we try and bring through"* (HOC). Another participant (CP) highlighted the importance of making fans feel included and part of the team's efforts and success through behind-the-scenes content. Another key

component of this strategy is “player humanization”. Participants described the importance of showcasing players as their individual self. , One participant stated: *“With the players, we try and actually bring, like they are individuals, they're humans, we try and bring their personality”* (HOC) and another participant backing its effectiveness by saying, *“Showing the player's personality, I think really helped get in fans feeling like they're already a part of the club”*(CP).This approach was also reflected in long-form content such as the AFC docuseries(CEO).

Furthermore, AFC’s deliberate attempt at adopting humour in digital content is reflected by the “memes and banter strategy” sub-theme code. One of the participants described it as being bold, stating that *“I think when it comes to socials, we want to come across as a brand that's bold and that's ambitious and that's innovative. And I think in being bold, you can have a little bit of fun.”* (MM) while the other participants highlighted the social media reach and engagement generated through this type of content (HOC, CP).

4.3 AFC Fan Interviews Thematic Analysis

4.3.1 Overview of Participants

Six semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with AFC fans who self-identify as an Auckland FC supporter, follower, or attendee during the inaugural A-League Men’s season.

Table 5 : Fan Respondent Demographics and Abbreviations

Respondent	Gender	Age	Abbreviation
Fan 1	Male	45	F1
Fan 2	Female	23	F2
Fan 3	Male	23	F3
Fan 4	Male	30	F4
Fan 5	Male	27	F5
Fan 6	Male	25	F6

Codebook 2 (AFC Fans) (See Appendix A: Table A2) was used to guide analysis of AFC fan interviews. Coding of interviews focused on finding recurring patterns and themes around fan’s lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings associated with AFC.

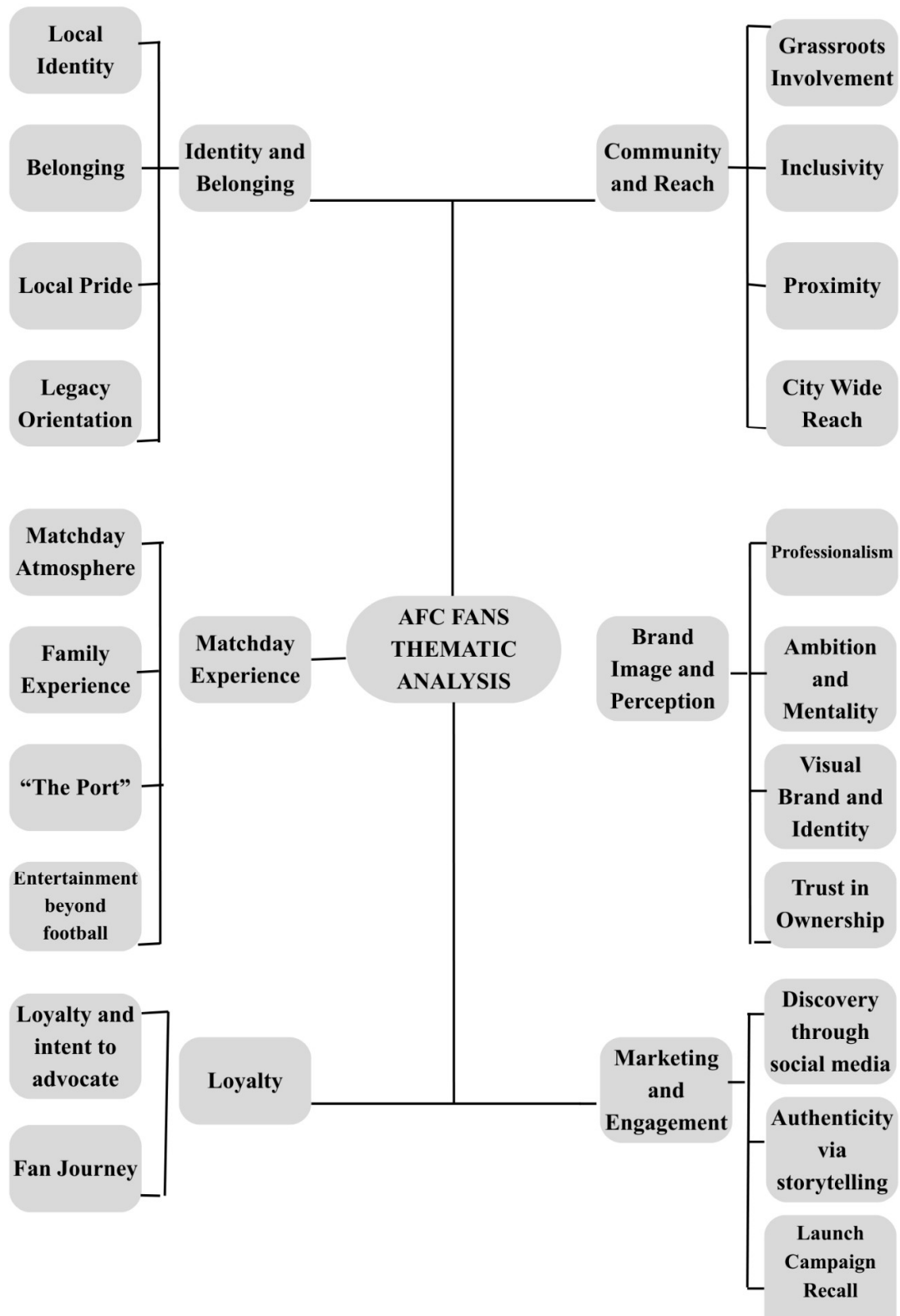


Figure 4: AFC Fans Thematic Analysis Mind Map

4.3.2 Theme 1- Identity and Belonging (See Appendix C: Table C1)

The first theme reveals the fans strong sense of “Identity and belonging” expressed by fans with respect to AFC. Fan’s support for the club beyond football consumption, extended to include civic identity, emotional connection, and collective belonging can be noticed consistently. “Local Identity” is a key code in this theme where fans described AFC representing the city of Auckland efficiently. One participant (F2) noted that, *“What caught my attention was the idea of Auckland having its own team... Auckland FC represented more than just football, so it represented Auckland's identity and growth.”* This sentiment was supported by other fans as participating fans described how the club symbolised the city and strengthened the connection to the place, with one participant stating (F4), *“It made me feel a little bit proud to be an Aucklander. It framed the club as representing the city's identity.”*

“Belonging” is another key code in this theme closely related to “Local identity”. Here fans emphasized on the feeling of being connected and included. Participants described AFC to be accessible and non-exclusive with one participant (F2) stating, *“The club doesn't feel exclusive. It feels like it's for everyone.”*

Participants (F6, F3, F2) highlighted the importance of belongingness within the football culture with one of them noting *“Feeling a sense of belonging is really important to me... especially when it's connected to my city.”*

“Local Pride” further strengthened this theme where fans consistently described a sense of pride in watching the club grow and being associated with them from its inception. One of the participants (F2) explained this by saying, *“Being an Auckland FC supporter means feeling connected to my city, being part of something new and sharing a sense of pride and belonging with other Aucklanders.”*

Furthermore, the fans desire to be associated with the club and to be a part of long-term history was captured by the code; “Legacy Orientation” Participants(F4) described a sense of ownership and historical importance with one of them stating, *“I think it's about being part of history in the making, to be honest, being there from the very beginning of the club's gives me a sense of ownership. I'm not just watching a team; I'm helping build a legacy.”* This attachment from the fans showcased identity formation and emotional investment.

4.3.4 Theme 2- Brand Image and Perception (See Appendix C: Table C2)

Fan’s perceptions of AFC’s brand image in terms of professionalism, ambition, and credibility were captured through this second theme. Participants reported initial impression of AFC as a brand to be serious, legitimate, and well-established.

AFC’s initial brand perception was shaped by “Professionalism” with fans noting that AFC felt like a serious affair rather than an informal local initiative. One participant (F3) referred to this by stating, *“They didn't feel like a small local club, just quietly launching, but it felt like a major announcement, like something meaningful was happening in Auckland.”* Another quote from a participant (F4) stated, *“Professional and serious. They came out acting like a big club, not like a starting club who's just there for the sake of it. It felt very, very exciting.”* strengthened the early professional identity.

AFC's initial brand perceptions were further shaped by "Ambition and Mentality". In this code, fans describe AFC as confident and aspirational with one participant (F1) noting that, *"They say we're not here to make up numbers we're here to win. Which is not really a Kiwi thing to say."* This code was further strengthened by other participants as they referred to the club's mentality and performances as "ambitious".

Another aspect that played a significant role is visual elements. This was captured through the code "Visual Brand and Identity". Here fans frequently cited the logo and kits as professional, bold, and international in appearance. One participant (F2) stated that, *"The logo for sure because ... it actually looked like a professional logo ... that made it feel like legit"* while another participant (F4) described the feel around the brand as unique and international.

Furthermore, the ownership structure played an important role in forming perceptions of legitimacy. Fans reflected a sense of confidence due to the awareness of a sound reputed leadership and ownership structure with one participant (F3) noting, *"Seeing who was involved in leadership added a level of trust, it made the whole thing feel more serious"*.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Community and Reach (See Appendix C: Table C3)

AFC's community presence and ease of access around all of Auckland has been captured through this third theme. Here fans consistently described AFC as inclusive, visible and heavily engaged with engagement outside of their main product i.e. the football games on the pitch.

A key code within this theme is "grassroots involvement". Fans consistently described AFC's presence at local clubs, events, schools and community initiatives through this code. One participant (F1) stated that, *"They went to all the small clubs as well... It made you feel included."* while other participants described football clinics, holiday programmes and fundraising campaigns for smaller clubs via ticket sales as evidence of active and continuous engagement with the community. Another perception that was consistently highlighted by fans was "Inclusivity". In this code fans described AFC as an inclusive organisation that is open and welcoming to people from diverse backgrounds and levels of football knowledge and interests. Participant (F2) described this as follows: *"It didn't come across as intimidating or like elitist. So, Aucklanders of all backgrounds could get behind it, even if they're not from a football background."* while another participant (F4) described the collective crowds at the stadium reflecting Auckland's diversity as a city.

Furthermore, the importance of accessibility was captured through the code "Proximity". Here fans emphasized on the geographic accessibility and convenience of having a professional football club close to home in Auckland with one participant (F1) noting, *"A professional football team on your doorstep is great. I mean, I live in Mount Albert, so I'm only 15 minutes' drive from Mount Smart, so that makes it nice and easy."* Another participant (F4) mentioned ease of access as a pivotal factor in becoming an active supporter from initial interest.

Lastly, AFC's representation and presence across north, south, west and central areas of Auckland rather than just a single region reflected the broader representation. The code "City-wide reach" revealed this fan perception of AFC's engagement with the entirety of Auckland.

4.3.4 Theme 4: - Marketing and Engagement (See Appendix C: Table C4)

This theme captures fans' initial discovery of AFC and how they engaged with the club. Digital platforms and social media were the most prominent forms of engagement described by fans.

"Discovery through social media" is one of the central codes to this theme where fans consistently describe their first point of contact with AFC to be Instagram, TikTok, and online news. One participant (F2) explained this, by noting: *"I definitely found out about them through social media cause. I saw them on Instagram 1st and then I got a lot of Tik Toks"*.

Next key code to this theme is "authenticity via storytelling" where fans highlighted social media content as human, relatable, and engaging. One participant (F3) explained in these words: *I felt like I was watching something being built in real time...It made the club feel alive and relatable. I guess I also liked how the content wasn't overly polished, and it had a human fun and definitely an authentic feel."* Another participant (F2) emphasized the importance of this type of content *"to feel connected to the club"*.

Furthermore, fans remembering specific launch campaigns, unveiling of the club's name, logo, kits, and activations was captured through the code "Launch Campaign Recall". Fans describe brand elements and the launch as symbolic markers that transformed the concept of a club into reality with one participant (F1) stating, *"I remember the unveiling of the of the name and the strip.... once you kind of have a name and you have a strip, you have a football club almost."* Fans also showcased strong recall towards certain launch campaigns, activations and content suggesting early impactful engagement with the club.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Matchday Experience (See Appendix C: Table C5)

This theme reveals AFC fans perception of the overall experience on matchdays at the home stadium. The participants consistently described the experience as energetic, inclusive, and entertaining.

