UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL BRAND EQUITY: A CASE STUDY OF
THE ONTARIO HOCKEY LEAGUE

A Dissertation Presented

by

CHRISTOPHER R. CHARD

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Leicester

Department of Sociology
University of Leicester

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You got to be careful if you don’t know where you're going, because you might not get there.

Yogi Berra
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A dissertation cannot be written without the dedication, assistance, guidance, feedback, support, and patience of many disparate individuals. Without God's grace and a lot of help, I could not have completed this process. Some of these individuals I would like to thank here as a small gesture for their efforts.

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A special “thanks” must also go to all the talented hockey players who participated in this research study. It is my sincere wish that you enjoy the great game of hockey for many years to come whether you succeed at making it a career or not. Always remember why you started playing so many years ago!
Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family. Friends, I feel lucky to have such a tremendous network of individuals to draw support from. To my family...Dad, your intellect has been a blessing, Mum, your passion and love an eternal gift (I miss you. I know you would be pleased); Phil, you’ve always had my back. To everyone else – Cyril, Gramps, Grandmar, Granch, Grandmar, Smitty, Loey – you have all helped shape me...thanks! To my “team”, although I have worked hard to not let this dissertation dominate our lives, the magnitude of the project necessitated some inconveniences. Jess, you are “still the one”, thanks for your unconditional love. Carter and Lucas, what can I say? You boys are my world. In you I see possibilities for the future and a lifetime of memories that we will create and share together. I love you infinity!
ABSTRACT

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA, THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA-HULL, AND THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA-CARDOU

FEBRUARY 2007

The purpose of this study is to understand the brand equity of the Ontario [ice] Hockey League (OHL) from the perspective of elite junior-aged players. The OHL depends on talented young players to provide the sporting performance - the ice hockey "product" - thus, it is important for those involved in the quest for new talent, to understand how those they seek perceive the OHL. This understanding of potential players' perceptions provides the main purpose of this research study. Thus, in completing this study and uncovering those perceptions, the research should enable those involved better to manage the league's strategic development through attracting and, perhaps, better satisfying the "raw material" that generates their product.

The traditional focus, in the area of sport management, for researchers studying consumers' perspectives on organizational brand equity has been on spectators and/or fans. This study expands the traditional view of the sport consumer to include those involved in the production of the product, the hockey players who may be viewed as a form of employee providing a service. However, prior to becoming an employee these players are consumers facing a consumption decision between competing brands.

This qualitative study is based on data obtained via semi-structured interviews with 54 elite young Canadian hockey players and documentary evidence. The central purpose of this thesis is to increase understanding of the brand equity of the OHL from the player perspective. The players were asked about antecedent influences that help shape their perceptions of the OHL and therefore influence brand equity of the league. The players were further asked how these perceptions might influence their consumption decision of playing in the OHL or pursuing the major competitive path through the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand the brand equity of the Ontario [ice] Hockey League (OHL) from the perspective of potential and newly recruited players as well as some of those who have chosen to pursue their hockey elsewhere. The significance of this exploration is apparent. The OHL depends on talented young players to provide the sporting performance, the ice hockey “product”, necessary to maintain spectator and media interest that is important for the league’s success and, ultimately, its survival. However, managers of OHL teams are not the only individuals competing for the services of these talented young hockey players. Thus, it is important for those involved in the quest for new talent to understand how those they seek perceive the OHL and its brand values. This understanding of potential players’ perceptions provides the main purpose of this research study. Thus, in completing this study and uncovering those perceptions, the research should enable those involved better to manage the league’s strategic development through attracting and perhaps better retaining the “raw material” that generates their product.

While research energies have been directed at examining organizational brand equity in mainstream management literature (Aaker, 1996; Bedbury, 2002; Biel, 1992; Blackston, 1992; Cheverton, 2002; D’Alessandro, 2001; Davis & Dunn, 2002; Davis, 2000; Farquhar, 1990; Keller, 1993; Moser, 2003; Temporal, 2002) and to a lesser degree in the context of sport management (Boone, Kochunny, & Wilkins, 1995; Fielding, Miller, & Brown, 1999; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 2001; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998) no empirical exploration has
been conducted addressing how brand equity might influence a specific type of consumer: the player-consumer. Furthermore, the sport of ice hockey has not been an object of extensive management research. By addressing the sport-consumer in the context of individual players, specifically, junior-aged ice hockey players in Ontario, a void in both sport and mainstream management literature is addressed.

This chapter sets the context for this study. Examination of the general significance of ice hockey in Canada and more specifically, the role of Major Junior hockey (the level of the game where the OHL operates) is initially conducted. To facilitate that, the structure of the game in Canada is introduced, prior to an assessment of the league's competitive environment with a particular focus on the American National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as its major rival. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the strategic implications of an improved understanding of the brand equity of the OHL.

Cultural Significance of Hockey in Canada

Miller, Lawrence, McKay, and Rowe (2001) assert that modern forms of sport are probably the most widespread aspect of popular culture in the world. Others also recognize the widespread power and influence of modern sporting forms, describing them in religious terms (Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Landsberg, 2000; Robinson, 1998). Smith and Westerbeek (2003) state, “with the secularization of the western world, sport is increasingly touted as the new religion” (p. 58). Canadian ice hockey [hereafter referred as hockey] is discussed in terms of a national religion (Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Landsberg, 2000; Robinson, 1998) and the significance of the game to Canadian cultural and national identity is widely documented (Boyd, 1998; Cuthbert & Russell, 1997;

Canada is the birthplace of the game of ice hockey (Ferguson, 1965; Nickerson, 1980; Vaughn, 1999); at least in the sense that the first organized game of hockey was played in Montreal in 1875 (Dryden & MacGregor, 1994). In terms of national policy, the Canadian Fitness and Amateur Sport Act (Bill C-131), passed in 1961, set hockey as one of the government’s top sporting priorities (Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks, 1987; Stevens, 2001). Governmental support for hockey was highlighted with the creation of Hockey Canada, as a result of a Task Force on Sports for Canadians (Government of Canada, 1969). Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s directive in creating this task force was in part the result of a perceived lack of success on the international hockey stage. It is argued that Trudeau used that lack of success and its influences upon the national psyche, identity, and culture in Canada as a platform in his successful re-election campaign in 1968 (Stevens, 2001). The National Sports Act of 1994 is further evidence of the government’s recognition of the significance of the game in Canada, as the Act formally recognizes hockey as Canada’s National Winter Sport (Government of Canada, 1994). Until this time, lacrosse had been the only officially recognized sport of Canada.

Culturally, hockey is referred to as the common coin, the national anthem, or a badge of identity to Canadians (Earle, 1995). Hockey is also seen as a “binding” agent for the nation (Dryden & MacGregor, 1994); “a fundamental part of the fabric of our country” (Ovenden, 1999, p. A1); and for some at least, as the foundation of Canadian identity (Kidd, 1996; Kidd & MacFarlane, 1972; Scherer, 2001; Scherer & Jackson, 2004) and character (Hale, 2000). As a form of “identifier” MacNeill (1996) argues,
"over the past century ice hockey has served as a crucial symbol within Canada’s struggle to achieve international recognition and in its efforts to create a unifying sense of identity within the country" (p. 103).

Major international sporting success is often the source of national pride and this has perhaps been most intensely felt after two particular victories by Canadian national hockey teams. The first occasion was the 1972 victory in the “Summit Series” (Bairner, 2001; Earle, 1995) against the Soviet Union. Earle (1995) notes that at that time, “disparate notions of class, ethnicity and gender were welded into a rare Canadian moment” (p. 108). The second occasion was approximately 30 years later, when in 2002, Canada won Olympic gold in Salt Lake City, Utah. National Team member, Al MacInnis explained, “everybody in Canada was watching with the same intensity that we played the game with. It’s amazing the way a sport can bring the country together” (Eliot, 2002, ¶ 16). Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien explained, “Canadians have once again been united in a way that only hockey can bring us together” (Golden nation, 2002, ¶ 11).

In economic terms, hockey contributes an estimated $800 million to the gross domestic product (GDP) in Canada and accounts for tens of thousands of jobs in coaching, administration, officiating, and volunteering (Dodds, 2001). More specifically, it was estimated that during the late 1990s the activities of the six National Hockey League (NHL) teams generated millions of dollars annually in taxes paid to, or collected on behalf of, different levels of government. “In the typical case – the Ottawa Senators, $17 million in federal taxes, $37 million at all levels” (Strachan, 2000, p.28). Media executives in Canada also recognize the economic significance of hockey.
Rogers Sportsnet President, Doug Beeforth, notes, “this is Canada, you can’t have a significant presence in this country without owning some hockey” (personal communication, November 4, 2003). Interest in televised hockey events seem to support Beeforth’s assertion since hockey delivered the largest audience in Canadian television history (Martyn, 2003) and is the subject of the longest-running program on Canadian television: Hockey Night in Canada. This program is significant in its own right as a Canadian cultural icon (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).

**Cultural Significance of Major Junior Hockey**

“The world of junior hockey is a place where teenage boys learn they are the gods of a national religion” (Robinson, 1998, p. 40). Former NHL player and current Canadian Hockey League (CHL) team owner, Bobby Smith, describes Major Junior hockey as a “Canadian institution” (Palov, 2003b, p. 32). Gruneau and Whitson (1993) depict Major Junior hockey in Canada as a “longstanding integral part of the Canadian hockey subculture” (p. 164) and an organization that provides the communities hosting CHL teams with a truly national sporting identity (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).

In terms of match attendances, more spectators watch CHL games than any other sport or league in Canada (“Canadian Hockey League”, 1998). During the 2000/2001 season the 49 CHL teams attracted over 7.6 million attendees to Major Junior games (http://www.chl.com). In total, the direct and indirect economic impact of the CHL has been estimated at some $135,363,657 annually, bringing economic benefits to communities across Canada (“Canadian Hockey League”, 1998).

---

1 Rogers Sportsnet is a 24-hour Canadian cable broadcaster of sports. It is owned by Rogers Sportsnet Inc., which is owned by Rogers media.
Organization of Major Junior Hockey in Canada

The Canadian Hockey League (CHL) is comprised of three member leagues that are separated geographically rather than hierarchically. The Western Hockey League (WHL) encompasses all franchises based west of Ontario and is comprised of 20 competing teams (2003-2004 season). The Ontario Hockey League (OHL) encompasses all teams in Ontario and also has 20 competing teams. The Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) completes the CHL triumvirate and includes the Atlantic provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In addition, each league has expanded to the United States, so that the CHL is no longer exclusively Canadian-based (see Table 1.1 for the list of leagues and member teams).

Until 1975, the three leagues operated autonomously. In that year however, an agreement was reached to link their operations together to form the Canadian Major Junior Hockey League (CMJHL); in 1987, the name was changed to the Canadian Hockey League (CHL). The culmination of each hockey season includes a competition between teams from each of the three leagues for Major Junior hockey’s championship: the Memorial Cup.

