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Research in Practice

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A short context of this writing is to explore three keywords supported by a minimum of three images, in synthesis with three visual artists or philosophers. The research will attempt to link the three keywords Sport branding, Loyalty and Kit design which will form a question for my independent research document. The keywords will be explored based on my interest in the subject via discourse and critical examination. The themes discussed will be in relation to my three theorists- Jeremy Darlow (Sport branding), Dr Allan Tapp (Loyalty) and Dr Ian Greenlees (Kit design) who provide critical analysis of the subjects. Due to the nature of their discussions I will also allude to the thoughts of thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Dr Daniel Wann and John Berger to help contextualise the themes conveyed.

Sport Branding

“Brands win Championships” (Darlow, 2015)

A review of the term sport branding has led my research down many avenues of context and concepts. The term encapsulates two very broad subjects which, in Jeremy Darlow’s opinion, must always co-exist. Darlow’s theory of “brands win championships” challenges the conception that performance is everything in the world of sport as “it’s not about the x’s and o’s anymore” (Darlow. 2015:99). So what is important within the world of sport? And how exactly do “brands win championships”?

Darlow theorises that “what people think about a university or athletic program dictates success, and that’s because, unlike in professional sports, the rich get richer in college athletics” (Darlow. 2015:162). This seemingly acquaints that in order to understand how success is achieved in the sporting world we must look at what is the beginning for most professional athletes, their school days. From this theory we can suggest that the strongest brands in the college sector of America will undoubtedly attract the best athletes. As a college program is a steppingstone to achieving a

professional career in sport it is fair to assume that the professional teams associated with the strongest college brands will gain the best performing athletes, giving them a much higher likelihood of success. To put it simply “teens pick brands, pros pick contracts” (Darlow. 2015:162).

But how exactly do these college ‘brands’ attract young talented athletes? According to Darlow this can be equated to “Goliath acting like David” (Darlow. 2015:316) where big ‘brands’ such as college football teams adopt the mantra of small ‘grassroots’ brands through prioritising “identification” (Darlow. 2015:686). This theory of ‘identification’ puts emphasis on the importance of having a strong visual identity that your target market, in this case young athletes, can relate to. Darlow focuses this ‘identification’ by two main categories, logo’s and colours. Logo’s must “elicit the emotions you are trying to produce with your brand story” (Darlow. 2015:686) and subsequently align with the target audience on an emotional level as well as being simple enough to work for all your needs as “consistency and frequency” (Darlow. 2015:686) are key. An example of this Darlow alludes to would be the O logo of the university of Oregon (Figure 1). The intention of this modern logo is to “reflect where they are going as a brand” (Darlow. 2015:686) with modernisation being the key. By creating a solid logo, which aligns with the target audience’s ambitions, such as the ‘Oregon O’ Darlow reinforces his theory that young talented athletes who are the key to a professional sports team’s success, will ultimately align with a brand that speaks to their core values, as “teens pick brands” (Darlow.2015:162).

In order to fully understand Darlow’s theory of “brands win championships” I felt it necessary to analyse further the key points he makes in regard to how a sporting brand such as the University of Oregon establishes itself as a leading recruiter of Americas top young athletes. In the case of figure 1 Darlow alludes to the shapes connection with modernity through its “sleek” (Darlow. 2015:686) design, but is this really enough of a signifier to convey the same emotional response within the average person? Drawing from Barthes theory of “signifiers” and the “signified” (Barthes. 1977:56) there is a level of context built up within us that drives certain connotations between the shapes,

symbols, and objects we have encountered our whole lives, so the assumption that a 'sleek' looking shape such as figure 1 will convey the feeling of modernity could be argued valid. The assumption then would be that the target audience (young sports stars and fans) will establish an emotional connection to the brand, if this aligns with their values. An example of this alignment Darlow champions is figure 2 where "fans today make hand gestures in the shape of the Oregon 'O'" (Darlow. 2015:686) showing they clearly have a relationship with the brands ethos and wish to display that in an act of "loyalty" (Tapp. 2003:3)



Figure 1. University of Oregon. (2001) *University logo*

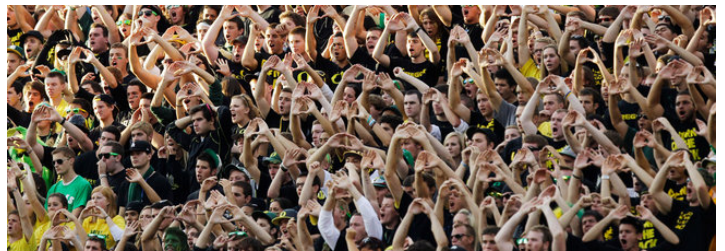


Figure 2. New York Times. (2011) *Fans making the Oregon 'O'*

Loyalty

“The conventional wisdom among football fans is that every supporter is unstintingly loyal to their adopted team.” (Tapp, 2003)