"Matchday Atmosphere" is a key code in this theme, where fans described the crowd, chants and an all-round sense of unity at the stadium. One participant(F5) described the atmosphere as *"Absolutely Electric."* while another participant(F3) stated *"The fans were loud. The chants were really strong and definitely the crowd felt united, even though the club is brand new."*

Another highly referred to code in this theme is "Family experience" where fans consistently described availability of activities for children and families. Attractions such as ferris wheels, slides, and artificial beaches were described by fans suggesting an elevated matchday experience for fans. One participant (F3) explained this by stating, *"The entertainment never stops. Definitely there are quite a lot of stuff for kids where they have like Ferris wheels, then inflatable football pitches, and slides as well. So, there was a beach set up in the stadium in the summer, so that was quite interesting."*

Furthermore, "the port" which is the active supporters club was described as a central aspect of the stadium atmosphere due to their lively chants, energy and presence at the stadium.

Finally, the idea around matchdays providing value outside of the sport and performance on

the field was captured through the code, “entertainment beyond football”. Here fans described matchdays as events where they enjoyed pre-game events, halftime shows, and off-pitch entertainment emphasizing on the importance of detaching the product from performance.

4.3.6 Loyalty: Loyalty (See Appendix C: Table C6)

Fans expressions of loyalty and growing commitment towards AFC is captured in this last theme. Here fans showcased both current attachment and future intentions.

Central code for this theme is “loyalty and intent to advocate” where fans show strong commitment towards attending games and advocating the club to others. One participant(F1) revealed this by noting, *"I'll keep buying season tickets until I can no longer stand up in the port"*, and other participants stated recommending the club to others.

Lastly, fan culture and fandom were captured through “Fan Journey “code. Here fans described their level of fandom. Most fans described themselves as transitioning towards die-hard fans with one participant (F5) stating, *"I wouldn't say I'll call myself a die-hard fan just yet, but I guess I'm well on my way."*

Another participant (F4) described an instant transition from awareness to active supporter suggesting the dynamic nature of early fan development.

The following figures present word clouds and tree maps comparing frequently used terms and their weightage for both set of participants and highlights the similarity between the two groups.



Figure 5 AFC Professional's Word Cloud



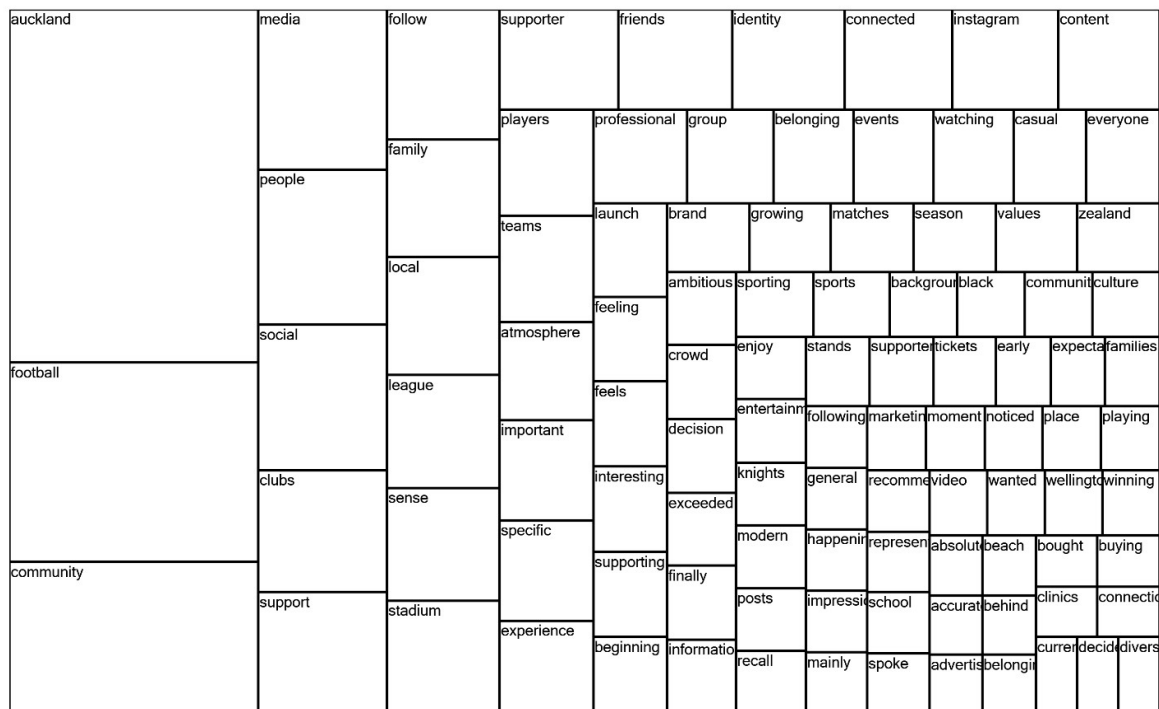


Figure 8: AFC Fans Tree Map

4.4. Document Analysis

The document analysis section presents an in-depth analysis of AFC’s inaugural year of operations by examining all the publicly available data between the initial license grant in November 2023 to the end of the 2024-2025 football season in June. The below analysis serves as a complementary source of data aligning well with this study’s triangulated data analysis design. Furthermore, this analysis serves the purpose of verification, contextualization, and enrichment of findings, adding depth to the insights gained from the two sets of interview participants (Fan and Employees). This analysis extensively examines materials including official press communications, marketing campaigns, digital content, community initiatives, fan sentiment, events and activations. This section offers contextual depth to participant perspectives and situates them in the broader sporting and media environment. Additionally, this section maps the advancements of AFC’s brand building and fan engagement efforts and strategies by reviewing the publicly available materials.

4.4.1 Ownership Structure and Model

AFC is majorly owned by the Black Knights Football Group led by American investor Bill Foley. The Black Knights group runs a multi-club sports portfolio and owns clubs such as AFC Bournemouth from the English premier league and NHL’s Vegas Golden Knights. The group decided to bring their model to Auckland and was backed by local partners, namely NZ entrepreneur Anna Mowbray and former All Black Ali Williams as majority stakeholders alongside the Black Knights group. They also onboarded local sports stars like NBA player Steven Adams, retired Kiwi internationals Winston Reid, Noah Hickey and Tim Brown serve

as club advisors. The mix of global and local ownership lead to a sense of global vision with a sense of trust due to familiarity with successful local figures. Together, this setting of investors was granted a license by the Australian Professional Leagues to run an Auckland based franchise.

Table 6: Auckland FC Ownership /Leadership structure

Role	Name	Background/Affiliation
Owner/Chairman	Bill Foley	Black Knight Football Club
Co-Owner	Ali Williams	Former All Black
Co-Owner	Anna Mowbray	Zuru Co-Founder
Minority Owners	Winston Reid, Tim Brown, Noah Hickey	Former All Whites
Chief Executive Officer	Nick Becker	Ex-Man City, Arsenal
Director of Football	Terry McFlynn	Ex-Sydney FC

4.4.2 Brand Design and Identity

AFC as a brand blend both ,the local aspects and the Black Knights group in its identity. The AFC logo or crest features a central “A” in sky blue on an electric black and blue background, representing Auckland, Rangitoto and the city’s skyline. The design also connects to the Black Knight identity represented by a visor and stripes connecting to the group’s helmet motif. Bill Foley’s mantra “Always advance, never retreat” was adopted as a central identity in the clubs initial rallying, which was even stitched in the clubs 2025-2026 kits. The primary colors adopted by the club were black and blue representing both Auckland as a dynamic city and the identity of the Black Knights group. The inaugural playing kits were launched in March 2024 manufactured by New Balance. The home kit had blue-and-black vertical pinstripes, and the away kit was mostly white with subtle grey and gold accents.

The official online club shop was launched by AFC which sold official club merchandise such as 2024/25 kits, training tops, scarves, caps and other apparel starting Mid-2024. The product descriptions mentioned the “A” representing Auckland and Rangitoto, the Knights visor and 2024 – marking the establishment of the club.

4.4.3 Campaigns and Media Activations

AFC’s launch was magnified by high profile media sponsorships and partnerships such as major sponsors- ANZ Bank. Integrated campaigns such as the “Auckland Forever” campaign by ANZ run via TBWA/NZ focused on the celebration of local pride. This campaign included a ‘Day 1’ component where ANZ hid 200+ limited-edition “Day 1” jerseys around the city to find, creating a wave of fans from the beginning. Club communications and website highlight ANZ as important partners, highlighting their support in various ways for e.g. CEO Nick Becker noted “from creating our Day 1 jerseys to pressing our record-breaking season onto vinyl, ANZ has been one of our biggest supporters”

Word around the launch of the club was spread throughout 2024-2025 via frequent press releases and media features. These media features included brand announcements, coach and staff hiring (Steve Corica as head coach), membership campaigns, and sponsorship announcements. Media partnership with NZME (New Zealand Media and Entertainment) ensured a widespread network across radio (Newstalk ZB), print (NZ Herald), and digital audio (iHeartRadio), allowing the club to reach 3.5 million Kiwis through NZME's combined network.

4.4.4 Commercial Partnerships Ecosystem

AFC built a strong commercial network with sponsors from scratch by attracting large established companies who saw value in the new franchise and diverse audience that the club delivers to sponsors.

Table 7: AFC's Commercial Sponsors and Partners

Partner	Partner Type	Industry
ANZ	Major Partner	Banking
Anchor Dairy	Principal Partner	Dairy & Food Manufacturing
Alvarium	Principal Partner	Financial Services
McDonald's NZ	Principal Partner	Food & Beverage
New Balance	Principal Partner	Sportswear
Betcha	Principal Partner	Betting
Bargain Chemist	Premium Partner	Retail Pharmacy
CUPRA	Premium Partner	Car Manufacturer
2degrees	Premium Partner	Telecommunications
Barfoot & Thompson	Premium Partner	Real Estate
UP Education	Premium Partner	Education
Ebury	Premium Partner	Financial Services
The Warehouse	Official Partner	Retail
Quest Apartments	Official Partner	Hospitality
JD Sports	Official Partner	Sports Retail
Ninja Kitchen	Official Partner	Kitchenware
Qantas	Official Partner	Aviation
AUT (Auckland University of Technology)	Official Partner	University
BlackBull Markets	Official Partner	Financial Services

Cumulo9	Official Partner	Digital Communications
Team Global Express	Official Partner	Logistics & Freight
Red Bull	Official Partner	Beverage
Solar hub	Official Partner	Solar Energy
Snap Rentals	Official Partner	Property
Gatorade	Official Partner	Beverages
Brut	Official Partner	Personal Care
ARG	Official Partner	
Jani-King	Official Partner	Commercial Cleaning & Facility Services
Vitalize	Official Partner	Health & Wellness Products
My Food Bag	Official Partner	Meal Kits
Bettr	Official Partner	Health & Wellness
Whitecross	Official Partner	Insurance Services
Clarity Insurance Brokers	Official Partner	Insurance Brokerage
TSB Living	Official Partner	Financial Services
Herbal Ignite	Official Partner	Health & Wellness
JBL	Official Partner	Consumer Electronics
USL Sport	Official Partner	Apparel and Equipment
Fruzio	Official Partner	Beverage (Alcohol-free)
Kiva Wellness	Official Partner	Health & Wellness Products
Casio	Official Partner	Consumer Electronics / Watches
Wai Mānuka	Official Partner	Honey and Beverages
Altura Coffee	Official Partner	Coffee
NZ Muscle	Official Partner	Fitness Nutrition
Colquhoun Construction	Official Partner	Construction
Savvy Touch	Official Partner	Tech
Northshore Golf Club	Official Partner	Sports & Recreation Facility
Crane Brothers	Official Partner	Automotive
Nut Brothers	Official Partner	Snack Food
NZ Herald	Official Partner	Media & News Publishing
The Hits	Official Partner	Radio & Entertainment Media

Benefitz	Official Partner	Financial Services
GoMedia	Official Partner	Media
Grove Mill	Official Partner	Wine & Beverage

These sponsors collaborations were reflected in fan experiences and activities. For example, the ANZ “Day 1” activation not only gave jerseys to supporters but aligned with ANZ’s role as shirt sponsors and McDonald’s and Anchor supported grassroots programmes with giveaways and goodies at club events.

4.4.5 Social Media and Digital

AFC structured itself as a digital first organisation where they focused on reach, accessibility, and amplification. The content strategy adopted by AFC focused on behind the scenes content and using the “Fear of missing out” effect by broadcasting the energy of the crowd, chants, the smoke, and the celebrations. The clubs’ channels prioritized on short-form video content, matchday atmosphere clips, player-fan interactions, behind-the-scenes storytelling. AFC also tailored content according to platforms for example, Instagram/TikTok for reels and viral challenges, Facebook for local news/events, X (Twitter) for quick match updates. The club also heavily relied on their website. The site served as a platform for news releases, matchday guides, and fan information. Furthermore, unofficial supporter created content for e.g. The “Port’s Instagram and Facebook group also gained heavy attention. Even though this organic digital activity was not controlled by the club, it complemented official messaging. Mainstream and traditional media sources also highlighted AFC’s social media content as a key contributor in normalizing AFC matchdays as a family and social activity rather than a specialist football event (RNZ; NZ Herald).