Competitive Landscape: The NCAA

The ability to attract the most talented players in order to continue producing a quality product is significant for any league. In this context, the NCAA provides the most significant competitive threat to the Major Junior leagues in Canada for the services of talented players, as many young Canadians have chosen the collegiate ranks in the United States (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). For talented young players in Canada, these two
Table 1.1: CHL Member Leagues and Teams

<table>
<thead>
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<th>EAST Division</th>
<th>CENTRAL Division</th>
<th>MIDWEST Division</th>
<th>WEST Division</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belleville</td>
<td>Barrie</td>
<td>Erie</td>
<td>Plymouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Brampton</td>
<td>Guelph</td>
<td>Saginaw</td>
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<td>Oshawa</td>
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<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>Sudbury</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Sault Ste. Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peterborough</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Owen Sound</td>
<td>Windsor</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>EAST Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moose Jaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Albert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saskatoon</td>
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<tr>
<th>QUEBEC MAJOR JUNIOR HOCKEY LEAGUE (QMJHL)</th>
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<td>ATLANTIC Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acadie-Bathurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Breton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halifax</td>
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<td>Moncton</td>
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Note. Italics denote US-based franchise
options (i.e., CHL and NCAA) provide the two most traveled routes through which young players seek to fulfill their hockey aspirations (Cheynoweth, 1993). (See Figure 1.1 for the developmental options for elite junior-aged hockey players in Ontario).

There was a time when Major Junior hockey was seen as the only real option a young player could pursue if he had aspirations of playing in the NHL (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Hood & Townsend, 1999). In 1967, some 97% of players in the National Hockey League were Canadian (MacGregor, 1993), almost all of whom would have come through the Canadian Major Junior developmental system (Hawthorne, 2000) when NHL clubs sponsored Major Junior teams in order to retain the services of the promising young players from Canada’s junior leagues (Tredree, 2002). This structure provided the Major Junior hockey leagues with a strategic competitive advantage over any competitors in attracting the most talented young players. Such arrangements no longer exist and so the CHL no longer has a virtual monopoly on the recruitment of young hockey talent (Bacon, 2001; Kelly & Askin, 2000; McPhee, 1999). In more recent times, the NCAA has proved to be a popular choice for many Canadians as they seek to fulfill their sporting aspirations. This has led to what might be termed as a talent exodus or “brawn drain” (Tiang, 2003). In 2003-2004, the year this research was conducted, 533 (34%) of the 1548 hockey players listed on rosters of Division I hockey teams in the NCAA were Canadian. Of those Canadians, 227 (42.6%) were from Ontario. Thies (1996) also notes the significant Canadian representation in the NCAA hockey leagues.

Strategic Implications of League Brand Equity for the OHL

Over a decade ago, Gruneau and Whitson (1993) already recognized the lure of American (NCAA) universities as a problem for the junior leagues in Canada. Currently,
Figure 1.1: Developmental Options for Elite Junior-Aged Hockey Players

TIER II JUNIOR
Players progress to:
- CHL at 16 or 17 years of age
- NCAA at 18 to 20 years of age
- CIS at 18 to 20 years of age

ELITE CANADIAN HOCKEY PLAYER
AGE 15 YEARS

KEY
Elite player’s path of development
Very best players only
Uncommon elite player path

PLAY RECREATIONAL LEAGUE
QUIT HOCKEY

CIS
OTHER MINOR PRO
EUROPE
ECHL
AHL
NHL
NCAA

HIGH SCHOOL
NCAA rules prohibit a player from joining a collegiate athletic team based on standards of "professionalization" (Pickle, 2003). The NCAA is formally an amateur league and the CHL, in this sense, is deemed to be "amateur in name only" (Cruise & Griffiths, 1991, p. 346). In other words, an individual cannot play Major Junior hockey in Canada and then pursue a university (and hockey) career in the NCAA. Such a prohibition does not exist "in reverse" as it were, and any player can return to play Major Junior hockey after playing in the NCAA, providing they remain eligible by virtue of their age.

The long-term effects of an exodus of Canadian talent to institutions south of the border are currently unknown. However, should this drain of Canadian talent continue, or even increase, then it is not unreasonable to speculate that there ultimately may be an effect upon the quality of play in the CHL, and thus the OHL in turn. A decline in the quality of play in the OHL may, in the longer term perhaps, affect attendance figures and general interest in the league. A consequence of such a decline could be reduced interest on the part of sponsors and the media, which in turn could act as a spur to increased future migration of the best Canadian players to the U.S. collegiate system. The OHL's brand equity (the perceptions attached to the league) is then clearly important, especially in regards to the perceptions held by young, talented hockey players as they make their decisions concerning how to pursue their hockey aspirations.

Summary

This study attempts to illuminate the perceptions of the OHL held by particular groups of players, potential players, and some of those already "lost" to the OHL. It may be that the perceptions of brand equity held by these specific groups are particularly important for the strategic development of the league; thus understanding those
perceptions becomes vital. Such an understanding involves asking two research questions; first, what perceptions do these particular groups hold; and second, what are the major influences on those perceptions? A corollary of these two questions is greater understanding of how brand perceptions and the influences upon these perceptions influence individual consumption decisions.

It is perhaps useful at this stage to make a point of clarification. When critiques of the NCAA system are levied the focus is often on the potential problems associated with athletic scholarships (Parcels, 1999; Kelly & Askin, 2000). Questions surrounding the amount of scholarship funding, duration of the scholarship, and the guarantee of financial support throughout a student's university tenure are all important issues that need investigation. An investigation of such issues would, however, be part of a study of the brand equity of the NCAA and is, therefore, beyond the scope of this study. The NCAA, however, is the OHL's major competitor for young Canadian talent and, inevitably, the research subjects themselves deal with aspects of the brand equity of the NCAA, usually in comparison, on a number of elements such as style of play, education, and development.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a paucity of academic literature that deals specifically with Canadian junior hockey. One explanation for this paucity is proposed by Robinson (1998) who states, “the fact that major-junior hockey is so isolated from the academic world may be one reason Canadian academics haven’t rigorously studied it” (p. 122). Literature which focuses more generally on the area of brand management however is much more plentiful (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Bedbury, 2002; Bell, 2001; Biel, 1992; Blackett, 2004; Blackston, 1992; Cheverton, 2002; Clark, 2004; Clifton, Simmons, & Ahmad, 2004; D'Alessandro, 2001; Davis, 2000a; Davis, 2000b; Davis & Dunn, 2002; de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992; Duffy & Hooper, 2003; Farquhar, 1990; Kapferer, 1992; Keller, 1993; Knapp, 2000; Lindemann, 2004; Moser, 2003; Temporal, 2002). While still not perhaps routine, studies relating to the areas of sport branding and sport strategy can be found in academic and sport industry journals such as the Journal of Sport Management (Gladden et al., 1998; Fielding et al., 1999; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Gladden et al., 2001), Sport Marketing Quarterly (Boone et al., 1995), SportBusiness International (Barrand, 2001), and non-sport business publications such as the Harvard Business Review (Jackson, 2001).

The relevant literature, dealing with brand management and Major Junior hockey in Canada is the subject of this chapter. The opening section reviews the concepts of ‘brands’ and ‘branding’ to be followed by an examination the concept of ‘brand equity’ and the influence that equity can have upon an organization’s strategic development. This analysis leads to a debate concerning the more appropriate status of junior-aged Canadian
hockey players in the present study. That debate examines whether talented young players should be considered as potential employees for the league’s teams or whether it is more productive to consider them to be a specific form of potential customer, in terms of the league’s brand values. Finally, the chapter considers pre-existing conceptual frameworks for the analysis of brand equity and from that analysis, an amended version is developed as an initial guide for this study.

Brands and Branding

Although the concept of ‘brand’ is a relatively recent management phenomenon “brands based on the reputations of craftsmen have existed over the centuries (Mariotti, 1999, p. 14). “The word brand comes from the Old Norse brandr, meaning to burn” (Blackett, 2004, p. 3). For example, this ‘burning’ was used by cattlemen to distinguish one farmer’s cattle from another (Blackett, 2004; Mariotti, 1999) and by distillers to identify their brand of whisky (Farquhar, 1990) and help guide consumers’ choice (Blackett, 2004). This practice of brand identification remains of value to consumers today (Biel, 1992; Cheverton, 2002; D’Alessandro, 2001; Farquhar, 1990; Grimaldi, 2003; Knapp, 2000). However, thinking of a brand as a simple logo to identify a product is an out-dated and limiting conceptualization.

Recognizing that the advent of branding and the use of brands are centuries old (Cheverton, 2002; Blackett, 2004; Farquhar, 1990), “the widescale use of brands is essentially a phenomenon of the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Blackett, 2004, p. 5). However, even in this era the use of the brand was largely the domain of manufacturing and consumer-products (Biel, 1992). More recently – the latter quarter of the 20th century - the “adoption of branding has been breathtaking” (Blackett, 2004, p. 4). Haigh and
Knowles (2004) propose three perspectives on “brand” that offer increasing scope of what a brand can encompass. The first perspective is that the brand is simply a name or logo; the second posits that the brand is an amalgamation of the legal trademarks and intellectual property owned by an organization; the third perspective is a more holistic view of the brand as an organization or company. It is this final, all-encompassing, view that has now gained wide acceptance in management circles (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Bedbury, 2002; Cheverton, 2002; Clark, 2004; Davis, 2000a; Davis, 2000b; Davis & Dunn, 2002; de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992; Duffy & Hooper, 2003; Knapp, 2000; Temporal, 2002). Grimaldi (2003) recognizes this “holistic” concept of the brand noting, “Nowadays, a corporation, law firm, country, university, museum, hospital, celebrity, and even you in your career can be considered a brand” (¶ 1). Taken within the organizational context, Davis (2000b) utilizes a contemporary definition of the brand as:

Every touch point your organization has with its ultimate consumer, regardless of industry, regardless of company. These touch points represent the perceptions we build up in our minds about that brand. Each additional touch point adds to that brand perception (p. 5)

In this respect touch points are “all the different ways that your brand interacts with, and makes an impression on, customers, employees, and other stakeholders” (Davis & Dunn, 2002, p. 58). These perceptions, created through the innumerable touch points a company may have with its consumers, create a number of associations in the consumers’ mind. Temporal (2002) includes advertising, employee morale, packaging, promotions, the Internet, corporate events, service standards and behavior, and word of mouth as examples of elements that create associations and thus influence a brand. Therefore, if a
"brand" is the cumulative perception of associations and experiences with touch points, branding and "brand management becomes the organizational framework that thoroughly manages those associations" (Grimaldi, 2003). Temporal (2002) addresses this point directly:

Brand management is a process that tries to take control over everything a brand does and says, and the way in which it is perceived. There is a need, therefore, to influence the perceptions of various target audiences to ensure that people see what you want them to see with respect to your brand (p. xiii).