Following my dissection of the term ‘sport branding’ a relationship between a ‘brand’ (sports team) and its fans has created many questions. Darlow acquainted a sports teams success down to its successfulness as a brand, which in turn requires the “loyalty” (Tapp. 2003:3) of its fan base to grow. The main question raised to me here then is how exactly do these ‘brands’ garner the “unstintingly loyal” (Tapp. 2003:3) adoration of said ‘fans? This question has led me to the work of Dr Allan Tapp a senior marketing lecturer at Bristol university where he discusses the relationship between football fans and their “adopted clubs” (Tapp. 2003:3) in the research paper “The loyalty of football fans — We’ll support you evermore?” (Tapp. 2003)

Tapp theorises that a fans loyalty is directly affected by the success of a team as

“analysis of crowd sizes stretching back to the Second World War shows beyond dispute that crowd sizes are related to a team’s position in the league, and that teams lose support when they drop down the league” (Tapp. 2003:2).

His theory then suggests that a fans loyalty is a fleeting thing that cannot be relied upon as

“sports supporter loyalties are more complex than is suggested by the simple conventional wisdom that all fans will ‘support you evermore’.” (Tapp. 2003:10).

He does however concede that this theory based on crowd figures “is likely a misleading indicator of individual loyalties” (Tapp: 2003:4) as there are undoubtedly fans who will stick with their team “through thick and thin” (Tapp. 2003:4). These fans can be attributed to being “fanatics” (Tapp. 2003:4).

So, what leads to a fan becoming a “fanatic”? Tapp theorises that this undying loyalty is created from their obsession with “self-image” (Tapp. 2003:4). From his research he discovered that their loyalty was active and consciously expressed through areas such as memorabilia collection (see figure 3) which was “a strong reminder of their sense of self” (Tapp. 2003:4) and had subsequently become very important in their lives. One fan from his research disclosed his obsession with the items by revealing in a hypothetical house fire he would save his “programmes and tapes” first “No question” (Tapp. 2003:4). This fascination with the acquisition of aesthetical items led me to further research regarding why exactly do the ‘fanatics’ obsess over such items?

Dr Daniel Wann, professor of psychology at Murray state university believes this to be due to the benefits supporting a team has on psychological wellbeing. Wann equates this boost in psychological well being down to the “need to belong” (Wann. 2005) in human nature. This theory then suggests that the obsession of collecting memorabilia seen in Tapp’s research is directly linked to the human subconical needs of belonging. By seeing another human being identifying their “loyalty” (Tapp. 2003:3) by proudly wearing the team emblem on a shirt creates an instant connection between the two individuals. From these discussed theories you could argue that this is the instigator to a fan’s fascination with such things as memorabilia as “part of identifying with the sport team is not just with the team, but with the fan base” (Wann. 2005)

On reflection of my research into ‘Loyalty’ the questions triggered are to what extent does the connection created between fans boost one’s ‘social self-image’ and are there any aesthetical factors that originally lead to a fan choosing a specific team? These questions could be used as a starting point for further expansion of my proposed research essay.



Figure 3. Sunderland Echo (2016) *Michael Ganley with some of his SAFC memorabilia.*

Kit design

My research into loyalty among sports fans showed me that memorabilia collecting has a massive influence on how loyalty is sustained. Due to this I wished to investigate what further role does memorabilia such as sports kits play within the world of sport, Does the kit design offer more than just aesthetical value to fans or play a higher role in sports performance? These questions led me to the research of Dr Iain Greenlees, a lecturer at the University of Chichester who sought to find out whether components of kit design such as “colour of soccer goalkeepers’ uniforms influences the outcome of penalty kicks” (Greenlees et al. 2013).

Greenlees' research theorises that "competing against red clad opponents hinders the performance of soccer (football) athletes" Greenlees. 2013:3). The research is based on an experiment conducted with 40 experienced players taking penalty kicks against a goalkeeper wearing different coloured shirts each week. The research results suggest that there is a correlation between colour and performance due to there being a lesser number of goals being scored against a goalkeeper wearing a red shirt (see figure 4). So why exactly did this happen?