4.4.6 Community Engagement

AFC positioned itself as a city- wide community-oriented football club. From the beginning the club committed itself towards developing local football. AFC signed a memorandum of understanding with 18 local youth clubs (Northern Region and WaiBOP) starting a partnership with them and creating a Youth Development Pathway. Each partner club became a marketing channel, promoting AFC matches to their junior players and families. The club also incorporated fan input on events and policies by forming a fan representative group, called the “12TH Knight”. Furthermore, on and off field staff and players regularly visited schools, local tournaments and youth clubs. Players and staff had attended 61 local club/school events reaching over 12,000 children by September 2025 (Auckland FC,2025). The club also aggressively targeted the next generation through School Holiday Camps held at partner schools and grounds. Another notable initiative by AFC was allocating 20 percent of membership revenue towards nominated local clubs for development of young talent. These initiatives and engagement touchpoints were shared on social media by the clubs’ official channels, developing the club’s image as community focused.

4.4.7 The Matchday Product & Fan Experience

A key strategy deployed by AFC was the "Americanisation" of the matchday experience which was heavily influenced by Bill Foley and the Black Knights group background. AFC focused on the broader entertainment product by treating gameday as a family festival rather than being just about the sport. CEO Nick Becker spoke of creating a “family-friendly” atmosphere so non-fans also enjoy pre-game festivities (Auckland FC, 2025). On-site activations included a kids’ zone (inflatable slides, obstacle courses, a man-made beach) and a ferris wheel. They also organized fan marches and club-branded public watch parties. NZ Herald called the stadium atmosphere “a European atmosphere” with fans embracing the club’s active support style, and other media highlighted packed crowds and fan enthusiasm.

4.4.8 Monthly Timeline of Key Communications and Events

March 2024

- The Australian Professional Leagues (APL) grants A-league license to AFC
- Steve Corica announced as head coach
- Official launch gala (reveals club name “Auckland FC”, crest, black/electric-blue kit)
- Social Media Campaigns begin with launch videos

April 2024

- Club grows digital presence (launching interest survey, membership info).
- Club opens ticketing and membership sites

May 2024

- Player signings announced

July 2024

- Announced inaugural fixtures
- Youth pathway announcement
- “100 days till kick-off” membership drive
- Preseason friendly vs Auckland United

August- September 2024

- Season fixtures announced
- NZME media partnership announced
- Single-game tickets released for sale
- Auckland Stadiums–*Go Media* deal emphasized as multi-year deal

October 2024

- Season opens Oct 19-Auckland FC wins in front of 24,492 fans
- Club promotes experience (family zones, entertainment) in match previews.

November- December 2024

- Early home games showcase matchday activations
- Social posts and local media highlight enthusiastic crowds
- Membership drives continue (Black Knights branding).

January- March 2025

- Mid-season social metrics report strong growth
- Auckland FC clinches Premiers' Plate
- Community events (Prize patrols, school visits) noted in social channels
- Club announces +2700 seats at Go Media Stadium for home semis due to high demand
- Fans enjoy trophy-lift

From launch identity to media campaigns, digital content, matchday spectacles, and community programs AFC's strategy can be noted as fan or supporter centric. This resulted in a rapid growth in local support and record-breaking attendance and positive media buzz all recorded by the media and official club communications.

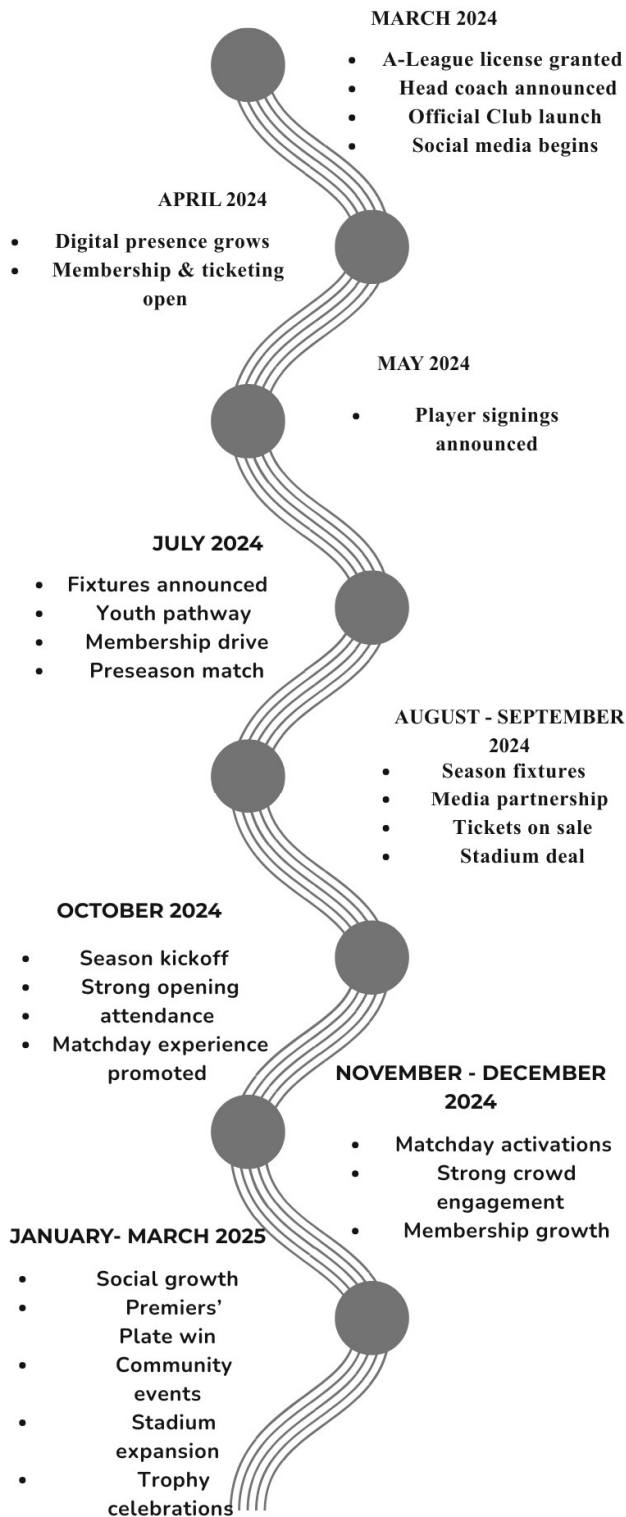


Figure 9: Monthly Timeline of Key Communications and Events

4.5 Conclusion

This data analysis chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the data collected through in-depth interviews involving AFC professionals and supporters/fans and is supplemented with the thorough document analysis of the club's inaugural year annual reports, documented campaigns and brand efforts and media materials. The individual analysis of these three data sources reveals a significant link between the club's strategic intent and the fans reception. The themes identified in the AFC professional interviews directly reflect onto the fans lived experiences and narratives. Additionally, the document analysis serves to verify these two perspectives by providing evidence of the execution of these strategies described by the AFC professionals.

The next chapter, "Findings and Discussion", will move beyond analysis of individual participants viewpoints, to triangulation, synthesizing these empirical insights with the study's conceptual framework and existing literature to answer the research questions and provide a theoretical interpretation of AFC's success in the inaugural year.

Chapter 5 Findings and Discussions

The following chapter presents a triangulated analysis of the three distinct data sources i.e., (i) in-depth interviews with the internal AFC executive and marketing professionals, (ii) eternal fans, and (iii) proprietary and publicly available AFC documents. The synthesis of these data sources identifies the cohesion between club's strategic intent (professionals) it's execution (documents) and reception by the target market (fans). To maintain structure and transparency in the triangulation of findings, all subsections are organised by addressing all the three data sources i.e. strategic intent (professionals), fan reception(fans), and documentary evidence followed by a thorough interpretation. The data from all the three sources suggest a strong convergence across the themes which reveals a strong linkage between what the club planned, what it communicated, and how fans experienced it. The discussions section addresses and links the RQ's, propositions and conceptual framework to the findings.

Theme	Professional Interviews (Strategic Intent)	Fan Interviews (Reception)	Documents (Execution)
Local identity and community integration	Community-first positioning and Auckland centric branding	Described civic pride and belonging	ANZ "Auckland Forever" campaign, MOU with 18 youth clubs and school/club visits
Decoupling product from performance (Eventization)	Intent to detach matchday from on-field result (matchdays as events)	Attending games for atmosphere, beach, ferris wheel, family (result secondary)	Matchday guides, media coverage, NZ Herald "festival" descriptions
Digital first brand construction and legitimacy	Bold and innovative digital strategy	TikTok/Instagram as first touchpoint, described club as "alive and legit"	Ownership structure, premium sponsors and social media channels

Table 8: Triangulation Summary

5.1 Local Identity and Community Integration

Strategic Intent (Professional Interviews)

A high degree of alignment can be observed in the club's community first strategic intent and fans' perceptions of the club's identity through the various data sources. Embedding the club in the community was central and non-negotiable according to all the responses of the AFC professionals. This was not described as a supplementary activity added on to the commercial objectives by the AFC Professionals rather it was described as the primary strategy and approach from where all other decisions followed. The CCO conveyed this simply as: *"Embedding ourselves into the community was at the heart of every decision we've made, and*

it continues to be at the heart of every decision that we make." The PAM strengthened the importance of this approach by saying: *"I didn't realise how big the community piece was when I first joined AFC, but it's almost as big as the high-performance team because there's so much happening in the community and that's so important to us."*

Fan Reception (Fan Interviews)

Fan interviews revealed that this community centric approach employed by AFC cultivated a sense of belonging and identity for the fans. Fans describe the club as a representation of the city rather than being a generic franchise. Fans also describe the perception of inclusivity as focal in forming a sense of local pride and ownership as the club made the fans feel it was for everyone. Furthermore, participants described the club as *"finally giving Auckland a football identity"* and representing *"Auckland's identity and growth"* (F2). One participant described feeling *"a little bit proud to be an Aucklander"* (F4), while another emphasised that *"the club doesn't feel exclusive, it feels like it's for everyone"* (F2). Participants also showcase legacy orientation as they described themselves as *"helping build a legacy"* and feeling a *"sense of ownership"* (F4). These snippets suggests that the community-first approach successfully invited fans to co-create the club's history from day one which aligns with the strategic intent understood through the professional interviews.

Documentary Evidence (Execution)

The execution of this strategy was evidenced by the document analysis where AFC executed structured commitments such as the signing of memorandums of understanding with 18 local youth clubs and the allocation of 20% of membership revenue to local clubs. Additionally, club ambassadors such as players and staff were involved in engagement activities at over 61 visits to schools and clubs reaching 12,000 children by September 2025. Marketing campaigns underpin the same identity with the ANZ "Auckland Forever" campaign framing the club as belonging to the city and the "Day 1" jersey activation made early supporters feel as founders rather than customers.

Altogether this demonstrates that AFC purposefully used place-based branding as a substitute to fill the historical legacy gap. The three sources strongly. These findings reveal strong links between all the three data sources. This extends Keller's (1993) CBBE framework through this finding and demonstrating that brand salience can be built through community and local relevance rather than mere history or legacy. AFC established brand awareness and legitimacy not through strategically embedding themselves into the community and made the club culturally relevant in the absence of on-field performance and history, directly addressing RQ1.

5.2 Decoupling Product from Performance

Strategic Intent (Professional Interviews)

A key distinct finding is the success of AFC's strategy to implement a commercial and entertainment driven matchday experience where they treated games as events rather than mere sporting contests. AFC professionals described this as "detach football performance... from the matchday experience" using various nonsporting attractions. The goal for AFC behind this strategy was to drive attendance through entertainment regardless of the on-field performances of the team. The CCO stated: *"We never approached our match days as if we are putting 13 football games. We've always approached from the beginning as like we are putting 13 events together. Football just happens to be there."* The MM further emphasized: *"That's a reason to drive people to a game and it's not necessarily because of the sport; it's decoupling product from performance. For us, we want people to come to the game because they're like, 'Oh I saw online, there's a beach.'" Innovative attractions outside the football pitch were described as primary acquisition strategies for families and casual attendees as they may not otherwise attend a football match.*

Fan Reception (Fan Interviews)

Fan perceptions also support this finding as fans consistently confirm and cited "Entertainment beyond football" as a key value driver, describing matchdays as electric, united events. Non-sporting activations catering to wider audiences such as "inflatable football pitches" and "slides" can be noted as a major drawer of family audiences. Additionally, fans described the matchday atmosphere as something beyond just the club's intent and organically driven by active supporters' group "The Port" which was cited by both professionals and fans as a crucial aspect to the experience. The HOC stated: *"Those guys (The Port) are awesome and they're kind of an attraction in themselves, like people go to see them"* (HOC); fans second this by describing the Port's chants and energy as central to the atmosphere.