Ensuring that "people see what you want them to see with respect to your brand" is a significant undertaking when considering the holistic nature of the brand. D’Alessandro (2001) notes that the brand, and the associations attached to it, is very comprehensive including, “the stuff you want to communicate to consumers and the stuff you communicate despite yourself” (xiv). This highlights a vital component of brands, branding, and brand management: every touch point a brand has with consumers will form some type of association. This is true whether these associations are positive, but also if the associations are negative. For example, Nike endured a low period with respect to its brand surrounding the employment practices and working standards in their Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Indian factories (Press, 1998; Saporito, 1998; Singam, 2000) even though the product was still the high quality it always had been. Managers at Nike recognized the ill-effect this negative equity was having on their brand and so developed tools to remedy the situation and “now posts results of external audits and interviews with factory workers at www.nikebiz.com” (Lindemann, 2004, p. 18). Thus, it is clear that “every touch point must be carefully managed” (Temporal, 2002, p. 210) in order to create an abundance of positive associations, while minimizing those that are
negative. The premise is simply that a greater number of positive associations will aid organizations in achieving desired marketplace outcomes. This ‘weighing’ of brand associations and perceptions, and the influence these items have on marketplace outcomes is often referred to as an organization’s brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Davis & Dunn, 2002; Knapp, 2000).

Brand Equity

There have been many proposed definitions of brand equity. Aaker (1991) defines it as “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (p. 15). Recognition that the brand is greater than a simple name, logo, or color scheme is important in understanding the influence that a brand has on existing and potential consumers. It is the emotional evocations and associations, as perceived by consumers, from a brand’s individual parts that contribute to the brand’s overall equity.

Understanding that the equity of a brand can be both positive and negative is worthy of reiteration; organizations are not insulated from negative associations that may be attached to their brand. In fact, bad news seems to be more readily communicated than good news in customer circles (Arndt, 1967; Kotler, 1991; Richins, 1987). Finally, understanding that both products and services are subject to brand review is important for managers. Boone and Kurtz (1995) note that brand equity refers to the added value a certain brand name contributes to a product in the marketplace. However, this definition fails to deal with two critical areas of brand knowledge: first, brands are more than products; and, second, equity is not always positive and consequently does not necessarily provide “added value.” Finally, if taken literally, then “equity” includes more
than just the brand name. Knapp (2000) expands on Aaker’s brand equity definition by identifying some of the various components that contribute to brand equity. Knapp (2000) states that brand equity is the “totality of a brand’s perception” (p. 3) and includes such elements as relative quality, financial performance, customer loyalty, satisfaction, and overall esteem toward the brand. Knapp’s reference to the “totality of perceptions” supports the position that equity can have positive and negative aspects (Aaker 1991). While other definitions are perhaps as useful, none seem superior to that developed in Aaker’s work and thus his definition of brand equity will be used in the present study.

However, the literature concerning brand equity is not homogenous in its application and might usefully be divided into two broad “camps” or “schools of thought.” Christodoulides and de Chematony (2004) recognize that brand equity can be analyzed on two levels, “depending on the beneficiary of value (firm or customers)” (p. 169). While these categories are blurred at the edges, of course, there are two general types of approaches that currently seem to dominate branding literature. The first school of thought takes an economic perspective and attempts to place a valuation on a brand (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Jacobson, 1994; Barwise, Higson, Likierman, & Marsh, 1991; Cheverton, 2003; Doyle, 2001; Knowles, 2005; Lipman, 1989; Ong, 2001; Seetharaman, Nadzir, & Gunalan, 2001; Simon & Sullivan, 1993; Temporal, 2002), a necessity if it is to appear on the balance sheet. The second approach comes more from strategic concerns and is seen to have a role in improving organizational performance (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996; Biel, 1992; de Chematony & McDonald, 1992; Gladden et al., 1998; Jackson, 2001; Keller, 1993). Each approach will be considered in more detail.
Economic Perspective of Brand Equity

Recognizing the brand on a company’s financial statement is a relatively recent development in financial reporting (Blackett, 1991; Clifton et al., 2004; Doyle, 2001; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Ong, 2001; Penrose & Moorhouse, 1989; Seetharman et al., 2001; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). Lindemann (2004) notes the need to identify the value of intangible assets: for accounting purposes. The authors note that definitive gaps between companies’ book values and their market values were being realized in mergers and acquisitions in the late 1980s. This recognition of intangible assets has been described as “Tobin’s Q” (Simon & Sullivan, 1993) and is the ratio of the market value of the firm to the replacement cost of its tangible assets (Tobin, 1978). Indeed, “today…in general, the majority of business value is derived from intangibles” (Lindemann, 2004, p. 12). The value of these intangibles, known as ‘goodwill’, for a company includes such items as the “trademarks and brand names” (Fried, Shapiro, & Deschriver, 2003, p. 69) the company owns. Acknowledging this goodwill is now required accounting practice.

For management purposes, however, placing a value on the brand does little to improve its quality (Haigh & Knowles, 2004). The utility of brand valuation is largely realized if/when a company is interested in selling one or more brands in the near future (The Brand Scorecard, 2004). Knowles (2005) address this point explicitly:

Most companies do not need an answer to the question ‘What is the value of my brand?’ except for the specific purpose of accounting for goodwill after an acquisition. Rather they need an answer to the question – ‘How – and by how much – does my brand contribute to the overall success of my business?’ It is this insight into the source of customer value…that will enable them to run more successful businesses (p. 17).
It is this second understanding of brand equity, as a contribution to a business and a source of "customer value" that is important for the present study, since this 'customer-based' approach to understanding brand equity offers insights into customer behaviors that may be convertible into actionable brand strategies (Keller, 1993).

Strategic Perspective of Brand Equity

Keller (1993) recognizes the need to study brand equity "from a strategy-based motivation to improve marketing productivity" (p. 1). His rationale is to utilize brand equity information in order to gain "a more thorough understanding of consumer behavior as a basis for making better strategic decisions" (p. 1). By managing brand equity from a strategic perspective, managers can better understand customers, competitors and the brand itself (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Through using this information, managers can identify and implement competitive advantages for their brand. Davis and Dunn (2002) identify a number of benefits enjoyed by organizations with strong brands - those with positive brand equity - including, but not limited to: premium pricing, price protection, greater new product success, potential co-branding, licensing candidacy, loyalty, and recommendation of the brand. Farquhar (1990) identifies brand resiliency as another competitive advantage for organizations with positive brand equity. Here, brand resiliency is the ability of brands to "survive difficult times" (p. 8).

Of course, there is no single, universally accepted framework for understanding brand equity (Knowles, 2005). The variability in measures corresponds to the variation in business processes, operations, geographic markets, product/service markets, economic cycles, and numerous other variables. One of the benefits of the strategic perspective on
measuring brand equity is in the ability of managers to select pertinent metrics that are deemed to be of value for their business and measure them accordingly. Although there is latitude for managers to highlight or weigh more heavily specific brand elements there is general acceptance that certain factors will be evident in the majority of brand equity analyses including: awareness, perceived quality, price, market share, visual imagery, intent to purchase and satisfaction (Aaker, 1996; Davis & Dunn, 2002; Knapp, 2000).

For the purpose of this study - understanding the brand equity of the OHL from the player perspective - it is clear that a strategy-based approach to brand equity is more appropriate and relevant.

Brand Equity and Strategic Development

Numerous definitions of strategy and the strategic management process exist. “Strategy is the pattern of decisions that intentionally or otherwise sets the long term direction of the company and determines its fate” (Koch, 1999, p. 2). Strategy encompasses consideration of the mission and vision, assessment of competitive position, assessment of resources and capabilities, strategic decision, strategy implementation, and strategy assessment (Coulter, 2002; Harrison, 2003; Porter, 1980; Porter, 1985; Woodcock & Beamish, 2003). Virtually all the literature deals with ways in which organizations can recognize and minimize risk and also capitalize on the opportunities that may exist or emerge from the industry in which that organization competes (Coulter, 2002; Crossan, Fry, Killing, & White, 2002). That means strategic decision-makers need to be flexible, open and alert to changing circumstances, as “strategic management is an ongoing process” (Coulter, 2002, p. 110). Planned or deliberate strategies are intended courses of action that become realized; emergent strategies are those that are realized but
not necessarily intended (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg, 1994). In other words, implementing strategy is not a linear process. Managers must use strategy as a “roadmap” to accomplish stated goals and objectives; however, realization of goals may evolve in a manner that is contextually different to the original plan.

A number of factors influence the success of an organization, but many acknowledge that the development of a viable strategy is one of the most important (Aaker, 2001; Griffin, 1984; Harrison, 2003; Miles & Snow, 1978; Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg, 1987). One aspect of that is to develop strategic initiatives to increase brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty so that the managers can “improve the frequency and degree to which positive marketplace consequences are realized” (Gladden & Milne, 1999, p. 28). For management within the OHL, a positive marketplace consequence would be that talented young Canadian players choose to play in the OHL to pursue their hockey aspirations. However, before the brand equity literature is used to develop a framework for the present study, it is necessary to consider whether those talented players are better seen as potential recruits to the league or potential customers of the league.

Classification of the Junior-Aged Player

Elite young hockey players may be seen as consumers who are making a consumption decision, or they may be viewed as potential staff and thus involved within the human resource management (HRM) function of the organization. Some argue that in the NCAA, “athletes may be considered as employees of a kind because athletes are the most important human resource involved in the production” (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997, p. 134); such an argument would equally apply to the OHL. The role of human
resources is described in numerous works as a key factor in organizational success (Chelladurai, 2001; Doherty, 1998; Herman & Gioia, 2000; Koehler, 1988; Parkhouse, 2001) and one of the primary functions of HRM is the process of recruiting.

Recruitment is defined as the “process of locating, identifying, and attracting applicants capable of and interested in filling job vacancies” (Slack, 1997, p. 237), and is noted as “the key to the success of any organization” (Sawyer & Smith, 1998, p. 15). “Attracting qualified applicants depends not only upon applicant sources, but also on other factors such as the organization’s reputation” (Parkhouse, 2001, p. 114). This acknowledgment of organizational reputation as an important factor has parallels with brand equity, of course, if potential players are seen as consumers.

Herman and Gioia’s (2000) study on organizational attractiveness, including corporate reputation, amongst recent college graduates notes the, “employer of choice means that workers – employees and contractors – choose to work for that employer…when presented with other choices of employment” (p. xi). It is this element of choice that most aptly defines these individuals as consumers and is also garnering attention in corporate marketing literature. “To compete for talent in the next century, corporations must descend from their own ivory tower and begin viewing graduates more as consumers in a market of job choices” (Hanigan, 1994, p. 24). Similarly, it is this element of choice (Hermann & Gioia, 2000) that means these sought-after, talented individuals may be more usefully seen as potential customers.

Lehmann (1999) recognizes choice as a key role for defining a consumer, “substantively, the emphasis has been on attitude toward and choices among a set of close substitutes” (p. 14). Thus, this issue has been addressed before. For example,
Chelladurai and Reimer (1997), when describing the role of students in collegiate athletics state, “the student-athlete is not only analogous with customer but also involved in the process” (p. 135); the term customer is used interchangeably with that of consumer (Lehmann, 1999; Malthouse & Calder, 2005).

Scholars also note the role of customers (employees) within organizations (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2002; Schmitt, 2003; Varey & Lewis, 2000) and so some sort of duality of classification exists; individuals can be both consumers involved in the purchase experience, and staff involved in production. There is one element of this debate however, that is particularly noteworthy: the consumption decision always precedes the staff function. Therefore, a player cannot be viewed as a human resource for an organization if he chooses not to work (play) there! It seems then that on balance, it may be more useful to consider those faced with the “OHL or NCAA” decision as customers making a consumption choice and so from this point they shall be referred to as consumers.