Greenlees theorises that "humans may possess a biologically-based predisposition to view red as a sign of danger that stems from instances of red signalling danger in the natural world" (Greenlees. 2013:3) and thus an opponent encountering the colour is more likely to feel less confident in the outcome of their shot. He further theorises that this colour effect is also true in reversed roles as goalkeepers within the test described "being less confident of saving penalties kicked by players who wore red" (Greenlees. 2013:3). To further the solidity of his theory Greenlees also alludes to the work of Hill and Barton (2005) who found that football teams competing in the 2004 European championships "had better results and scored more goals when they wore red than when they wore a uniform of another colour" (Greenlees. 2013:3).

This theory then proposes that for an advantage within team-based sports, Kit design can be created in a way to manipulate the opposition psychologically. By appealing to an opposition's biological predisposition, in this case a red signifier, we can trigger a physical response aimed in our benefit. On further investigation of this point I discovered the work of John Berger who theorises that the context of past teachings has a profound effect on how we judge items as 'From birth we are taught how to read signs and symbols' (Berger, 1972). This theory then suggests that something such as colour conveys different levels of meaning to different individuals, which leads me to the question, will all players in a football team have the same response to a red coloured kit or does culture and past teachings play a higher role in how signifiers such as the colour will effect a players performance?

Interestingly, Greenlees concedes that there are some limitations to the research and therefore his work shouldn't be taken as gospel. These limitations include the consistent control of "hue, brightness, perceived typicality, and saturation of the jersey colours that were used in this experiment" (Greenlees. 2013:10) due to real-world conditions. Greenlee's also notes that following the work of Hill and Barton (2005) that more research is warranted on the evolutionary effects of the colour red in different genders and cultures as red is proposed to have evolved as a signal of "male dominance and status" (Greenlees. 2013:10). The question raised to me here once again is can colour really have an effect on sporting performance? This is a question that could be further explored in my proposed research essay.

MEAN PERFORMANCE AND EXPECTANCIES OF SUCCESS SCORES ACROSS COLOR CONDITIONS								
Measure	Goalkeepers' Uniform Color							
	Red		Blue		Yellow		Green	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Performance against control goalkeeper	6.90	2.42	6.80	1.62	6.80	1.32	6.70	1.83
Expectancies of success against control goalkeeper	60.70	14.69	58.90	12.46	68.80	18.25	55.00	13.23
Performance against target goalkeeper	5.40	1.58	7.20	1.87	6.90	1.66	7.50	1.78
Expectancies of success against target goalkeeper	53.60	10.33	50.20	16.21	58.20	13.09	46.30	17.93

Figure 4. I.A.Greenlees et al (2013) 'Table 1'



Figure 5. Bleeding Pencil (2010) 'How to win a World Cup. Pick a red goalkeeper'

On evaluation of my exploration of my three keywords I can see that there are numerous links between the terms which will lead to a proposed question. The Proposed question 'How important is sport branding and can the elements of fan loyalty and kit designs be manipulated for success?' is a working research question proposed for the 'Big Idea' project. The analysis of this question also leads to numerous possible sub-questions such as 'how effective is a strong brand in acquiring young talent', 'How can a brand appeal to young talent' 'How does a brands 'social image' effect a fans loyalty', 'How can material objects boost a fans 'social and self-image', 'How can kit design effect success', 'Can use of colour boost performance' also lead me to a proposed practical response which could comprise a brief of 'creating a new branding strategy for a sports team that utilises the theory's discussed'. The exploration of this practical brief would allow for design experimentation guided by the fundamentals of brand strategy discussed by Darlow and would also utilise the theory of colour signification discussed by Greenlees to produce a theoretically performance enhancing design. From all these questions conveyed to me from my research I propose 'How can the fundamentals of design and branding effect a sports teams performance' to be my final proposed question for the 'Big idea' project. This would be followed by a practical expression of the writing through an infographic analysis of the themes discussed.

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Figures

Figure 1: University of Oregon. (2001) *University logo* (digital image)

Figure 2. New York Times. (2011) *Fans making the Oregon 'O'* (digital image)

Figure 3. Sunderland Echo (2016) *Michael Ganley with some of his SAFC memorabilia*. (digital image)

Figure 4. I.A.Greenles et al (2013) *'Table 1'* (Digital image)

Figure 5. Bleeding Pencil (2010) *'How to win a World Cup. Pick a red goalkeeper'* (digital image)