Documentary Evidence (Execution)

This approach can be validated by the document analysis as the implementation of "innovative attractions" such as Ferris wheels, man-made beaches, and kids' zones has been highlighted in AFC's official matchday guides, social media content, and press releases consistently. Social media content highlighted matchday experience, community celebration and family-friendly football suggesting that attending AFC matches offered a wider entertainment value outside of sport.

The triangulated findings from these data sources suggests that eventization and decoupling the product from the sporting performance as one of the primary acquisition strategies. This strategy can have a direct effect on the attraction stage of Funk and James's (2001) PCM as AFC created early fan identification routes for potential fans that did not require football knowledge, team loyalty, or prior experience of the sport by creating entertainment and community focused entry points. This also suggests that a first-time attendee or potential fan who came for the added entertainment aspects might leave with an emotional association with the atmosphere and the crowd. This explains that attraction was built through experience rather

than sporting allegiance in AFC's case, directly addressing RQ 2 AND 3. This further adds to Funk and James's (2001) PCM applications that assumes sport-first motivation at the attraction stage.

5.3 Digital-First Brand Construction and Professional Legitimacy

Strategic Intent (Professional Interviews)

AFC relied heavily on "Professionalism" and "Ambition to form immediate brand identity in the absence of a historical presence. AFC professionals highlighted a "bold" and "innovative" digital strategy that used humour, memes, and behind-the-scenes storytelling to humanize players. Digital strategy was described as intentionally bold, informal sometimes and human. This was a deliberate differentiator from the usual communications style of many sports organisations. The HOC explained: *"We always try to look for what are the nuggets there that actually give them (players) some personality beyond the pitch... that's the storytelling we try and bring through."* The CP highlighted the importance showcasing players as humans by stating: *"Showing the player's personality I think really helped get fans feeling like they're already a part of the club."*

Fan Reception (Fan Interviews)

Fan interviews reveal that the clubs digital first strategy was the most common touchpoint for discovery. Fans consistently cited TikTok and Instagram as their first point of contact. Additionally, fans also described the club as relatable and "alive" rather than corporate due to the natural storytelling employed by the club in their content strategy. One participant described it as *"something being built in real time... the club felt alive and relatable... the content wasn't overly polished, it had a human, fun, and definitely authentic feel."* Furthermore, this relatability was balanced with a strong perception of high-end professionalism. Fans described the club launch as "major announcement" and "serious" differentiating AFC from other smaller efforts by local clubs. The visual identity specifically the logo and kits were interpreted by fans as "legit" and international in standard. This suggests that informal tone and professional presentation created a distinctive brand positioning.

Documentary Evidence (Execution)

AFC's professionalism and ambition can be further evidenced through the document analysis that points out at the high-profile ownership structure (Bill Foley, Anna Mowbray) and premium commercial ecosystem (ANZ, New Balance) as signals of stability and ambition. Social media posts, promotional videos, and online campaigns consistently focused on storytelling, players, club values, community initiatives, with a touch of informal tone through memes and recent social media trends. This combination led to immediate market legitimacy for AFC aligning with the brand positioning described by professionals.

Digital media served two functions for AFC, first as an awareness channel to reach audiences before the first game was played and second as a tool for shaping brand perceptions in the absence of history and legacy. The brand perception around legitimacy serves an important

function as professional football had previously failed to sustain itself in New Zealand. This brand perception was achieved through marketing rather than performance.

5.4 Discussion

The following section interprets the findings and data analysis through the lens of the conceptual framework laid out in this research which integrates Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) (Keller, 1993), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001). The data analysis and findings confirm the proposed conceptual framework and the propositions: marketing initiatives successfully built early brand equity (P1), which influenced behavioural intentions (P2), while engagement accelerated fan progression from awareness to allegiance (P3) and combined pathways explain rapid growth in fanbase and membership uptake (P4).

5.4.1 How AFC Established Brand Awareness and Legitimacy (RQ1)

This subsection addresses the following RQ:

RQ1 How did AFC establish brand awareness and legitimacy in its inaugural season?

Findings from across themes provide a direct and intricate answer to the RQ. In AFC's case awareness and legitimacy was achieved through three processes working together rather than one single mechanism. Community embedding, visual and organisational signalling and digital reach helped establish brand awareness and legitimacy for AFC in their inaugural year.

A lack of history, traditions and achievement is a key challenge faced by new sports teams (Bauer et al., 2005). The findings and data analysis support Proposition 1 (P1), demonstrating that marketing initiatives can successfully construct Club Brand Equity (CBBE) in the absence of on-field history. The challenge for initial brand awareness was addressed by embedding the club into the community which made AFC visible and relevant to Auckland's football ecosystem, especially at the grassroots level. AFC successfully created a network of direct brand contacts through community channels as they partnered with local clubs and visited schools, reaching thousands of children

Furthermore, establishing legitimacy required a different mechanism. Particularly in the New Zealand and Auckland football context where previous efforts at professional football had failed (Football Kings collapsed and absence of a professional football club from Auckland for years), it was more than just recognition rather it was to establish football in the wider sports market. According to Yun et al. (2020), new teams rely on visual markers (logos, colours) to establish identity. In AFC's case this was evidenced and supported by fans citing the professional "look" of the logo and kits as key components in the club's legitimate perception.

Additionally, AFC's "community first" approach led to the construction of Brand Meaning (Associations) among fans. The club successfully created "Benefit" associations (pride, belonging) by aligning the brand with the local identity, embedding itself in the community and creating pathways for youth football rather than just focusing on "Attribute" associations (winning). This also aligns with Ross's (2006) claim that that non-product attributes are critical for team identification. Furthermore, the findings also extend this by revealing that that in a

rugby-dominated market, a football club gain equity by positioning itself as a representative of the city rather than just a competitor with other sports.

Overall, the findings and analysis demonstrate that AFC established brand awareness and legitimacy (RQ1) through a combination of strategic levers i.e. integration of community engagement, symbolic signalling, and digital activation. AFC was successful in overcoming the absence of history and challenges associated with the sports market by using these strategic levers. These outcomes empirically support (P1) revealing that Customer based brand equity can be formed via strategic initiatives even in the absence of history and confirming that brand salience and brand meaning can be deliberately created even in the absence of achievements and legacy.

5.4.2 What Marketing Strategies and Activations Shaped Early Fan Engagement (RQ2)

This subsection addresses the following RQ:

RQ 2- What marketing strategies and activations shaped early fan engagement?

Community-first marketing, eventization of the matchday experience, and digital storytelling can be identified as three specific strategies as the primary drivers of early fan engagement. AFC successfully created multiple low - barrier touchpoints for Aucklanders via school visits, grassroots partnerships, and the fan representative group to ensure the fans can interact with the club in a non-commercial space. This approach aligns with Lock et al. (2011)'s findings that suggest that pre-existing attachments are the strongest drivers of early team identification for new clubs. AFC used existing attachments to the geography and community for early engagement.

The findings and analysis strongly support (P2) which suggests that brand equity and marketing initiatives influence fan attitudes and intentions (TPB). AFC successfully influenced “attitudes” to attend games by “decoupling the product from performance”. The fans perceived value in the entertainment outside of football in attractions such as ferris wheel, artificial beach, matchday atmosphere which created a positive attitude toward the behaviour of attending. This strategy led to a reduced psychological barrier for non-football fans to attend games, aligning with the theory of planned behaviour where positive attitudes

AFC used entry points that did not require football knowledge or loyalty. Fans attended for the experience and formed (Funk & James, 2001) emotional associations with the club in due process. Eventization directly fits onto the attraction stage of the PCM where individuals form preferences based on the value of entertainment and social context, forming a low-level connection with the fans which may transition into a stable connection as the fan progresses to the attraction stage.

Additionally, “Subjective norms” around the clubs shifted due to the club’s “inclusive” perception. AFC created a new social norm by treating each matchday as an event which created a shift from the traditional rugby-dominated fandom.

Furthermore, the digital strategy shaped engagement by making the club feel accessible, alive and inclusive. AFC successfully narrowed down on the psychological distance between a

potential fan and the decision to attend by creating positive associations of the club being relatable, ambitious, local and fun using behind-the-scenes content, player humanisation, and humour. shaped the attitude component of behavioural intention.

Finally, these findings reveal that AFC's pre-launch and combined strategy consisting of community-first initiatives, event-based experiences, and digital storytelling successfully shaped fan attitudes and social norms by highlighting matchdays as an entertainment experience for everyone ranging from non-football fans to diehard fans, irrespective of the outcomes on the field. This directly supports (P2) that brand equity and marketing initiatives influenced fans' attitudes, perceived norms, and their intention to attend and support AFC.

5.4.3 How Strategies Influenced Fan Identification and Loyalty Formation (RQ3)

This subsection addresses the following RQ :

RQ3: How did these strategies influence fan identification and loyalty formation?

The findings and analysis confirm that AFC fans moved rapidly from Awareness to Attachment (Funk & James, 2001) which is atypical for a club in its first season. The data contradicts the fact that allegiance or loyalty takes years or legacy to build as fans describe their journey from awareness to active support to be instantaneous. In AFC's case this accelerated movement across PCM stages is explained by inputs such as place-based identity substituted for legacy, experiential engagement substituted for on-field success, and digital storytelling substituted for institutional reputation. The movement on the PCM from identification to attachment where membership becomes personally meaningful was driven by the co-creation strategy. Fans described feeling that they were "part of history in the making" and that they had a "sense of ownership" of the club (F4), which are key indicators of the attachment stage where the bond between fans and the team strengthens on the basis of personal meaning. AFC systematically involved fans to co create rather than being just mere consumers via the fan representative group, the community ownership framing, the "Day 1" positioning and visibly including fans in the overall club narrative. Fans described intrinsic meaning to the club revealing that AFC had triggered fans on to the attachment stage on the model. Furthermore, the active advocacy described by the fans where stated they would "keep buying season tickets" and recommend the club to others reveals some fans progressing towards the allegiance stage gradually. This prosocial advocacy behaviour identified by Yoshida and co-researchers (2014) as a marker of high identification.

These findings together reveal that in AFC's case identification and loyalty formation were driven by engagement strategies such as player humanisation, storytelling, and early fan inclusion. These engagement strategies not only created awareness but also led to accelerated movement through the Psychological Continuum Model. This supports (P3) by revealing that fan engagement initiatives can accelerate progression from awareness to attachment and in some cases early allegiance even in expansion franchises who lack legacy and achievement.

5.3.4 Branding New Sports Teams in Monopolistic Markets (RQ4) and Validating Conceptual Framework (Addressing P4)

This subsection addresses the following RQ:

RQ4: What insights does the case provide for branding new sports teams in monopolistic sports markets?

This case suggests that new football franchises cannot compete on just the basis of sport in a monopolistic or culturally saturated sports markets where one or two sports dominate .AFC strategically targeted a different space by portraying football as the sport of the city, of diversity, and of the next generation rather than attempting to compete with established and dominant sports such as rugby. This differentiation strategy may be applicable for other new entrants in a similar market.

This case also demonstrates that early fandom and identification can be constructed through non-sporting and performance-based attributes in the absence of on field success and history. This extends to other new franchises without legacy or history as this case suggests that experiential, community-based, and digital mechanisms can substitute for performance in driving fan identification and early loyalty progression.

Furthermore, place-based identity, eventization, digital storytelling together offers a strategic framework to fill the gap for legacy, performance and reputation which can benefit other new franchises in similar market to adapt. Every case may have its own specifications but the idea behind finding substitutes to brand assets such as legacy, performance and reputation can be transferrable to other cases.

Lastly, the alignment between strategic intent and fan reception observed in AFC's case shows the importance of the cohesion across marketing channels as an important factor for rapid fan formation. Consistent messaging across all campaigns including community initiatives, matchday design, digital content, and commercial partnerships can be observed in AFC's approach. This presents a practical insight for practitioners to follow a consistent approach across all channels for new sports teams.

The study's findings together confirm the Conceptual Framework as a valid model for new franchises. AFC's rapid growth in a non-dominant sport was the result of strategic execution by the management

CBBE: Establishing immediate professional credibility and local identity (Keller, 1993).