Research Framework

The conceptual framework utilized for this research study has its roots in Aaker’s work. His 1991 model is based on the concept of brand equity as a construct that exists in the minds of the consumer. Support for this focus on the consumer as the ultimate judge of a brand’s equity is found in numerous works (Blackston, 1992; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Keller, 1993; Knapp, 2000; Temporal, 2002). “It is a fundamental premise of branding that brands only exist in people’s minds; that companies do not own brands [except strictly in the financial sense] – consumers do; consumers not companies build brands” (Temporal, 2002 p. 131). Given this “ownership”, managers need to manage
brand perceptions in order to achieve strategic success through the creation, and maintenance, of positive brand equity.

Aaker's (1991) model provides the foundation for two of the first studies on brand equity in the sport sector. These two studies follow Boone, Kochunny and Wilkens' (1995) work by applying principles of brand equity research to the area of sport. Gladden et al. (1998) utilize Aaker's framework and apply it to Division I College athletics (see Figure 2.1). The purpose of the research is to understand and utilize the brand as an exploitable strategic asset, as is Gladden and Milne's (1999) examination of the importance of brand equity in professional sport, specifically, understanding the role of branding to help guide marketing strategy. A fundamental premise of both research studies is the recognition that an organization's brand can be a valuable business asset (Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999). Both studies also recognize that brand equity is affected by antecedent influences, consequences of brand equity, and marketplace perceptions of the brand. However, a direct application of the brand equity framework developed by Gladden et al. (1998) in the present study is problematic, as areas of inadequacy seem to exist.

Firstly, Gladden et al. (1998) take a traditional view when considering which groups are sport consumers; for them a consumer is a “fan” or a “spectator.” However here, the concept of sports consumer has been expanded from this more traditional view to include young players in the process of deciding where their hockey future lies. These individuals are neither primarily fans nor spectators in the context of making this decision.
Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Brand Equity in Professional Team Sport.

Secondly, a further problem emerges from the antecedents of brand equity utilized in the Gladden et al. (1998) study. Namely market related, organization related and team related antecedents. Since the OHL is in a competitive market for these talented individuals, the category of market-related antecedents remains in the model. However, while the latter two antecedents are useful guides for an analysis of university teams' and professional teams' brand equity from the perspective of fans and spectators, there are problems in their application in this context to an entire league and especially one that operates a draft\(^2\) system. This means that if a young player decides to pursue a hockey career in the OHL, they could be drafted to play for any one of 20 different teams. This does not mean that factors relating to teams and/or the organizing body of the OHL are ignored or seen as unimportant in the present study, it is simply that they need to be handled in a slightly different way. Team-related factors would include the influence of particular coaches, facilities, and former players. Organization-related elements include the style of play, media coverage, and operations of the Major Junior league; these two groups therefore are better joined in one new category of "league-related antecedents."

The final antecedent category is entitled "socializing agents."

Socializing agents are individuals who may have (or have had) some influence on a player’s perceptions of the OHL, and consequently, on the decision over their hockey future. These individuals could be friends, family, parents, teachers or people in the media (Mowen, 1993). The premise behind creating a category for analysis of socializing agents as a “stand alone group” originated from a pilot study conducted prior to the

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\(^2\) The OHL Priority Draft is a mechanism used to distribute talent – not yet playing in the league – in an attempt to promote competitive parity amongst playing units. The draft operates on a reverse order basis based upon a team’s final league standing the previous year – thus, the last place team would receive the number one pick, the second last receives the number two pick and so on.
research study and is supported in the research itself. Data generated tended to indicate that such people indeed exert (consciously or less consciously) a degree of influence on brand perceptions; this might not be surprising given that the research participants are still very young men who may well look to parents, advisors, and family members for guidance on such a significant life decision.

Another adjustment to Gladden et al.'s (1998) model, which became necessary as the result of earlier changes, relates to the structure of the model. A single line has been added to the framework connecting the market-related antecedents and the socializing agent antecedents. The media was actually a part of the market-related antecedents in the original model developed by Gladden et al. (1998). However, following Mowen’s (1993) perspective that the media are a form of socializing agent, the role of the media will be addressed in the corresponding antecedent category of socializing agents’ influence.

Before dealing in detail with the antecedents that contribute to brand equity and presenting the final version of the model it is perhaps useful here to provide a brief explanation of the components of brand equity, namely, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty, and other proprietary brand assets.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to “the strength of a brand’s presence in the consumer’s mind” (Aaker, 1996, p. 10). Keller (1993) describes brand awareness as “the likelihood that a brand name will come to mind and the ease with which it does so” (p. 3), either positively or negatively. Both definitions imply a top-of-mind component that Knapp (2000) refers to as the brand’s “mind’s eye” or “the position in a consumer’s mind the brand occupies” (Knapp, 2000, p. xxiii). Essentially, creating brand equity is not possible
without at least some degree of awareness. The need for awareness is documented in marketing texts (Kotler, 1997; Shank, 2002; Spoelstra, 1997) as an important step in meeting consumer needs.

Most literature on brand awareness refers to the concept as a means to differentiate or break through an increasingly cluttered marketplace (Aaker, 1996; Cheverton, 2002; Davis & Dunn, 2002). While it is important that there is awareness of the OHL, the competitive marketplace is relatively small for the young hockey consumer in Ontario. For elite young players, the OHL and the NCAA provide by far the most popular alternatives for their future development. Therefore, the term “clutter” does not seem to apply in this context. Former CHL President Doug Cheynoweth acknowledges this:

They [players] reach a point where they must make a decision regarding the direction their hockey career will take. For elite athletes in this age bracket, the decision generally boils down to two options – a U.S. college scholarship in the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or the Major Junior route via the Canadian Hockey League (Cheynoweth, 1993).

Although the number of available options is relatively small and only two are seriously considered by many, there is still a need for differentiation since the OHL is not the only option. Essentially, “brand awareness can affect decisions about the brands in the consideration set” (Keller, 1993, p. 3), whereby a greater awareness or understanding of a brand can influence consumption decisions where a choice is available.

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality relates to a consumer’s judgment of a product’s overall excellence relative to its intended purpose (Aaker, 1991). Clearly, perceived quality is not an absolute; rather, it is a relative construct in a consumer’s mind. Stated another way, the
consumer is continually establishing how well a brand is delivering on its promise. The expectations held by consumers that a bicycle will perform admirably will be significantly higher for those spending $3,000 versus those spending $500. Perceived quality relates to consumer expectations as well as product or service quality.

Gladden et al. (1998) define the perceived quality dimension of brand equity for professional sport teams as the "ability of a team to achieve preconceived expectations for wins and progression into post-season play" (p. 2). Building upon Aaker's (1991) view of perceived quality (excellence relative to intended purpose), this interpretation could clearly be used to assess the perceived quality of individual teams. For this study, however, the success of an individual playing unit is considerably less important.

From a potential player's point of view, the "intended purpose" or purposes of playing in the OHL may include all, some, or any of the following: exposure to professional scouts; development of individual skills; chance to play on television; the opportunity to progress to the NHL; opportunity to play at the highest level; personal growth/maturation. The players' perception of the quality of the OHL will be affected by league management's ability to meet, and even exceed, these expectations.

"Perceived quality is usually at the heart of what the customers are buying...it is a bottom-line measure of the impact of a brand identity" (Aaker, 1996, p. 19). Therefore, it is important that brand managers operate in a strategic environment to position the brand for long-term health and image benefits. The equity of a brand is influenced by image, a consumer/customer concept (Biel, 1992). Managing the brand image is thus fundamental for the creation of positive brand equity.
Gladden et al.'s (1998) interpretation of brand quality in sport has its primary focus on individual teams and their results. While this limits its utility for the present study, individual teams must still be considered as components or extensions of the league brand. Perceived quality is most important when considering brand extensions (Gladden et al., 1998). In this context, each playing unit is a factor in the positive and negative balance of OHL brand quality, and therefore, a contributing factor. How each team is operated, managed, administered, and controlled contributes directly to the perception of that team brand and also to the perception of the OHL brand.

Dacin and Smith (1994) argue that a failure to manage the quality in a brand's family of products will negatively impact the equity accorded to the brand name. Therefore, when one of the units is not strong, perceptually, the overall brand may suffer the repercussions. For instance, when an OHL coach was found guilty of making racial slurs against a team member, OHL executive officers acted by issuing the stiffest fine in league history (Naylor, 2003a) and banned that individual from associating with the league for five years. This action was issued to send a message: racial discrimination will not be tolerated in Major Junior hockey, not by one team nor the league as a whole. The discipline issued by OHL management sent the message that the team extension is not always representative of the OHL brand. This is important as a brand's image, and the quality associated with that image, is the cumulative product of brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

Brand Associations

Brand associations are any mental connections (often experiential) a consumer makes with a particular brand (Aaker, 1991). These associations (positive and negative)
influence the overall perception of the brand's image and hence, its equity. Sport managers must manage their brands in a manner that conveys the positive attributes and experiences that a consumer is hoping to achieve from consumption. Thus, a key to building strong brands is to “develop and implement a brand identity” (Aaker, 1996, p. 25).

Brand associations are driven by the brand identity – what the organization wants the brand to represent in the customer's mind (Aaker, 1996; Biel, 1992). Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1996) further identifies a brand’s identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members” (p. 68).

To clarify the role of brand identity in forming positive (or negative) associations, consideration of the brand-as-a-person is valuable (Aaker, 1996; Biel, 1992; Cheverton, 2002). Brands are bought for “who” they are as well as “what” they are (Lannon, 1991). Aaker (1996) explains that a person’s identity serves to provide him/her direction, purpose, and meaning. A brand identity similarly provides direction, purpose, and meaning for the brand. Therefore, brand managers can inform consumers and prospective consumers about the service the brand can provide by creating a brand image/identity. Like any other interpersonal relationship, the brand must represent values that are meaningful to the consumer (Fournier, 1998; Kapferer, 1992).
Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as the ability to attract and retain customers. The focus for most business managers therefore, is to attract consumers, satisfy them, and ultimately convert them onto advocates and continued/repeated users of their brand. The emphasis is on customer satisfaction as the main reinforcement tool for repeat purchasing (Gladden et al., 1998). In the case of the OHL, "continued" or "repeat" purchasing is somewhat of a misnomer. Consuming the Major Junior hockey product rules out the possibility of playing hockey in the NCAA, it is not a decision that can be revisited. However, while the other most popular option is not available once a player has played in the OHL, there are some other, much less common options that remain. Some of these options include: ceasing to play hockey altogether; playing tier II Junior hockey; pursuing a Canadian University career; or playing in the Canadian high school system. While some of these options are quite rare choices in practice, alternative choices do exist (see Figure 1.2).

Building brand loyalty involves continuing to serve the customer in a satisfactory way (Blackston, 1992; Gladden et al., 1998; Mariotti, 1999). In the context of the OHL, this means continuing to deliver the exposure, skill development, level of competition and so on that players sought when they made their decision to play in the OHL. The relative success or failure of the league to continue to provide those aspects will colour players' views of the league and play a part in their advocacy (or otherwise) of the OHL brand in their contacts with other potential player-consumers. La Barbera and Mazursky (1983) measure success in this context in terms of satisfaction:

Satisfaction acts as a mediator between preexposure and postexposure attitudes. In contrast to treating satisfaction as a static dependant variable, the cognitive
model recognizes that satisfaction is a part of the dynamic purchase process and influences repurchase intentions (p. 393).

Davis and Dunn (2002) acknowledge this element of satisfaction and its corresponding level of advocacy. For existing and former consumers of the OHL, brand advocacy may represent the closest comparison to that of repeat purchasing whereby a strong level of advocacy will equate to sponsorship of the Major Junior brand in future interactions with individuals. These authors note that customer satisfaction is an important area for any organization to focus upon (Davis & Dunn, 2002).

Other Proprietary Brand Assets

Ownership of other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships can contribute to brand equity (Aaker, 1991). He states that brand assets will be most valuable if they inhibit or prevent competitors from eroding a customer base and loyalty.

Conceptual Framework for Data Gathering

Having considered the components of brand equity, it is useful to present the final version of the model utilized for data gathering (see Figure 2.2) and provide a brief explanation of the antecedents that are worthy of further exploration when considering the brand equity of the OHL.

League Related Antecedents Influencing Brand Equity

Tradition/Reputation. An organization’s reputation (e.g., the OHL) can significantly influence its public. The Major Junior leagues in Canada have historically and continue to be the leagues from which the greatest number of players “graduate” to
Figure 2.2: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Brand Equity of the OHL from the Player Perspective.

LEAGUE RELATED ANTECEDENTS
- Tradition/Reputation
- Management
- Scholastic
- Product (style)
- Players (past/present)
- Coaches
- Facilities
- Development

MARKET RELATED ANTECEDENTS
- Location
- Competitive Landscape: NCAA
- Support (Fan)

SOCIALIZING AGENT ANTECEDENTS
- Family
- Peers/Friends
- Agents
- Coaches
- Media

BRAND EQUITY

PERCEIVED QUALITY

ASSOCIATIONS

OTHER ASSETS

CONSEQUENCES OF BRAND EQUITY
- Recruits into CHL
- Skill level increases
- Quality of play up
- Greater TV exposure
- Personal development
- Academic achievement
- Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) benefits
the NHL. It remains, therefore, the number one league for NHL teams to find the top
talent (Partners in Excellence, 2000). Over half of all players selected in the NHL Entry
Draft have graduated from the CHL since its inception in 1969 (Tredree, 2002).

Management. Management is fundamentally comprised of planning, organizing,
leading, and controlling (Tosi & Carol, 1982). Planning involves establishing goals
(Jordan & Kent, 2005) while organizing identifies the tasks necessary to achieve the
stated goals (Jordan & Kent, 2005). Although not a panacea leadership is an important
management function, “it is not an outmoded concept from a less scientific and more
romantic age” (Hosmer, 1982, p. 47) and can certainly be viewed as a dependent variable
for the OHL to be successful. Finally, controlling includes ongoing monitoring of the
people and activities designed to achieve goals (Jordan & Kent, 2005), as organizations
are simply the amalgamation of people. Therefore, the ability of management to attract
and utilize talented individuals to work in league positions will be important for
organizational success (Stoner, 1978), which will influence brand equity.

Scholastic. Drucker (1994) feels that the “knowledge worker” will dominate
society in the near future, where such a person will give the emerging society its
character, its leadership and its social profile” (p. 64). As such, formal education is
essential in development of knowledge workers and formal qualifications are seen as
signs that particular sets of knowledge have been acquired. The educational aspect of a
playing career in the OHL is, therefore, extremely important.

Product (style). The style of play in the OHL can be influential in influencing
player-consumers’ brand perceptions and hence consumption decisions. Current NHL all-
star Steve Sullivan recognizes the similarities in the styles of play in the OHL and NHL.
“I was recruited by other schools [NCAA universities] but felt I could still get my education paid for while preparing myself with a more professional style game” (Harris, 1994, p. 4). NHL veteran Chris Pronger’s statement that “the OHL is geared more to the NHL style of play” also makes the same association (Davies, 1993, p. 1).

Players (past/present). The history of great hockey players developing their skills in the CHL includes: Wayne Gretzky, Steve Yzerman, Mario Lemieux, Joe Thornton, Bobby Orr, and Patrick Roy, to name a few. A full list of exceptional NHL players who came through the CHL system is very long and extremely impressive. The function of these players as “role models” and agents of influence can be seen in the sport marketing literature, where “this type of reference group, which has an impact on our participation in sports...is called an aspirational group” (Shank, 2002, p. 170). Here, individuals may attempt to emulate their sporting heroes and be influenced when considering competing brands as they aspire to follow the same developmental path.

Coaches. The importance of the coach in influencing player-consumer decisions can be found in Cooper’s (1996) study on basketball recruits to the U.S. college system in 1992-1993. Recognizing that this study cannot be directly applied to the OHL structure, the findings are pertinent to the role of coaches in affecting player decisions when selecting a university to attend and play basketball. In short, Cooper (1996) finds that a coach who was seen to have a good relationship with their players and is committed to the program has considerable influence in recruiting potential players.

Facilities. The stadium tradition and design may play an important part in the development of brand equity (Gladden & Milne, 1999). While their (1999) research focused on the consumer-as-fan experience, the quality and characteristics of the arena in
which a player usually performs could similarly influence perception of the OHL brand. The amenities, comforts, and supplementary facilities (such as weight training facilities and physiotherapy clinics) could influence OHL brand equity.

**Development.** Perceptions concerning an individual player's personal development can influence the brand equity of the OHL. Whether this development is viewed as a positive, as for former OHL player Perry Pappas, who notes, “Major junior hockey really matures you a lot...not only do you get to play hockey at an extremely competitive level and receive your education, you begin to mature as a person” (Harris, 1994, p. 4), or as a potential negative as noted by Buczkowski (2003):

People do not realize that these players are kids, and they are usually playing away from home...and it is very hard for them to adjust not only to the pressures of playing hockey but also to the pressures of school, driving, and social situation. I saw it happen every year with at least half a dozen players. They would be going through a tough time for whatever reason and want to go home or just want to quit the game altogether.

**Market Related Antecedents Influencing Brand Equity**

**Location.** While the OHL head office is located in Toronto, Ontario, the member organizations of the league are located in communities across the province. The location of the individual teams can affect brand equity of the league as prospective player-consumers form opinions about the various locales that could, through the vagaries of the draft system, become “home” for them.

**Competitive Landscape: NCAA.** Competition is the most influential factor when creating brand equity (Gladden et al., 1998). The purpose of this study is to understand the brand equity of the OHL amongst specific groups of customers and potential customers. That understanding will often be implicitly compared with the major alternative: the NCAA.
Support (Fan). “At the end of the day, sport is about the fans. It wouldn’t be much fun playing in front of an empty building” (S. Pellegrini, personal communication, March 26, 2003). In some respects then, building brand equity can be a continuous process. For example, increasing attendances and a heightened atmosphere at OHL matches could increase the league’s attractiveness to talented young players. The presence of more talented players on the ice is likely to generate more exciting play, which in itself would help heighten the atmosphere in turn making the league a more attractive option still.

Socializing Agent Antecedents Influencing Brand Equity

**Family.** Sport participation is heavily influenced by the various reference groups to which an individual may belong (Shank, 2002). The brand equity of the OHL, from the player perspective, is present only in the minds of those individuals; however, many socializing agents may influence this perception. A primary reference group that has one of the greatest influences on sport participation is the family (Shank, 2002). Robertson-Wilson and Cote (2002) argue, “parent support and encouragement is a key factor to children’s sport involvement” (p. 6).

**Peers and Friends.** Primary reference groups, such as friends and peers, may exert a powerful influence among high school athletes (Shank, 2002). These potential consumers are, of course, in this age range and so it may be that friends and peer groups may have a significant influence on their brand perceptions and decision-making process.

**Agents.** The prominence of player agents in minor sport is now significant and players as young as 13 are being courted to sign with player agencies. The role of the agent must therefore be considered when assessing brand perceptions of potential OHL consumers.
Coaches. The coach of a junior-aged player can also have an influence on developmental decisions. These coaches may have helped to shape a young hockey player’s development and these young players may actively seek their opinion on important decisions affecting their future.

Media. The additional awareness and loyalty generated through local/regional media arrangements may lead to positive consequences (Gladden et al., 1998). Utilizing the media as a tool to generate awareness or link into prospective players’ aspirations may certainly be of value.

In the following chapter, the research methods for this study will be presented including consideration of research design and research strategies, and an examination of the processes of data gathering and analysis.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

"Social theory can be defined as a system of interconnected abstractions or ideas that condense and organize knowledge about the social world" (Neuman, 2003, p. 7). The purpose in this study is to "organize knowledge" through enhanced understanding of brand equity in relation to the OHL, as seen by particular consumer groups or potential consumers. This is a case study where "a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 149) and while those consumers' views of the OHL will be specific to them, there is no reason to believe that either these player-consumers are systematically atypical of a wider group from which they were drawn or that the OHL differs systematically from the other leagues that form the CHL.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the advantages and disadvantages of those research strategies that may have been used to gather appropriate forms of primary and secondary data to inform this study. On the basis of that discussion a research design is developed and this in turn is followed by an account of the chosen methods of data generation and analyses.

Methodology

"Research methodology is what makes social science scientific" (Neuman, 2003, p. 68). If, as Neuman (2003) states, "the goal of social research is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings" (p. 76), then the selection of methods most appropriate for so doing is of vital importance, since it provides the foundation for this discovery. Neuman (2003) explains
that, “social researchers choose from alternative approaches to science” (p. 68), including what might be called “positivist” social science and “interpretive” social science. The majority of the academic work in social science has been based on traditional positivist research and is closely aligned with the approach of the natural sciences (Neuman, 2003). Varieties of positivist research include logical empiricism, the accepted or conventional view, postpositivism, naturalism, and behaviorism (Neuman, 2003). The positivist seeks the “facts” or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals (Patton, 2002). The fundamental nature of this approach is that reality is real; it exists and is simply waiting to be discovered (Neuman, 2003). Although objective methods may be appropriate for studying physical events such as science experiments, an objective approach to studying human events is neither desirable nor, perhaps, even possible (Eisner, 1998; Moss, 1996; Wolcott, 1994). While not a universal truth, the majority of positivist studies are quantitative in nature while qualitative studies are usually more humanistic (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Qualitative studies take the researcher into complex and varied interactions with the participants. “This implies that the knowledge constructed during a qualitative study is interpretive: the researcher makes meaning of (interprets) what he learns as he goes along” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 35).

Interpretive social research can be closely related to hermeneutics (Neuman, 2003) in that it “literally means making the obscure plain” (Blaikie, 1993, p. 28). Researchers who employ such strategies “want to discover what actions mean to the people who engage in them … people have their own reasons for their actions, and researchers need to learn the reasons people use” (Neuman, 2003, p. 78). Consequently, these sorts of strategies “are more concerned with achieving an emphatic understanding
than with testing laws of human behavior" (Neuman, 2003, p. 81). Those who conduct interpretive research do not predefine dependent or independent variables, nor do they set out to test hypotheses, rather, the aim is to produce understanding of social context of phenomenon (Klein & Myers, 1999). As Rowlands (2005) notes, interpretive research focuses on aspects related to human action and attempts to understand phenomena by accessing the meanings that participants assign to them.