TPB: Removing attendance barriers through "Eventization" (Ajzen, 1991).

PCM: Accelerating loyalty by inviting fans to co-create the club's history and culture from the day of inauguration (Funk & James, 2001).

This integrated pathway allowed AFC to overcome the structural barriers of the New Zealand sports market and achieve rapid growth in a competitive landscape.

Chapter 6 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This case study on Auckland FC (AFC) contributes to both theory and practice. This chapter uncovers how the findings of this study extend existing knowledge for both theory and practice on new sports team branding. The study offers insight into how a new football franchise can build brand awareness, legitimacy, and early fan attachment in a culturally saturated sports market such as New Zealand. This chapter uncovers the theoretical implications, contribution to knowledge, managerial implications, limitations, future research directions attained from this case study.

The theoretical problem that this thesis addresses is -how can a new sports franchise build brand awareness, legitimacy, and early fan attachment in a monopolistic market where other sports are dominant and where football itself lacks established professional credibility?

Existing sports branding theory is useful and valid but it is mainly developed around in contexts involving established clubs or expansion teams in mature football markets. This study addresses this gap and examines this in a different setting i.e. new football franchise in a culturally crowded, historically monopolistic sports market where rugby commands dominate. In this context the three theoretical frameworks CBBE (Keller, 1993), PCM (Funk & James, 2001), and TPB (Ajzen, 1991) are refined accordingly. The findings from this study do not replace existing theory rather they contextualize and extend it.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

6.1.1 Extending CBBE to New Sport Franchises

Demonstrating the relevance of Keller's (1993) CBBE model and its sport adaptations (Ross, 2006; Naik & Gupta, 2013) in new sports team context is a key theoretical contribution of this study. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity model is useful for understanding new sports franchises as it begins with brand salience which is a key challenge for a new sports team entering a market without an existing name, history, or community. For fans, it is necessary for them to have brand awareness and some sort of relevance before they can form associations, make judgements, or develop loyalty which is not a given considering a new sports team.

Traditionally, brand equity models work on the assumption that brands emerge gradually through experience, history, and performance whereas this study through AFC reveals that brand salience and imagery in new clubs can be created before the first competitive match through rigorous strategic and tactical marketing campaigns, relevant visual identity creation, and dedicated community engagement, extending the application of CBBE. In AFC's case brand awareness was constructed through place-based, and community centric touchpoints such as school visits, youth club partnerships, grassroots football engagement, and city-centric campaigns. This led to accelerated brand awareness and salience formation through embedding the club socially and making it seem legible to Aucklanders not because of mere promotion but rather because the club was present in the community.

The implication of CBBE theory is that in a new sports teams context brand meaning may emerge from social and civic relevance before the team can construct credibility from on field

performances. The AFC case suggests that new franchises in saturated markets can construct early brand equity through place-based and non-performance brand associations.

This case also supports Du et al.'s (2020) argument that brand associations for new teams are initially constructed rather than experienced. Prior work on non-product attributes and their dominance in forming early fan attitudes (Biscaia et al., 2013; Yun et al., 2020) is also supported by this study as AFC's early emphasis on city-centric identity, visual markers, partnerships, and community-oriented campaigns allowed AFC to establish strong non-product brand associations and also extends this into the New Zealand sports context.

6.1.2 Advancing PCM as a Rapid-Progression Model

The Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001) is used in this study as it conceptualizes sports fandom formation as a systematic progressive journey rather than just an event. This multi staged model is specifically relevant in new sports team context as the fan journey from awareness to loyalty must be built from scratch without any reliance on history and prior allegiance.

The findings from this study suggest that strategic engagement and digital campaigns created early awareness among fans. Furthermore, social media was the mentioned as the first point of contact which suggests that AFC's digital content strategy functioned as a primary mover of potential fans into the awareness stage on the PCM ladder. AFC strategically planned content to be engaging, relatable, and shareable so that awareness and early interest were formed simultaneously. This was followed by matchday experience and local identity which moved fans to the attraction stage where fans develop a conscious preference towards the team. The eventization strategy is key here as AFC designed matchdays as events with multiple touchpoints that did not necessarily require football knowledge.

Furthermore, sense of belonging, repeat match attendance, rituals and advocacy suggest that some fans moved to the attachment stage on the PCM model. AFC's case contradicts Funk and James (2001) traditional PCM model which was conceptualized as a gradual process whereas AFC demonstrates that strategic engagement, identity cues, and experiential touchpoints can shorten this journey.

In AFC's case awareness and attraction was formed almost instantaneously and simultaneously through early exposure through digital platforms, city-based identity, and social interaction. Attachment and in some cases, allegiance was achieved in some fan journeys via Matchday experiences, merchandise, and supporter rituals. This research also aligns with Wear and Heere (2020) who demonstrate that in new clubs the stadium and its social space become primary drivers for early team identification and Lock et al. (2011) who demonstrate that fans attach to new teams through place, sport, and experience rather than performance, extending their insights to the New Zealand market landscape which is culturally dominated by rugby.

6.1.3 Integrating TPB into Sport Brand Formation

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) is used in this study as it explains the conversion of brand perceptions into actual fan behaviours i.e. the active decision to attend a game, become a member or be an active advocate. TPB suggests that behavioural intentions

are formed by three factors, namely attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

Fan attitudes and subjective norms were shaped by brand associations and social media presence in AFC's case. Furthermore, perceived behavioural control was enhanced by efforts such as accessible pricing, stadium experiences, and digital engagement. Together, these key factors and components increased behavioural intentions such as attending matches, purchasing memberships, and advocating for the club.

Therefore, integrating TPB within CBBE and PCM helps how brand meaning translates into action which further explains why AFC's early awareness was rapidly converted into real behavioural outcomes.

6.1.4 Theoretical Integration

The process of early fanbase formation for new sports teams is difficult to capture through one single theoretical framework. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity model explains how the club constructs brand meaning through strategic marketing and communication. Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) further explains how behavioural intentions such as decision to attend, buy, or advocate are shaped by initial brand perceptions. The Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001) explains how engagement may deepen a fans psychological attachment and identity towards the club followed on from acting on behavioural intentions formed. Together, these frameworks suggest a sequence i.e. brand perception → behavioural intention → psychological progression. AFC's case further reveals that these frameworks were not only sequential rather they were dependent on each other and occurred simultaneously.

In AFC's case community engagement successfully constructed brand meaning (CBBE) which led to social conditions to offer support to the team (TPB) while also creating early attachment through the Auckland based civic identity (PCM). This sequence can be linked to other mechanisms such as the digital storytelling leading to effective brand awareness (CBBE) while shaping positive attitudes (TPB) followed by repeated digital engagement, explaining the accelerated PCM progress. Furthermore, AFC successfully created non-performance-based associations (CBBE) while reducing behavioural barriers (TPB) through effective eventization and creating hedonic attraction touch points.

This framework may be significantly effective in new team contexts as there is no history or legacy to rely on. PCM progression for established clubs may move gradually and organically through years of experience and legacy around the club but for new clubs, these three frameworks together may generate accelerated progression as observed in AFC's case.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this case study offer significant practical implications for sports marketing practitioners, particularly those tasked with establishing new franchises.

Build Identity Before Expecting Loyalty

New sports team should focus on place-based identity formation as early as possible. The findings from the AFC case indicate AFC's Auckland centric positioning as a club that existed to represent the city and its communities was the most strongly indicated factor by the fans for early identification. This positioning helped eradicate barriers for fans who had no prior connection to professional football and get behind the club based on their connection with the city. Managers or professionals launching a new sports team in a dominated market can work on this through community partnerships, engaging local cultural institutions, and embedding the club in the local community from the get-go.

Market the Club as an Experience

New sports teams may benefit from positioning matchdays a social and civic experience rather than a sporting event especially when audiences have not yet formed a psychological attachment to the team. The AFC case reveals that fans attended AFC matches for the atmosphere, the family activities, and being part of something being built in real time rather than just the sport itself. The eventization strategy attracted audiences who would not have attended a traditionally organised football game and the social value of attending games was enhanced by organic supporter culture that can be observed with the active supporter's group "The Port". Managers or professionals may opt for this strategy by treating a matchday as a festival with football at its centre. This may create reasons for fans to attend that are independent of team performance.

Digital Storytelling to Build Legitimacy

A strategically sound digital content strategy can be used to build early legitimacy in new sports team contexts by deploying it aggressively in the pre-launch as well as during the early days before any on field engagement is available to the fans. This way digital contact can function more than just a promotional channel.

Findings from AFC's case reveal that social media was dominantly the first touchpoints for the fans to encounter AFC as a new club. The fans also described the tone and content throughout the digital content and positioning as unique which helped shape early brand associations. AFC strategically managed a professional visual identity and informal relatable content strategy which positioned them differently from traditional sports outlets. This combined positioning by the club's communications team made AFC easily approachable yet credible.

Managers in a similar setting can replicate this by investing in content that focuses on player personalities, behind-the-scenes footage, storytelling rather than just focusing on promotional content. In competitive markets, authenticity and relatability in digital content can shape early credibility for new sports franchises.

Reduce Barriers

New sports franchises may focus on reducing barriers to entry and converting first time attendees in the first year of operations. Matchdays and overall experience with the club should be designed to encourage first visits and minimize barriers to visit.

Findings from AFC's case reveal that fans formed positive associations with the club once fans attended an AFC game or in some cases engaged with the club through other channels. Efforts such as affordable pricing, proximity, family friendly event design and communications led to reduction in barriers to attend.

Managers and professionals can implement this by making the fan journey of attending games easier and face market challenges efficiently. Entry barriers may be context specific but the principle of focusing on converting first visits can be a transferrable objective for new sports team entering competitive markets.

6.3 Limitations

There are several important limitations that need to be considered while presenting the implications derived from this case study.

Methodologically, this is a single case research design which explores one club in one market during its inaugural season. Further research is required for the findings to be generalised to other new sport teams entering monopolistic markets even though the AFC case provides rich and analytical findings and implications. The contextual factors of the New Zealand sports market and AFC's launch may not be replicable to other markets.

Furthermore, researcher subjectivity and potential bias is one of the main concerns of a qualitative inquiry (Ruddin, 2006) as it may affect interpretation of data. This potential bias was overcome by complete transparency, reflexivity, and triangulation across interviews and document analysis were maintained throughout the process. Restricted generalizability of findings is another limitation of case study research, as it focuses on a single case (Yin, 2017). A key limitation of the study is recall and positivity bias among staff, subjectivity in fan perspectives, and the restricted insight beyond individual experiences, given that the club is unlikely to disclose details of negative outcomes or details.

This is qualitative data-based research from small samples of six professionals and fans. Even though data across the participant groups are consistent, the findings cannot be statistically associated and quantitative analysis between the identified mechanisms that worked for AFC cannot be established.

Lastly, the longitudinal formation of loyalty is hard to predict or assert in AFC's case as it is a year one study. The attachment and in some cases, allegiance does not indicate whether early fan identification will progress to long term allegiance and loyalty.

6.4 Future Research Directions

The following pointers for future research directions directly address the limitations and findings of the study discussed in the previous subsections.

Most importantly, in order to understand whether early fan identification developed into long term allegiance in AFC's case needs to be studied using a longitudinal research design accounting for multiple seasons over a number of years. According to Funk and James (2001)'s PCM model allegiance or fan loyalty is a result of sustained engagement over years which cannot be asserted through the AFC case as it is a year one study. A longitudinal study may

help understand whether the accelerated progression through the PCM model is sustainable and early fan identification and attachment falls of without continued club efforts.

Furthermore, comparative studies involving other new sports teams in similar markets such as Western United FC, Macarthur FC or any other A- league expansion teams in the near future can help test the findings and implications derived from AFC's case to improve generalizability of the findings in new sport team contexts. To add to this, cross-sport studies testing similar marketing strategies and mechanisms can be tested through new sports team from other sports entering into a monopolistic or saturated market to further understand whether the findings are specific to football or applicable to sport more broadly.

Methodologically, the strategies and mechanisms such as local identity, eventization, digital engagement, and behavioural intention can be statistically tested through a quantitative research design using a survey with a larger sample size of AFC supporters to further establish the relationship between these mechanisms and the theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand how a new sports franchise builds brand equity and fan identification in a saturated, non-football-dominant market during its inaugural season. This research problem is addressed by investigating the marketing strategies and operational efforts that enabled AFC to achieve rapid growth in terms of fanbase growth and early adoption in their inaugural season.