The central purpose of this study is to illuminate meanings particular to groups of consumers attached to the OHL brand. Through doing so, a better understanding of the decision-making processes of these junior-aged hockey players can be achieved. Thus, some kind of interpretive approach may be more suitable in generating the appropriate kinds of data required for such a study. As Dooley (1995) suggests, "no objective reality exists or if we cannot know it, then the reality becomes what the actor thinks, feels, and says it is" (p. 263). It may be therefore that an approach using a qualitative strategy may be better at dealing with the subtleties and nuances of meaning held by player-consumers than would an approach informed by traditional positivist methods.

The six main sources of evidence for case studies such as this include, "documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts" (Yin, 1994, p. 79). Documentary evidence and archival records are used in the current study. Many of the issues that may concern player-consumers will have been discussed in the mainstream and specialist press. In this context, however, direct observation, participant observation, and the examination of physical artifacts may be difficult or impossible and yield little in the way of appropriate data. As the central purpose of the study is to understand the meanings these particular player-consumers
attach to the brand, some form of interviewing would seem to be the most appropriate strategy for generating primary data. It is appropriate to next consider the issues involved in the use of interviews and documentary sources in more detail.

Qualitative Interviewing

It is likely that the interview is the most widely employed, and one of the most important methods in qualitative research (Bryman, 2001; Yin, 1994). "In depth interviews ... provide a method of collecting respondents' perceptions of their world" (Jackson, 1999, p. 130) and may provide researchers with a means to "understand that person's perspective" (Patton, 1999, p. 109). Indeed, it is in this kind of research context that the German word "verstehen", which means, "understanding or establishing meaning from the point of view of the participants in a social environment" (Baker, 1999, p. 241), is most often used. Since in depth interviewing "is an important source of qualitative data" (Patton, 1987, p. 108), this method will form the primary data generation technique for the inquiry at hand. However, while in-depth interviewing is both an important and popular method of data generation in qualitative research, there are issues that must be considered before such methods are used.

The Dynamics of Interviews. "Because the interview involves two people, the nature of the relationship developed between these two people before and during the interview will have a great effect on the success of the interview obtained" (Baker, 1999, p. 217). Researchers must recognize that interview dynamics are central in the research process. It is important that interviewers take time to build a degree of trust and rapport with a respondent, especially where age or other social differences between the parties exist. If the interviewees are part of a more specialized group, this may present the
researcher with additional problems, or prove a benefit should the researcher also belong to that group. In this instance, the professional playing background of the author proved to be a particular benefit in that it established credentials as an "insider." In such circumstances, interviewees will know that the "jargon" associated with - in this case - the game, will be readily understood. Respondents must also feel comfortable enough to answer questions, give opinions and be confident that those views are not judged, but are valued if quality data is to be generated. Neuman (2003) highlights the value of such a degree of rapport in the research process, "a researcher might share his or her background to build trust and encourage the informant to open up" (p. 391). Discussing the need to build this kind of (albeit temporary) relationship, such an interview can be "a process of mutual discovery" (Neuman, 2003, p. 391) and at its best becomes simply a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984, p. 102). Both parties should be aware of the purpose of this conversation, although it will normally be the researcher who guides it. In short, both participant and interviewer are aware that the discussion has a research intention (Jackson, 1999). The ability on the part of a researcher to put participants at ease during purposeful conversations will add to the richness of the data and is a skill towards which they strive.

**Audiotape Recording.** "In addition to increasing the accuracy of data collection, the use of tape recording permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee" (Patton, 1987, p. 137) thus promoting the conversational nature of the interview. While notes may still be taken in a recorded interview, this is normally very different to a situation where notes become the only record. Recording interviews has obvious benefits for the researcher, but it may pose problems for a participant. Research participants may
feel that assurances of confidentiality are compromised if their voice is recorded or may feel inhibited about what they can say. If so, then this will affect the quality of data generated in the interview. There is also, of course, the ever-present possibility of a technical malfunction. However, providing participants consent to have the interview recorded, such a system does record data more accurately.

**Gatekeepers.** Researchers may be able to gain access to potential respondents directly, but in other circumstances this can only be achieved through a third party, known as a “gatekeeper,” defined as “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site” (Neuman, 2003, p. 372). At times, such individuals are a valuable resource if they organize venues and the availability of participants, ensuring “a smooth entrance into a site” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 151). At other times, however, they can pose problems for the research and researchers. Not all gatekeepers are cooperative or supportive of the researcher’s goals. By “controlling access” the gatekeeper has the ability to block or deny researchers access to particular groups of potential participants. While ideally, research participants would be accessed directly, this is not always possible and access may be needed via some kind of gatekeeper. Even when gatekeepers are cooperative problems can emerge. Specifically, if a gatekeeper holds a position of authority over participants, these participants may feel “delivered up” to researchers and under some pressure to grant an interview. While such a situation has obvious ethical implications, it may also affect the quality of the data generated in those interviews. In some circumstances acquaintances can provide access to participants if they can act as a “sponsor”, for a researcher, to individuals known to them (Bryman, 2001).
Ethical Considerations. “Research participants should be told the nature of the study to be conducted and be given the choice of either participating or not participating...any participation in a study should be strictly voluntary” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 107). This is the case not only for ethical reasons but also since the use of coercion and duress would have an effect upon the data generated. Clearly, a researcher must locate potential interviewees to assist in the research study and obtain their informed permission to participate in the research. Once data has been generated there exists a “moral obligation to uphold the confidentiality of [those] data” (Neuman, 2003, p. 397). Participants must be encouraged to trust that the information they divulge in any research project will be kept confidential and such assurances must be upheld. These ethical standards, if compromised, could have far reaching effects on participants and ultimately upon future research. To these ends it is important, wherever possible, to conduct an interview in an environment where respondents can speak freely without being overheard and feel comfortable that their statements will not come back to harm them (Bryman, 2001). Assurances of confidentiality should be supplemented with explanations as to how the data will and will not be used – in aggregate form, for example. Despite such assurances, individuals remain free to refuse to participate or to withhold information in an interview.

Documentary Analysis

If researchers’ interests are historical accounts, then documentary analysis may be the only method a researcher could feasibly employ to understand a problem. However, for studies of a more contemporary nature, often the “most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 1994, p. 81). Because of
the importance documents play in shaping views on a specific situation, their overall value is highly regarded in data collection for case studies (Yin, 1994). The value of documents is both in the ability to support other methods and to highlight contradictory positions. That is not, of course, to contend that documentary sources can be taken at face value. Documentary sources too should be handled with care (Yin, 1994). Authors of documentary evidence may have a "position" to advance or defend. Scott (1990) offers four criteria for evaluating the quality of documents: authenticity; credibility; representativeness; and meaning. Assessing documents through a critical lens with these four criteria as a guide can enhance the value of these data.

Generally, documents are a "fairly heterogeneous set of sources of data, such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, newspapers, magazines, and photographs" (Bryman, 2001, p. 370). However, for the purposes of the present study, the specialist press including titles such as The Hockey News together with the more mainstream sports media and the Internet will provide supplementary data. It was envisioned that these data may support, augment, or give some indication of how widespread views expressed in the interviews may be.

Research Design

"Simply put, research design is planning" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 91). Yin (1994) states:

the design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions. Colloquially, a research design is an action plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions. Between here and there may be found a number of major steps, including collection and analysis of relevant data (p. 19).
Therefore, the research design is the plan for tackling the research problem and
"represents a structure that guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of
the subsequent data" (Bryman, 2001, p. 28). Case study research focuses on the
particularities of the case in question considering its unique situation and complexities.
Stake (1998) states that "knowledge is socially constructed...and thus case study
researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge (p. 95).

In the present study, the case object is the OHL, the research problem is brand
equity and as with others, the "specific method of the case study depends upon mother
wit, common sense, and imagination of the person doing the case study" (Simon, 1969, p.
276). From the preceding discussion, semi-structured in-depth interviews with potential
and newly recruited player-consumers of the OHL, as well as some who had chosen to
pursue their development in the NCAA were utilized. Moreover, these data were
augmented by secondary data from documentary sources.

Methods

The remainder of this chapter describes a pilot study that was conducted to assess
the suitability of the semi-structured research instrument. That account is followed by an
examination of the data collection process and an examination of the interview sample. A
description of the data analysis process follows. The chapter concludes with a section on
the researcher's reflection of the research experience encountered.

Testing the Research Instrument

The area of brand equity in sport, specifically from the perspective of players and
potential players, has not been the object of previous research. The conceptual model (see
Figure 2.2) adapted from Gladden et al. (1998) was used to guide the process of data

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generation. And, although *most* qualitative researchers – including interpretivists – attempt to avoid prior commitment to theoretical constructs before gathering data (Yin, 2003), the practice *can* be advantageous. In fact, the case can be made that prior conceptual structure composed of theory and method provides some type of *de facto* starting point for all observations in all qualitative studies (Schwandt, 1993). Creswell (2003) supports such a position as does Lather (1986) who notes, “data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits the use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured (p. 267). Whetten (1989) notes that different approaches to theoretical construction (deductive or inductive) may be taken or combined for the purposes of research. As an example with some similarities to the present study, in Rowland’s (2005) interpretive investigation, the decision was made to employ elements of both approaches because of the relatively unresearched nature of the topic of player-consumers’ perceptions of an organization while operating within the bounds of an established research program (brand equity). Therefore, a conceptual model built upon prior research on brand equity, both within sport (Gladden et al. 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999) and within the wider scope of management (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996; Davis & Dunn, 2002), was developed. The major benefits of this model were that it functioned as an initial *guide* into the field, ensured important issues were not overlooked, and provided a set of provisional constructs to be investigated (Rowlands, 2005). This meant, of course, that the model was not being “tested in the study as one would find in a quantitative project, but modified in the study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 135) and, therefore, was not a rigid ‘container where data was poured’.
The initial research instrument was developed from that conceptual model and enhanced from pilot interviews with acquaintances, seven of whom were former OHL players and one who was from the NCAA. The observations of these former players proved valuable in confirming and creating the antecedent factor categories (i.e., league-related, market-related and socializing agents) to guide data gathering. While such a convenience sample means the data generated may be compromised (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the intention was not to generate data for inclusion in the final analysis, but to test the conceptual model and inform the development of more specific interview questions which were designed to prompt particular discussions. Open-ended responses were sought from the pilot study participants; each participant was asked to list potential influences on a junior-aged hockey player that could influence perceptions of the league and hence decisions on future development. Of particular interest were the responses relative to socializing agents.

Participants were unanimous in their responses with respect to the influence of friends and family on junior-aged hockey players. Agents and current coaches were also mentioned regularly as sources of influence. This lends support to the adaptation of Gladden et al.’s (1998) model where socializing agents are now a “stand alone” category. Other responses too supported the antecedent categories of league-related, market-related, and socializing agent-related influences on OHL brand equity. While the pilot study proved valuable in relation to the adapted model and in generating prompting questions, as stated, these participants’ views will not be included in the final data analysis. These former players are far removed from the time when they were faced with assessing the OHL brand and the decision to play Major Junior hockey in Canada, or
pursue an NCAA scholarship. As memory is imperfect (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Neuman, 2003), recollection of specifics could be compromised. Additionally, the events and experiences that these respondents have had since they were in the position of having to make that decision may affect their recollections. This difficulty of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) may even mean that the past is rewritten to make it more consistent with current beliefs (Neuman, 2003).

Data Collection

"In depth interviews … provide a method of collecting respondents’ perceptions of their world” (Jackson, 1999, p. 130). Such a technique enabled the players to share their own experiences in their own words. It allowed interviewees to digress and to elaborate on points of interest. It also allowed respondents to develop their responses further and/or to qualify and clarify them where they felt appropriate. The interviews, however, were not devoid of structure. Each interview began with experience and background-based questions (Patton, 1982; 1987; 2002) in order to establish a level of comfort and build a rapport between the participant and the researcher. Permission was sought and an audio-tape recorder was used during each interview; this allowed the interviewer to be more attentive to the participants during each interview as this encourages a more conversational approach as opposed to a question and answer session (Baker, 1999). The guided-interview approach involves a list of issues to be investigated in the course of the interview (Patton, 2002), thereby ensuring that specific areas are covered with each participant. The guided nature of the interviews, where discussions were initiated using specific questions, also enabled respondents to be asked to talk about specific examples from their experience or to expand upon aspects they raised. The use of
these open-ended probes allowed participants to clarify meanings, in order to "deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired" (Patton, 1987, p. 125). The probes were conversational in nature and supported the flexible interview approach.

Interviews with 54, junior-aged, Canadian hockey players were conducted. At the time of the interviews, 15 respondents were rookies in the OHL, 11 were rookies in the NCAA, 15 had affiliations with an OHL team, and 13 were eligible for the 2004 OHL Priority Draft. Throughout this study, these subgroups will be referred to as: OHL Rookies, NCAA Rookies, Affiliates and Draft Eligible consumers respectively. A total of 49 interviews were conducted face-to-face, while five were completed by telephone – due to scheduling and accessibility issues - using a hands-free speaker system. This allowed for the interviews to be audio-recorded (with the expressed permission of respondents) and transcribed in a similar fashion to the face-to-face interviews.

The players interviewed were all products of the Canadian hockey system in Ontario and deemed to be "elite" by satisfying at least one of the following criteria. First, interviewees had been drafted by an OHL team; second, been approached to be a free agent signee to an OHL team; third, signed to play in the NCAA; fourth, were included on the 2004 OHL draft list; or, fifth, had been asked to attend an evaluation camp for elite 1988 birth year players.

3 A "rookie" is a first-year player in the league.

4 Players were deemed to be "affiliates" if they had been drafted by or offered a free-agent contract with and OHL team.
The Interview Sample

"Qualitative researchers tend to use nonprobability or nonrandom samples" (Neuman, 2003, p. 211) and that is the case with this study. The overall sample was selected in a two-stage process because it was to be constructed using purposive techniques where "a sample is arbitrarily selected because characteristics which they possess are deemed important for research" (Sproull, 1998, p. 117). The sample was to consist of a number of sub-samples, related to the selection criteria above.

The first stage involved establishing contact with the sub-sample of players who were classified as OHL Rookies and NCAA Rookies. It was important to interview participants from these groups as soon as possible after they had made the decision on their future development in order to minimize cognitive dissonance, and/or, experiences shaping or changing their consumption perceptions. Consequently, interviews with these groups were concluded by the mid-point of the 2003-2004 hockey season (corresponding to the leagues' Christmas break). Contact with these players was initially attempted through the coaches of Major Junior and NCAA teams who acted as gatekeepers. Also, in this first stage, students enrolled at a Canadian university were asked to forward names (act as sponsors) of individuals who were currently rookies in the OHL or the NCAA. Both of these strategies were intended to establish contact with the "Rookie" groups. The university students proved invaluable for establishing contact with the NCAA Rookies who were, overall, a far more difficult group to access than the OHL Rookies. Intuitively this makes sense as coaches provided the main point of contact with players; Major Junior coaches saw the value in understanding player perceptions of the OHL. On the other hand, NCAA coaches had little to gain from their players thinking, or perhaps
rethinking their decision to play university hockey in the United States because these individuals, in some cases, could return to play in the OHL.

OHL coaches were informed as to the purpose of the study and enlisted to establish interview times with their players. The first coach who agreed to help with the study also recommended colleagues who he felt might be prepared to grant access to their players. Here, in effect, a snowball sample (Patton, 2002) of gatekeepers was established. Five coaches (identified by the original coach) who were identified as potentially willing to assist in the study were contacted. Four of the five individuals were agreeable to grant access to their players, producing 15 research participants.

The sample of NCAA Rookies was also selected using snowball sampling methods. Two potential respondents were contacted through one NCAA coach who agreed to coordinate interviews with his players. Those two respondents were subsequently asked to recommend other NCAA players who might participate in the research and those recommendations produced two further participants. Another four interviewees were contacted from suggestions made by Canadian university students regarding friends and acquaintances playing in the NCAA. A further three respondents in this group were contacted via agencies that represent players’ interests.

The second stage of the data collection process involved contacting players who were OHL Affiliates, playing Tier II Junior hockey in Ontario. Initially, emails were sent to 47 coaches in the Tier II junior leagues across Ontario; three of these coaches responded and were contacted to clarify whether the players they suggested would fit the criteria for the study; this resulted in five participants. Telephone calls were made to nine coaches who had not responded to the original email approach and this produced a further
10 interviewees. In total, 15 interviews with OHL Affiliates were conducted. This stage also included a further 13 interviews which were conducted with Draft Eligible players (eligible for the 2004 OHL Priority Draft). Seven of those were contacted through the same coaches and were playing on a Tier II Junior team in Ontario. The other six players were contacted through coaches at an elite prospects camp that took place in Toronto. While the chances of these samples being representative of the groups from which they were drawn cannot be known there is no reason to believe that these players are systematically atypical of others in those groups. It may be therefore, that valuable inferences can be drawn from the participants' views.

Data Analysis

There is usually no single 'right' way to analyze the data in a qualitative study. The researcher begins with a large body of information and must, through inductive reasoning, sort and categorize it and gradually boil it down to a small set of abstract, underlying themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 160).

Documents. Documentary evidence “constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (Patton, 2002, p. 293). Yin (1989) supports this contention stating, “documents can provide other specific details to corroborate information from other sources; if the documentary evidence is contradictory rather than corroboratory, the case investigator has specific reason to inquire further into the topic” (p. 86). This study utilized documents from a variety of sources including newspapers, CHL newsletters, books, web features and trade publications (specifically, The Hockey News). Documents were collected from various sources and at various times throughout the study. Subscription to The Hockey News allowed for easy access to current issues in that trade journal. The Director of Information at the OHL was also
helpful in sending *Information Guides and Player Register* handbooks for the OHL, which represented information that covered the previous five years. Relevant mainstream newspaper coverage was also collected over the course of the study. Documents were also collected from the Hockey Hall of Fame's Resource Centre in Toronto, Ontario. This Resource Centre was beneficial for obtaining archived records on the Major Junior leagues in Canada such as the now discontinued CHL News and annual OHL yearbooks.

**Interviews.** “A case study researcher often begins to analyze the data during the data collection process; preliminary conclusions are likely to influence the kind of data that he or she seeks out and collects in later parts of the study” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 150). This intertwining of data collection and assessment is what Glasser and Strauss (1967) call the constant comparative method of data analysis. Lofland and Lofland (1995) support this interplay of data collection and data examination; they advise against leaving the analysis of qualitative data until all the interviews have been completed and transcribed. Miles and Huberman (1994) address this interaction of data collection and analysis describing it as a blurring of research stages. For this study, the interaction of theory and research and data collection and analysis was present from one interview to the next. For example, upon reviewing interview transcripts of the first stage of data collection, specifically the NCAA Rookie sub-sample, perceptions of the CIS were probed in greater detail.

Upon completion, each interview was transcribed, which aided ongoing analysis and allowed for the organization of raw data into conceptual categories and created themes or concepts that emerged as part of the research (Neuman, 2003). The result of such ongoing analysis and identification is that the "researcher becomes more aware of
emerging themes that he or she may want to ask about in a more direct way in later
interviews" (Bryman, 2001, p. 322). This relationship between the collection and analysis
of data is recognized and described as being iterative (Bryman, 2001).

The development of a coding structure helped identify themes and patterns
(Bryman, 2001) since coding "is two simultaneous activities: mechanical reduction and
analytic categorization of data into themes" (Neuman, 2003, p. 442). Here, there is an
element of 'quantification' as the frequency of occurrence of incidents, words, and
phrases, makes it more likely for a theme to be identified (Bryman, 2001). For example,
codes within the theme of education, or the CIS emerged as a result of their frequent
identification by participants. To aid with the data management and help facilitate this
coding process, transcripts were managed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program.
The main benefit of this software was in its ability to assist in storing and retrieving
coded transcripts and produce grouped reports of the specific codes. The functionality of
Atlas.ti in assisting the researcher in filtering data from open coding, where initial labels
are assigned, to axial coding, where thorough organization emerges and themes are
connected, through to selective coding where specific illustrations of themes are
identified (Neuman, 2003), was invaluable. However, the need for a researcher to "see"
or recognize themes cannot be replaced by software. As Boyatzis (1998) notes, "seeing"
themes and coding rests on the ability to recognize patterns, and to think conceptually,
while having tacit knowledge of the subject, and possessing relevant information on the
research study. Having the flexibility to create new themes and change initial codes is
seen as valuable in qualitative research (Schwandt, 1997). Utilization of the Atlas.ti
software made this flexibility a more manageable process as themes and sub-themes were
identified, created, and positioned through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding and utilized in the final stages of data analyses.

The major antecedent themes of league-related, market-related, and socializing agent influences on OHL brand equity were supported throughout the research and will therefore be utilized to communicate data in the following three chapters. However, a departure from the defined themes is noted in two specific instances when presenting the data. First, the presence of the NCAA in the data, as the major alternative to the OHL, is pervasive. The research participants themselves, of course, did not respect the "artificial" boundaries of a conceptual framework and constantly made explicit and implicit comparisons to the NCAA when discussing many aspects of the OHL. Consequently, in terms of structure, it made little sense to attempt to deal with the NCAA as a separate, league-related antecedent, such was its influence throughout. Reference will therefore be made to the NCAA in the league-related and socializing agent sections of the analysis as well. Second, Keller (1993) argues that factors that may not affect the performance of a "product" (service too) can affect the consumption decision, and also the brand perceptions. Analysis of the data generated showed that the university hockey leagues competing under the umbrella of the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) may be one of those type of factors. Although the CIS and OHL are two distinct and unrelated organizations, the CIS is linked to the OHL brand because the education packages offered in the OHL are taken up in Canadian universities and competitive hockey is organized in universities through the CIS. Therefore, the CIS will also be addressed in the section dealing with league-related antecedents.
Researcher Reflection

The greatest influence on the OHL case study and the processes involved with addressing the research purpose of understanding the brand's equity relate to my own experiences with the game of hockey in Canada. I played Tier II Junior hockey in Ontario and then progressed to the CIS, formerly known as the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU). Upon completion of my undergraduate degree, I embarked on a professional hockey career in Europe. Having played professionally for four years, I have been exposed to numerous players who had played in the NCAA or the OHL. Furthermore, with two very young boys, I have at least entertained the idea - if their skills allow - that one day they might be faced with the decision of pursuing an NCAA scholarship or developing in Canada in the OHL. As an insider, I have developed opinions and views on the competing developmental routes. Thus, it was important to try and maintain a balance between closeness and distance throughout the study (Richards, 1998).