The research answered the four primary research questions through a qualitative case study research design incorporating interviews with the fans and AFC professionals involved in the club's launch supported by an extensive document analysis. The findings from the AFC case study suggests that a new sports franchise can build brand awareness, fan identification, and early loyalty within a single inaugural season despite facing several market related contextual challenges. The study revealed that AFC used a strategy of "hyper-localization" combined with "global ambition." as the club embedded itself in the Auckland community through various partnerships and grassroots efforts while also showcasing an international image through the Black Knight ownership group and identity. This research also demonstrated that in AFC's case brand meaning was achieved through "decoupling product from performance" as they focused on treating matchdays as entertainment events and used digital platforms to inherit relatability by humanizing player elements which lead to a sense of belonging among fans

Theoretically, this study extends existing sports marketing literature by integration of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) as a framework for understanding new team launches. This study simply extends the boundaries of these frameworks rather than replacing them completely.

AFC's rapid growth in a non-dominant sport was the result of strategic execution by the management which explains:

CBBE: Establishing immediate professional credibility and local identity (Keller, 1993).

TPB: Removing attendance barriers through "Eventization" (Ajzen, 1991).

PCM: Accelerating loyalty by inviting fans to co-create the club's history and culture from the day of inauguration (Funk & James, 2001).

In conclusion, AFC's inaugural season provides an example proving while a new club lacks history, a brand identity and a loyal community can still be created by treating the club as a community first and a sports team second, offering a defensible contribution. Thus, providing a blueprint for how new sports organizations can achieve rapid growth and early adoption in a competitive market.

Closing Reflection

As a researcher it was an exciting journey observing AFC's launch and to observe the real-time creation of culture. It highlights that modern fans are not just looking for a team to watch rather they are looking for a community to join. The "Blue and Black" of AFC has rapidly become a sense of pride for a city that was waiting for something new to get behind and support.

While the clean slate for an inaugural season eventually fills in, the foundations laid by AFC suggest that they have not just built a team rather a sustainable brand. For future researchers and practitioners, a key takeaway from this study is that in the business of sport you may not always rely on history to create a legacy while you just need a clear identity, a commitment to community, and the right efforts and operations from "Day one."

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1: Codebook (AFC Professionals)

Codes	Code Descriptors
Detach football performance from matchday experience	Focus on entertainment (E.g. Inflatable slide, beach, pre/mid match entertainment) and ensuring value proposition does not rely on the outcome
Digital Storytelling and content	The use of digital platforms (TikTok, Instagram) to engage fans
Embedding the club into the community	Core club philosophy to put the community first (schools, clubs, refugee camps, grassroots development) to establish meaningful authentic fan relationships
Eventization	Hosting each matchday as an event focusing on entertainment and catering all fan segments
Fan representation and feedback	Two-way interaction with fans and facilitating feedback through initiatives such as "Fan Rec Group," to inform club decisions and strategies.
Grassroots and Pathways development	Creating pathways and opportunities for local kids to become professionals and bridging the gap between amateur and professional football
Localisation	Focus on Auckland specific identity and local pride
Market Entry in Rugby dominated sporting landscape	Difficulties and strategies to enter and capture a market share in a traditionally rugby dominated sporting landscape
Matchday Atmosphere	The overall sensory experience at the stadium on matchdays
Ownership	The influence of the ownership group
Player Recruitment	The strategy of signing players- proper mix of local and international talent
Sponsors and Marketing activations	Integration of commercial partners in matchday events and marketing campaigns
Success and Numbers	Quantitative measurement of overall performance (Ticket sales, matchday attendance, social media growth and membership sales)
Fan Segmentation	fan types (e.g., "The Port" vs. "Families" vs. "Curious Sports Fans")
Player humanization	Content strategy focused on showing players as relatable humans with hobbies

Mememes and Banter strategy	Humour, memes, and banter to differentiate from traditional sports marketing
Innovative Attractions	Using non-football attractions (Ferris wheel, The Slide, The Beach) to cater to all demographics

Table A2: Codebook 2 (AFC Fans)

Codes	Code Descriptors
Local Identity	AFC representing Auckland as a city and a location
Local Pride	A sense of pride for fans to support AFC
Belonging	Sense of being a part of something like a community or group for the fans
Sense of ownership	Fans feeling towards AFC being their “own team”
Proximity	Ease of access for fans due to geographical proximity
Professionalism (Image)	AFC’s image as a professional credible and club
Legitimacy (Image)	AFC’s image as a credible and trustworthy organisation
Ambition and mentality	AFC’s winning mentality and ambition to win silverware rather than just being an expansion club
Trust in ownership	Sense of trust and backing towards the ownership and financials
Ownership	The influence of the ownership group
Discovery through social media	Awareness and engagement through social media platforms
Visual Brand identity	Logo, kit, design and Black Knights identity
Authenticity via storytelling	Relatability and realism in content and communications
Grassroots Involvement	Involvement with local clubs, schools, and youth programmes
Inclusivity	Representation and involvement of all age, ethnicity, and football knowledge levels
Matchday Atmosphere	Emotional and sensory experiences in the stadium on matchdays
“The port” (Active supporters’ group and culture)	Role of organised supporter groups (e.g., The Port)
Family Experience	Matchday design and activations catering to families and kids
Fan Journey	Emotional investment in the club
Loyalty and intent to advocate	Willingness to recommend and remain loyal to the club

Launch Campaign Recall	Fans recollecting early name, kit, and launch campaigns
Youth fan focus	Engagement strategies targeting children and young people
Entertainment beyond football	Attractions outside of the football game
Legacy Orientation	A feeling of being a part of history being written and being a supporter since Day 1
City Wide reach	Engagement across multiple Auckland regions

Appendix B

Theme Tables

AFC Interviews

Theme 1- Community First Strategy and Authentic Connection (Table B1)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Embedding the club into the community	“Embedding ourselves into the community was at the heart of every decision we've made, and it continues to be at the heart of every decision that we make”	CCO
	“We are every single weekend from Friday to Sunday, we are at a club, at a school, at a social project, at a cultural group or a refugee camp, and it was all to just introduce the brand to people.	CCO
	“I didn't realise how big the community piece was when I first joined AFC, but it's almost as big as the high-performance team because there's so much happening in the Community and that's so important to us”	PAM
	“We set clear values from the start: to be a club that's part of the community, to create pathways for young players, to be ambitious, and to be bold and innovative.	CEO
Localisation	“We were obviously really focused at home first, even Auckland, before we talked about New Zealand because that's where we're from, that's our home, that's our name.”	CCO
	“There's a lot of Auckland embedded into the logo, like the ascending A in the top is Rangitoto and stuff like that.”	CP
	“We're still all about being all for Auckland. There's still a huge community piece that we're working on”	HOC
Grassroots and Pathways development	“We want New Zealand football to be better off because we exist. That's part of embedding ourselves in the community. Part of doing that is we have to develop Kiwi talent.”	CCO

	"We want to do the idea of Auckland FC and the idea of the structure we're in, in terms of the model club ownership was a clear pathway for kids from Auckland's and surrounds"	HOC
	"Highlighting the journey and the player pathway of not only the first team but the younger boys as well going into the reserves"	MM
Fan representation and feedback	"We have something called our fan rep group and I sit in that group, and we have maybe 10 fans that give us feedback around what's going on in the current climate, what fans are feeling at games, what they like dislike."	MM
	"We did a survey last year that showed that members weren't really sure the benefits... so we're trying to be really clear in our communication."	CP
	"They didn't want be part of the club... and wanted to be 100 percent independent but were super keen to work alongside just create that atmosphere"	CCO

Theme 2 – Experiential Marketing “Eventization” (Table B2)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Eventization	"So, we never approached our match days as we are putting 13 football games. We've always approached from the beginning as like we are putting 13 events together. Football happens to be there"	CCO
	"It's all the stuff we do in the family fun zone. It's all the stuff that we do in terms of that's not on the pitch that really counts."	HOC
	"I think entertainment as a product...It is so important now in sport...How do you make sport an entertainment product which includes adding a beach, DJs, Ferris wheel, because a lot of my friends do not care about football but they come because there's so many other things going"	MM
Detach football performance from matchday experience	"How do we detach football performance? As much as we can from the matchday experience... We want people to leave our games saying, "Oh, my God, there was a 15 metre Ferris wheel, there was a circus, a teacup, there was a face painter, there was Santa Claus, there was planes flying over the stadium, and there was football."	CCO
	"So that's a reason to drive people to a game and it's not necessarily because of the sport, it's decoupling product from performance. For us, we want people to come to the game because they're like, oh, I saw online, there's a beach"	MM

	"Entertainment... makes up such a small part of it, it's everything beyond that is really going to keep the fans coming."	HOC
Innovative Attractions	"We have a Ferrous wheel... We had the biggest inland beach in New Zealand... We built it Why? Because it's somewhere, every kiwi likes to go."	CCO
	"Everyone loves the slide; the slide has been a huge hit... We're also got this weird obstacle coursing as well."	HOC
	"People are arriving two hours early to try out all the other activations we have, the Ferris wheel and the slide and all the other entertainment we have going on."	PAM
Matchday Atmosphere	"You're there for the atmosphere... If you like football's a bonus."	CCO
	"And those guys (The port) are awesome and they kind of they're an attraction in themselves, like people go to see "	HOC
	" They (The port) bring the atmosphere, the support that is very valued by us."	PAM
Fan Segmentation	"We segment fans... We've got the hardcore fans... We've got the families... We've got the sports enthusiast."	CCO
	"We have members and non-members. Under that, we look at what type of membership or what type of ticket they've bought. Someone who only comes to marquee matches like the derbies is more of a curious fan, while others come to three, four, five or six games without buying a membership. We also see families through family packs and mates through three or four adult tickets,"	MM
	"You have your hardcore fans... You've got your families... and then you've got your FOMOs."	HOC

Theme 3- Market Entry and Operations Strategy (Table B3)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Market Entry in Rugby dominated sporting landscape	"Rugby fans are not like football fans... the other thing is before the ownership group purchased the license, they did some homework and they realised that New Zealand, Auckland was the largest city in the world without a professional football team."	CCO
	"We live in a rugby dominated landscape, I think it's being pretty bland as far as, you know, there's not a lot of excitement around it. But it's also quite a test, isn't it? I mean, it's secluded group. We need more sports the community"	CCO
	"No other sports team is playing over summer, so the All-Blacks play in the winter, the Hurricanes, the Blues, the Warriors, we have a clear run. So, there is no saturation over summer "	MM

	"We're not trying to necessarily take away all the All-Blacks fans, they're just two different experiences. That's a key part in differentiating us. Also, football is huge, especially in Auckland."	CEO
Ownership	"One of the owners, Bill Foley is American. He owns about 85% for the club. He's got many businesses here. So, he had a connection to New Zealand"	CCO
	"Bill came in, swept everybody else away... His advice was simple: embed yourself in the community."	CEO
	"We followed a blueprint from Bill Foley. His first sports team, the Vegas Golden Knights, became an instant success story, from expansion to winning... His playbook emphasized community connection, ambition, and getting the right people."	CEO
Sponsors and Marketing Activations	We're very values driven; working hard, playing fair, being in it for the community. The sales team don't just go out and pick anyone, they're strategic and picking brands that align with us.	PAM
	For example, having Anchor on the front of the shirt for the first season. That was a really important decision. They were trying to find a brand that could align with us being for the whole family."	PAM
	So, we look at what do they have in common with us and how do we capitalise on that. So, for example, when we signed Shark Ninja, they wanted to be fun and bold and edgy. So, we did a cooking series with players... authentic product placement."	MM
	"McDonald's who put a massive football pitch inflatable... for the kids to play doing on match day."	CEO
Success and Numbers	We've had 18,000 average attendees at games. We had over 250,000 people come across games. And if you look at the league's average, which other teams that are there for three decades, is 9,000.	CCO
	"I think we're about 70,000 followers, which is pretty good. You know, I actually have some screenshots of the Instagram page when I had 8,000 followers 16 months ago, which is quite cool to look at."	CP
	"We were selling out games last season and this season we're still doing really well."	HOC
Player Recruitment	"We have to develop Kiwi talent... Out of the 25-squad last season, 18 were Kiwis."	CCO
	"We had a clear strategy to be a team for and from the community. My job was to get as many Kiwi boys as possible back into the team."	CEO

Theme 4- Modern Marketing Strategy and content (Table B4)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Digital Storytelling and content	"So, we always try to look for what are the nuggets there that actually give them (players) some. personality beyond the pitch...that's some of storytelling we try and bring through, and we make that come through and some of stuff we do and our digital channels"	HOC
	"I think digital marketing is the is the most important. Nowadays everyone is online. I think for us organic Instagram organic social media has worked really well, especially Instagram."	MM
	"Making the fans feel like they are in the inner circle of the club, so getting a lot of like behind the scenes sort of footage."	CP
	"We want to extend that game to be longer than 90 minutes... So, here's a video of all the goals... relive the best moments... and then at the bottom of that there is an upsell and we obviously want them to come back."	MM
Player humanization	"we try and like, with the players, we try and actually bring, like they are individuals, they're humans, we try and bring their personality"	HOC
	"Showing the player's personality, I think really helped get in fans feeling like they're already a part of the club"	CP
	"We showed vulnerability and humour. The players' personalities came through naturally, that's what makes it relatable. It's been great for the club and fans." (AFC docuseries)	CEO
Memes and Banter strategy	"I think when it comes to socials, we want to come across as a brand that's bold and that's ambitious and that's innovative. And I think in being bold, you can have a little bit of fun."	MM
	"I think we posted about 20 memes on TikTok, which gathered up millions of views."	CP
	"Our content guy rang me said like, we're getting loads about everyone thinking we're in the Club World Cup. And I was like, mate, just have some fun with it. Club World Cup... Everyone loved it. And we added like 100,000 social media followers."	HOC
	"We want to jump on trends because we know that that's quite funny, ... It's more from a fact of we're a club that wants to be different and we want to be fun, and we want to be bold and having trends that are funny plays into that."	MM

Appendix C

Theme Tables

AFC Fans

Theme 1- Identity and Belonging (Table C1)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Local Identity	"What caught my attention was the idea of Auckland having its own team... Auckland FC represented more than just football, so it represented Auckland's identity and growth."	F2
	"It made me feel a little bit proud to be an Aucklander. It framed the club as representing the city's identity."	F4
	"I think that they've, as I said, that they've brought out the sense of belongingness of being an Aucklander as a whole."	
Belonging	"Feeling a sense of belonging is really important to me... especially when it's connected to my city"	F2
	"The club doesn't feel exclusive. It feels like it's for everyone."	F3
	"I think belonging to a club or a society is one of the main parts of watching football."	F6
Local Pride	"There was a sense of pride in watching something grow and knowing you have been following since the beginning."	F3
	"Being an Auckland FC supporter means feeling connected to my city, being part of something new and sharing a sense of pride and belonging with other Aucklanders."	F2
	"It made me feel a little bit proud to be an Aucklander. It framed the club as representing the city's identity"	F4
Legacy Orientation	"I think it's about being part of history in the making, to be honest, being there from the very beginning of the club's gives me a sense of ownership. I'm not just watching a team, I'm helping build a legacy."	F4
	"The idea of being part of something from day one, it was appealing for me. And there was a sense of pride in watching something grow and knowing you have been following since the beginning."	F3
	"It's a huge like euphoric feeling to be like the part of Auckland FC as the first team to win the league in their first attempt. And being part of the history will always be very important to me."	F5

Theme 2- Brand Image and Perception (Table C2)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Professionalism	"They didn't feel like a small local club, just quietly launching, but it felt like a major announcement, like something meaningful was happening in Auckland."	F3
	"Professional and serious. They came out acting like a big club, not like a starting club who's just there for the sake of it. It felt very, very exciting."	F4
	"My first impression was that it felt professional and ambitious"	F2
Ambition and Mentality	"The ambition and the financial backing, the owner got to the club, which made it feel like a legitimate club from day one, which actually wants to achieve something"	F4
	"They say we're not here to make up numbers we're here to win. Which is not really a Kiwi thing to say."	F1
	"The never say die attitude performing at clutch moments. I think that itself created an identity of the club and they were very ambitious since the beginning."	F5
Visual Brand and Identity	"The logo for sure because ... it actually looked like a professional logo ... that made it feel like legit"	F2
	"Definitely the Black Knight's identity and definitely the design logo as well. It quite unique. It definitely is bold, clean, and it felt international."	F3
	"I liked the logo and the first season's away kit. I actually bought that one."	F6
	"The logo looked sleek professional"	F4

Trust in Ownership	"Seeing who was involved in leadership added a level of trust, it made the whole thing feel more serious"	F3
	"When I found out that Bill Foley from England was announced as the owner of the club... It was all over the news"	F4
	Since an English club was influenced in setting up Auckland FC... So, I think the identity of the club looked very professional."	F5

Theme 3- Community and Reach (Table C3)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Grassroots Involvement	"They went to all the small clubs as well... It made you feel included."	F1
	"I think they did a great job in going to all the clubs around Auckland and some of them in Hamilton. And I know that they have been to my club Mt. Albert Ponsonby twice on 1st kicks nights"	F1
	"You also see them holding football clinics, not just in the central part, but towards the south of Auckland as well in schools and in local clubs. They're also engaged in fundraising activities for local clubs through tickets sales."	F4
	"There are always football clinics or school holiday programs. I think that's very engaging for locals to stay in touch with the club."	F6
Inclusivity	"It didn't come across as intimidating or like elitist. So, Aucklanders of all backgrounds could get behind it, even if they're not from a football background."	F2
	"I think the crowd is really diverse, which makes which matches Auckland, you see families, young people, and people from a different background united by football"	F4
	"Auckland FC has done a good job reflecting Auckland's diversity and being inclusive of everyone, from diehard fans to families."	F6
Proximity	"A professional football team on your doorstep is great. I mean, I live in Mount Albert, so I'm only 15 minutes' drive from Mount Smart, so that makes it nice and easy."	F1
	" Having a team representing the city that I live in, playing 20 minutes from my house, make the transition from interested to a supporter very instantaneous."	F4
	" It's nice to have a club you can easily access while living in Auckland."	F6
City Wide Reach	" They went to Clinton united, you know, deep in in South Auckland. So, it was kind of the show that it wasn't just the North Shore or a central Auckland or an East Auckland thing."	F1
	"Look like they're focussing on the entirety of Auckland and not just a particular part like the central regions. they're trying to go up north towards in the north part of Auckland, the south part of Auckland as well."	F4
	"Auckland is also made-up of different people from different backgrounds, so it feels inclusive which aligns with how I view Auckland."	F2

Theme 4- Marketing and Engagement (Table C4)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Discovery through social media	"I definitely found out about them through social media cause. I saw them on Instagram 1st and then I got a lot of Tik Toks"	F2
	"So, I first came across Auckland FC through social media. So, there were announcement posts that were getting shared a lot"	F3
	"I saw them on Instagram. There was an advertisement showing there would be a new professional club in Auckland."	F6
	"It was all over the news and immediately it was popping up on my social media feeds as well."	F4
Authenticity via storytelling	"It (social media video) definitely humanised them like immediately and I felt connected towards them."	F3
	" I felt like I was watching something being built in real time...It made the	F3

	club feel alive and relatable. I guess I also liked how the content wasn't overly polished, and it had a human fun and definitely an authentic feel."	
	"Instagram seems to be the one because you get the stories and you get the almost immediate uploads of things."	F1
	"The small clips from training. It's interesting to see how professionals train and what they talk about."	F6
Launch Campaign Recall	"I remember seeing a video... when the club launched that focused on Auckland as a city."	F2
	"I remember the unveiling of the of the name and the strip.... once you kind of have a name and you have a strip, you have a football club almost."	F1
	"I think I saw this marketing campaign on Instagram where Auckland FC they have chosen walls or parts of fences around the city where they had like displayed 20, 30 shirts in a row for the fans to come collect on a first come first sub basis"	F4

Theme 5- Matchday Experience (Table C5)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Matchday Atmosphere	"The atmosphere is definitely like lively. The pregame events were really cool"	F2
	"Absolutely Electric... it's like a sea of Auckland FC supporters there and it's absolutely ecstatic to be there."	F5
	"The atmosphere now on the big games or whatever is great for me and great for my kids"	F1
	"The fans were loud. The chants were really strong and definitely the crowd felt united, even though the club is brand new."	F3
Family Experience	If the kids need a break, you've got your Ferris wheel or your beach or your whatever the other side of the ground... that makes it great for me"	F1
	"The entertainment never stops. Definitely there are quite a lot of stuff for kids where they have like Ferris wheels, then inflatable football pitches, and slides as well. So there was a beach set up in the stadium in the summer, so that was quite interesting."	F3
	"The club itself is family friendly. Go Media Stadium is really nice and has a family zone with slides for kids. It's good for families and football fans alike."	F6
	"They had this artificial beach once. They always have drinks there. So, it's more of a family day out for a family rather than just going for a match."	F4
"The port" (Active supporters' group and culture)	"I think it's great that we've got active support in the South stand."	F1
	"The Port, which is the active supporter's group that makes a lot of noise from the stands."	F4
	"There are quite a lot of diehard fans- 'the port' that are cheering loud and chanting."	F3
	"It was full of energy. There were lots of fans, especially at 'The Port.'"	F6
Entertainment beyond football	"There's something for everyone out there. For example, they have inflatable slides... artificial beach."	F4
	"The entertainment was solid and the whole experience felt like really professional."	F3
	"I enjoyed the halftime shows and the slides for kids."	F6
	"The pregame events were really cool."	F2

Theme 6- Loyalty (Table C6)

Code	Key Data Quotes	Respondent
Loyalty and intent to advocate	"I'll keep buying season tickets until I can no longer stand up in the port."	F1
	"I'm probably very likely to recommend Auckland FC."	F2
	"I have friends in Korea I've been telling about our great club."	F6
	"Even in the bad seasons, I'll, I'll be there standing in the sun and the rain and the whatever and hoping that we win a title soon."	F1
Fan Journey	"I wouldn't say I'm a die-hard fan yet I'm still growing into the role."	F2
	"The transition from interested to a supporter, very, very instantaneous."	F4

	"I wouldn't say I'll call myself a die-hard fan just yet, but I guess I'm well on my way."	F3
	"I'll keep buying season tickets until I can no longer stand up in the port."	F1

Appendix C

AFC Professional Interview Guide

Project Title: Marketing a New Football Franchise: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies

Method: Semi-structured interviews of the AFC marketing team and executive team members.

Prerequisites: Signed participant consent form and information sheet provided.

Section 1 – Introduction and Demographics

1. What is your current role at Auckland FC?
2. How long have you worked with Auckland FC?
3. What according to you were the marketing priorities in the inaugural year?
4. How (if at all) how the marketing priorities and objectives changing or progressing year on year?

Section 2 – Fan Engagement and Brand Identity

5. What were the main objectives of the marketing strategy in the first year?
6. Did the original marketing plan have a set of particular target audience(s) in mind? Who?
7. Can you tell me about any creative marketing campaigns the club has run, and what thinking or goals were behind them?

Section 3 – Acquisition Strategy

8. How did the club approach growing its fan base during the first season?
9. What role played did social media influencers and public opinion leaders play in ticketing strategies and events towards building the early fan base?

Section 4 – Fan Retention and Long-term Engagement

10. What strategies are/were used to convert first-time attendees into fans or members?
11. What do you regard as a “great” matchday customer or viewer experience likely to drive either return visits or membership?
12. Which actions/tactics or strategies do you proactively follow to turn visitors into members or loyal return attendees? How does an attendee become a member or fan?
13. What membership or loyalty benefits are available to fans?

Section 5 – Target Audience Strategies and Community Engagement

14. Who are your three most desired target audiences as future members?
15. How did AFC engage with younger fans (e.g., school programs, junior clubs)?

16. Are there other targeted future fans I have not mentioned? How do you influence them?

Section 6 – Social Media and Digital Platforms

17. Can you describe how the club uses social media and digital platforms to connect with fans?

18. What content types has been highly effective for fan engagement on social media platforms?

Closing Question

Is there anything you would like to add that you feel is important to AFC's marketing strategy

AFC Fan Interview Guide

Part 1: Introduction & Demographics

- To start, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background with football? Would you describe yourself as a casual viewer, a passionate fan, or somewhere in between?"
- **Auckland Context:** "How long have you lived in Auckland?"
- **Prior Loyalty:** "Before Auckland FC, did you support any other football teams? If so, which ones and why?"
- **General Belonging (Psychographic):** "In general, how important is it for you to feel a sense of 'belonging' to a group (like a club, association, or local community)?"

(Note: Record Age, Gender, and Occupation for demographic analysis)

Part 2: Awareness (Discovering the Club)

Goal: Identify first touchpoints and initial brand perceptions.

- **Discovery:** "Think back to when you first heard about Auckland FC. How did you find out about them?"
- **Initial Hook:** "What specifically caught your attention when you first saw or heard about the club?"
- **Branding & Identity:** "Which specific elements of the launch stood out to you? Was it the logo, the leadership, the 'Black Knights' identity, or something else?"
- **First Impressions:** "If you had to describe your very first impression of the club's personality or image, what would you say?"

Part 3: Interest (Engagement & Growing Curiosity)

Goal: Understand what moved them from 'aware' to 'interested'.

- **Deepening Interest:** "After you first heard about AFC, what encouraged you to follow them more closely?"
- **Media Consumption:** "How do you currently stay connected with the club?"
- **Community Presence:** "Have you noticed AFC representatives or players out in the community (schools, clinics, events)? How relevant was this to your growing interest?"
- **Social Influence:** "In those early days, did you discuss the club with friends or family? Did anyone influence your decision to pay attention?"

Part 4: Desire (Motivation & Emotional Connection)

- **The Shift to Supporter:** "What made you 'want' to become a real supporter rather than just a casual follower?"
- **Brand Perception:** "If you could describe the Auckland FC brand in just three words, what would they be?"
- **Storytelling Impact:** "Can you recall a specific advertisement, social media post, or interview that made you feel emotionally connected to the team?"
- **Self-Assessment (The Supporter Continuum):**

Part 5: Action (The Fan Experience)

- **The Decision:** "What finally made you decide to attend your first match or buy a membership?"
- **Ease of Process:** "How easy or difficult was the process of finding information, buying tickets, or joining?"
- **Matchday Atmosphere:** "How would you describe the atmosphere at Go Media Stadium?"
- **Community Fit:** "Do you feel Auckland FC accurately reflects the values and culture of the Auckland community? Why or why not?"

Part 6: Reflection & Loyalty (Future Intentions)

Goal: Assess long-term loyalty and satisfaction.

- **Evaluation:** "Looking back, how do you feel about your decision to support AFC? What has exceeded your expectations?"

- **Improvements:** "Is there any area of the fan experience (communication, pricing, matchday) that you think could be improved?"
- **Drivers of Loyalty:** "What motivates you to remain loyal to the club in the long term? Is it on-field success, or something else?"
- **NPS (Net Promoter Score):** "On a scale of 1 to 7, how likely are you to recommend Auckland FC to your friends or family?"
- **Closing Thought:** "In a few words, what does being an AFC supporter mean to you

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Appendix E (Ethics and Public Facing Documents)



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

10 September 2025

Rouxelle de Villiers
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Rouxelle

Re Ethics Application: **25/276 Marketing a New Football Franchise: Auckland Football Club's (AFC's) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies in Year One of Ownership**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 10 September 2028.

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 AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access 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.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz; melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz

Organisational Permission to Access Form

Project title: Marketing a New Football Franchise: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies in Year One of Ownership

Project Supervisors: *Primary Supervisor: Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers* (rdevilli@aut.ac.nz)

Secondary Supervisor: - Dr. Melody Johnston
(melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz)

Researcher: *Dhruv Sunil Kapoor* (cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz)

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 15 September 2025.
- I understand that the limited number of participants will offer only limited de-identification of interview data and thus only limited confidentiality can be offered to participants.
-
- I give permission for the researcher to undertake research within Auckland Football Club
- I give permission for the researcher to access the staff/ employees of Auckland Football Club
- Do you give permission for Auckland Football Club (AFC) to be named in this research project and any resulting outputs (e.g., thesis, publications)? YES ☐ NO ☐

CEO's signature:

.....

.....

CEO's name:

.....

.....

Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....
.....
.....

Date:

Note: The head of the organisation should retain a copy of this form.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on

10 September 2025, AUTECH Reference 25/276

Participant Consent Form

Project title: **Marketing a New Football Franchise: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies in Year One of Ownership**

Project Supervisors: **Primary Supervisor: Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers (rdevilli@aut.ac.nz)**

Secondary Supervisor: - Dr. Melody Johnston
(melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz)

Researcher: **Dhruv Sunil Kapoor (cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz)**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmmyyyy.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- The researcher will do everything possible to ensure participant confidentiality, but due to the small group of participants, can only provide limited confidentiality.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I have read and understood the study information and voluntarily agree to participate in this research through signing this consent form and oral consent during interviews.
- I wish to receive the transcript for checking (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

.....
...

Participant's name:
.....
...

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):
.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 10 September
2025, AUTEK Reference 25/276**

Organisational Participant Information Sheet

Date that data collection will start:

15 September 2025
Project Title: Marketing a New Football Franchise: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies

Researcher:

Dhruv Kapoor – Master of Business student, Auckland University of Technology (AUT)
Email: cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz

Supervised by:

Primary Supervisor: Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers (AUT Business School)
Email: rdevilli@aut.ac.nz

Secondary Supervisor- Dr. Melody Johnston (AUT Sport and Recreation school)
Email: melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz

Ethics Approval: Pending approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) upon permission granted by AFC.

1. Introduction & Purpose

Kia ora,

You are invited to participate in a research study on how Auckland Football Club (AFC), as a newly launched professional football franchise, has used marketing strategies to establish itself in a market traditionally dominated by rugby. This study is being conducted by **Dhruv Kapoor**, a Master of Business student at **Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand**. Other members of the research team include **Dr. Rouxelle De Villiers (Associate Professor- Marketing & International Business)** and **Dr. Melody Johnston (Head of Department- Sport Leadership and Management)**. The study is being carried out as part of the requirements for the Master of Business degree.

2. Organisational Permission and What We Are Requesting

We are seeking your organisation's formal permission to:

- Indicate whether you would like Auckland Football Club (AFC) to be named in the research project and resulting outputs (e.g., thesis, publications), or whether you would prefer the club not to be named. Please note, however, that given the size and profile of AFC, only limited confidentiality can be assured.
- Recruit suitable staff for participation in interviews.
- Conduct interviews either remotely (via Zoom/Teams) or on club premises, depending on

what is most convenient.

- Refer to participants by their organisational role/title (e.g., “Marketing Manager”), while recognising this may carry some risk of identifiability in a small organisation.

We also seek your support in either:

Nominating eligible participants and forwarding information regarding the research to employees after which they can make initial contact with the researcher to participate.

Your organisation may withdraw from the research at any time before data analysis begins. If you withdraw, any identifiable information already collected will be destroyed. After analysis, removal of data will not be possible.

3. Participant Selection Criteria

The individuals we hope to interview should:

- Be currently employed by Auckland FC
- Have been involved in inaugural-year marketing, fan engagement, or branding activities
- Be fluent in English
- Be willing to voluntarily share their insights in semi-structured interview

Each participant will receive a separate Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form.

4. Voluntary Participation and Confidentiality

- All participation is voluntary and will not affect the employees’ relationship with the club and their employability.
- Participants may withdraw at any stage without providing a reason.
- You will receive a summary of key research findings, but not individual transcripts.
- Each participant can request a copy of their own interview transcript.
- Due to the small size of the organization, and the public nature of some roles, , only limited confidentiality can be possible. . However, all steps will be taken to protect identities, and all data will be securely stored to prevent external access.

5. Data Collection and Storage

- A minimum of 5-6 Interviews will be conducted in person or using Microsoft Teams / Zoom each lasting approximately **45 minutes** and recorded with participants’ consent.
- Transcriptions will be deidentified and securely stored in a password-protected AUT OneDrive folder accessible only to the researcher and supervisor.
- All data will be destroyed within 6 years, in accordance with AUT (AUTEC) policy.

6. What Happens Next

If you are willing to support this project, we ask that you **sign and return the attached Organisational Permission to Access Form.**

Contact Details

Dhruv Kapoor – Master of Business student, Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

Email: cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz

Primary Supervisor: Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers (AUT Business School)

Email: rdevilli@aut.ac.nz

Secondary Supervisor- Dr. Melody Johnston (AUT Sport and Recreation school)

Email: melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project supervisor, *Dr. Rouxelle De Villiers*.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on

10 September 2025, AUTECH Reference 25/276

Participant Information Sheet

Date that data collection will start:

15 September 2025

Project Title:

Marketing a New Football Franchise: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies

Kia Ora,

You are invited to participate in a research study on how Auckland Football Club (AFC), as a newly launched professional football franchise, has used marketing strategies to establish itself in a market traditionally dominated by rugby. This study is being conducted by **Dhruv Kapoor**, a Master of Business student at **Auckland University of Technology (AUT)**, New Zealand. Other members of the research team include **Dr. Rouxelle De Villiers (Associate Professor- Marketing & International Business)** and **Dr. Melody Johnston (Head of Department- Sport Leadership and Management)**, . The study is being carried out as part of the requirements for the Master of Business degree.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research explores how Auckland Football Club (AFC), as a newly launched professional football franchise, has used marketing strategies to establish itself in a market dominated by established sports such as rugby. Your insights as a member of the AFC marketing team are valuable in helping understand how these strategies were designed, implemented, and evaluated.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have received this Information Sheet because you responded to the study's recruitment information shared to you by AFC. Participants are selected based on the following criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

Marketing Professionals

To participate in this study, you must:

- Be currently employed by Auckland FC.

- Have been involved in inaugural-year marketing, fan engagement, or branding activities.
- Be willing and able to provide informed consent and communicate in English.
- Be willing to voluntarily share your insights in a semi-structured interview.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to take part in this research, please read and sign the attached Consent Form before the interview begins. You may return the signed form by email or in person. By signing the form, you confirm that you understand the purpose of the research, what your participation involves, and your rights as a participant.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You may withdraw from the research up 2 weeks after the interview after which the data may be in the process of analysis. All data you provide will be kept confidential and your identifiable details won't appear in the report.

What will my participation involve?

If you agree to participate you take part in an interview (approximately 45–60 minutes). The interview will be semi-structured and may take place in person (Booked Study rooms at AUT Campus) or via video conferencing (e.g., Microsoft Teams), depending on your preference and your schedule.

The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed with your consent to ensure accuracy. You will be asked questions related to AFC and their marketing campaigns. You will be provided with a copy of the final report, should you so wish.

What are the benefits?

Participation in this study allows you to share your experiences and perspectives, helping to improve understanding of fan engagement and marketing strategies. The research will provide the researcher with valuable knowledge and practical experience and may benefit the wider community. There are no direct commercial benefits from this study.

Will the results of the study be published?

The results of this research will be published in a *[master's thesis]*. This thesis will be available to the general public through the AUT library. Results may be published in peer-reviewed, academic journals. You will not be identifiable in any publication

What will happen to information about me?

Interview recordings will be stored securely on password-protected files and deleted once the project is completed.

Data and consent forms will be stored securely and separately.

Data will be deidentified during transcription. Any quotes used in the thesis will be attributed as e.g., "Marketing Professional 1" All data will be destroyed within 6 years, in accordance with AUT (AUTC) policy.

Due to the small size of the organization, and the public nature of some roles, only limited confidentiality can be possible. However, all steps will be taken to protect identities, and all data will be securely stored to prevent external access.

The club will be formally asked for permission to be named in research outputs. Regardless of the club being named, individual participants will not be named and their quotes will be deidentified.

The research findings will be submitted as part of a Master's thesis at AUT.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You are invited to consider participation in this study. You have **2 to 4 weeks** to decide whether to participate in this study.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

I will send a summary of the research to you at the end of the study, if you request this. I will send you a copy if you indicate this on the Consent Form

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor- : Dr.Rouxelle de Villiers (AUT Business School)

Email: rdevilli@aut.ac.nz

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Dhruv Kapoor – Master of Business student, Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

Email: cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Primary Supervisor: Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers (AUT Business School)

Email: rdevilli@aut.ac.nz

Secondary Supervisor- Dr. Melody Johnston (AUT Sport and Recreation school)

Email: melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *10 September 2025*, ATEC Reference number *25/276*

CALLING ALL AUCKLAND FC FANS



AUT

🏆 CALLING ALL AUCKLAND FC FANS! 🏆

Share Your Voice

AUT Student Research Study: A Case Study of Auckland Football Club's (AFC) Fan Engagement and Brand-Building Strategies in Year One of Ownership

👤 WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- Be 18 years or older.
- Self-identify as an Auckland FC supporter, follower, or attendee during the inaugural A-League Men's season.
- Have attended at least one AFC home game and/or engaged with AFC through social media, club communications, or official activities.
- Currently live in Auckland or the wider Auckland region.
- Be willing and able to provide informed consent and communicate in English

🎯 WHAT'S INVOLVED?

45-60 minute friendly interview (online/in-person)

Share your AFC fan journey and experiences

Completely voluntary & confidential

★ WHY PARTICIPATE?

Have your voice heard and help shape learnings for new clubs

Receive research findings summary and small token of appreciation!

📞 GET INVOLVED

Email: Dhruv Kapoor at- (cjj4244@autuni.ac.nz) if you meet the criteria!

Subject: "AFC Fan Research - I'm Interested"

🔒 ETHICS

✅ Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 10 September 2025, AUTEK Reference number 25/276