Baker (1999) highlights the researcher’s role in qualitative studies as being “deliberative, thoughtful, and always mindful not to distort the environment or organization being studied” (p. 244). As an interviewer “rapport must be established in such a way that it does not undermine my neutrality concerning what the person tells me” (Patton, 2002, p. 365). While I was conscious to avoid distortion “some argue that true neutrality is illusory” (Neuman, 2003, p. 380). This may be true in terms of opinions and value systems that I might personally hold as an individual; however, as a researcher, the need for distance is paramount. Patton (2002) states that “neutrality means that the person being interviewed can tell me anything without engendering either my favor or disfavor
with regard to the content of her or his response … nothing the person tells me will make me think more or less of the person” (p. 365). Understanding the challenges of being absolutely impartial, I have attempted to be as nonpartisan as possible, both in conversations with the players, and in analyzing the data.

Where my former status as an insider proved invaluable was in developing a rapport with these young Canadian hockey players; almost unanimously, they dream of playing professionally one day. While the dream is typically focused on the NHL, most were enamored with the idea of being paid to play the game they love. My former status as a professional in Europe was offered during my introduction to the participants. The aim of this divulgence was to demonstrate that I understood the game, had been in their shoes, and had enjoyed relative success in the sport we were discussing. In most cases, I truly believe that this knowledge helped demystify myself as a researcher to the participants; I was also a hockey player. During the introductory preamble to the research purpose, I assured each participant that his responses would remain confidential. In order to protect identity further, fictitious names were given to each respondent for the purpose of data analysis. Each pseudonym represents a different participant throughout the analyses (see Table 3.1).

As mentioned previously, throughout the study and data collection phase, I was constantly balancing on the continuum of closeness and distance. This ideal of neutrality was challenging as I came to like many of the players I interviewed during our brief interaction. The optimism with which many viewed their future in hockey, even those highly unlikely to enjoy a professional career, was refreshing in some respects. However,
Table 3.1: Composition of Research Participants and Given Pseudonym.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-sample Classification</th>
<th>Number of Participants n=54</th>
<th>Pseudonym Given</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>n=15</td>
<td>Barry, Dean, Mike, Seymour, Mitch, Paul, Russ, Tim, Gus, Shane, Lou, Harry, Wally, Buck, Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>n=11</td>
<td>Cory, Kevin, James, Bill, Marvin, Matt, Bruce, Morris, Carter, Oscar, Sully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>n=15</td>
<td>Stuart, Jake, Jerry, Marc, Kelly, Malone, Blair, Hap, Buzz, Steve, Pat, Kermit, Darwin, Levin, Craig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Eligible Consumers</td>
<td>n=13</td>
<td>Kris, Karl, Perry, Jeremy, Sam, Drake, Lucas, Krandell, Max, Larry, Rich, Eric, Kramer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
my inner voice was also concerned with the focus many players had on “the dream” of playing in the NHL. I often felt that the players’ goals were too lofty; the NHL is the pinnacle of hockey globally; for this league to be the target for players to achieve was difficult to reconcile – most, if not all, will certainly fail to attain this objective.

Recognizing, however, “the interview is a short-term, secondary social interaction between two strangers with the explicit purpose of one person’s obtaining specific information from the other” (Neuman, 2003, p. 292), I tried not to allow my own opinions to influence, or curtail this optimism. The value of the study was to gain a greater understanding of the brand equity of the OHL from the player perspective, however, my experience of interviewing supports May’s (1993) belief that interviews are social interactions and not just a passive means of gathering data.

The qualitative case design approach was utilized because it offered a functional format to achieve the study objective. Using semi-structured interviews to guide the research process was beneficial in understanding the viewpoint of the players, who comprise a key consumer group for the OHL. Documentary evidence used to corroborate and/or contradict the data collected through the interviews method was valuable in terms of triangulating the data.

Of note, when reporting quotations in the following chapters, in some instances, minor editorial changes have been made for purposes of clarity; these omissions in no way affects the accuracy of participants’ meanings and perceptions.
CHAPTER IV
LEAGUE-RELATED INFLUENCES ON THE BRAND EQUITY OF THE OHL

This chapter examines those aspects of OHL brand equity that are primarily related to the league, in terms of the adapted framework. However, the participants themselves knew nothing of the research model used in this investigation and so their responses in relation to the antecedents often made implicit (or explicit) comparisons with the NCAA. As Davis and Dunn (2000) note, “although the information you collect on your own brand is important, you are basically operating in a vacuum without a competitive reference point” (p. 76). Given that fact, it would have been an artificial (and repetitive) exercise to attempt to confine a discussion of the NCAA to its “rightful” place as a market-related aspect of OHL brand equity. Since the basis of many of those comparisons made by participants contrasted the educational packages available in the NCAA and those available through the CIS, it is also beneficial to deal with the CIS here (though it is also a market-related antecedent in terms of the model). It became clear that many of these player-consumers viewed the CIS as an “extension” of the OHL brand.

The analysis of league-related antecedents itself has two elements. The first is to consider which of those antecedents exerts an identifiable influence on perceptions of the OHL and, by implication, which do not. The second element is to examine the nature of the influence exerted by those antecedents the participants perceive as important; does/did the influencing antecedent affect consumption (potential and actual) decisions? A considerable number of specific issues were explored in the interviews, but the data generated indicated that these issues could usefully be grouped into five broader categories or themes. These themes will be categorized as league awareness, the priority
draft, associations of OHL culture, skills development and finally, education. Each will now be examined in turn.

League Awareness

The category or theme of league awareness can be further subdivided into the topics of general awareness, historical awareness and organizational or team awareness. All contribute something to these consumers’ overall awareness of the OHL.

General Awareness

In terms of general awareness, Aaker (1996) notes that “awareness refers to the strength of a brand’s presence in the consumer’s mind” (p. 10) and as such, awareness is a strategic asset for management. General awareness of the OHL, amongst these consumer groups, certainly appeared to be an asset. Karl, a Draft Eligible consumer, stated: “...a lot of people know about the OHL ‘cause that’s mostly here right? Scholarships, they’re back in the States, but everyone knows about the OHL here, that’s the thing to do. That’s where to go.” Part of the interview with Draft Eligible consumer Larry supported this view:

Larry: There’s more exposure on the OHL. Here you might hear about Michigan or Michigan State, but you never hear about BU or Boston College.
CC: Does that influence your view of the league?
Larry: Yeah, it does at first. Like, before my Dad exposed me to NCAA, I wanted to go OHL. Ever since I was a little kid I wanted to go OHL.
CC: What changed this view?
Larry: Just knowing more. I just like the total package more down there.

Lucas, another Draft Eligible consumer recognized how the exposure of Major Junior hockey in Canada affected his preference to play in the OHL: “...round here you don’t hear much about universities. I can’t remember the last time I heard about the NCAA; OHL you always hear about it.” An Affiliated consumer, Levin, also felt the
OHL received a lot of exposure and felt that fact could influence player-consumers’ brand preference: “…that’s why, I think, a lot of Canadians want to play in the OHL, cause, like, you don’t even know about college cause that’s all you see [OHL] and you’re like, that’s what I want to do…without a doubt it can influence you”

High levels of exposure to (and the resultant awareness of) the OHL could make Major Junior hockey seem like a “natural progression” to the next stage for elite players. Peter, an OHL Rookie, spoke of the NCAA alternative but also recognized the pervasive presence of the OHL:

I guess that here [Ontario] you hear about the OHL a lot more and you don’t hear about the NCAA as much...I’m sure it’s just as good hockey, it’s just maybe, you don’t hear about it as much, you know what I mean? So, it’s difficult to develop as big of an interest when it’s not in your face all the time.

Virtually all of the participants felt that there was a high level of general awareness of the OHL, a view held in common with those participants who had chosen to pursue their hockey in the NCAA. One of those who had done so, NCAA Rookie Bruce, explained that,

growing up, everybody wanted to play in the OHL, or it’s what all the young guys wanted to attain in their hockey career. And everyone kind of strives to get a high draft position in the OHL. But we didn’t really know of very many avenues that could’ve been taken in the hockey world, so basically, it was pretty much the OHL or nothing growing up.

Bruce returned to the topic of awareness later in the interview, speaking specifically of elements of the Canadian media. “The media glorifies the OHL, especially in Canada. They make it seem like it is the only route worth taking if you are a hockey
player, especially when they are showing the games on TV, and showing highlights on SportsCentre."5

James, another NCAA Rookie, acknowledged the level of league awareness in Ontario, especially when growing up in a community with a local OHL team:

...my community took a lot of interest in the [team] ... I did go to a few of their games, once in awhile. I knew players from the team, and definitely we talked about them all the time, because of their success I guess.

It was clear then, that levels of general awareness of the OHL were high amongst these potential consumer groups in Ontario. Such a level of awareness may constitute a form of competitive advantage for the OHL, as awareness is the first step in most consumption decisions (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). Such awareness, however, does not by itself guarantee that all of these potential consumers would wish to continue their hockey within the OHL; indeed some had already chosen to do otherwise.

Capitalizing upon the competitive advantage of initial awareness and converting it into brand loyalty is an important task for OHL management since such an advantage may dissipate prior to any consumption decision. NCAA Rookie Marvin’s comment is a case in point: “...it’s somewhere I always wanted to play [OHL] until I got older and then I noticed the whole college hockey thing was there as well.” Here, an increasing awareness of the available alternatives laid the groundwork for an eventual decision for Marvin to choose the NCAA. Similarly, Draft Eligible consumer Larry expressed the same type of “waking up” to the alternatives in the USA, as he got older. When asked

5 Sports Centre is the nightly “highlight show” aired on Canada’s leading 24-hour national broadcaster of sports content, The Sports Network (TSN).
whether the exposure the OHL received was an influence on his brand perceptions he stated:

**Larry:** Oh definitely. 'Cause I didn’t even really consider NCAA until I went down and saw it, ‘cause I’ve never seen it on TV. I didn’t really see the caliber of hockey played until I went down there and saw. So, I think it would help the NCAA a lot more if they start showing some games.

**CC:** With the junior games, you can see it and get exposed to it?

**Larry:** Oh yeah. And you see the fans there, you realize it’s important hockey and you start to think that’s the only way. And like, not too many people get to see the NCAA before OHL, and then they just go to the OHL and then they see it [NCAA] after and then they may realize they might want to go there and it’s too late.

Larry highlighted the lack of exposure in Ontario for the NCAA and recognized this as a weakness for that brand in attracting player-consumers. Larry reasoned that increased exposure of college hockey from the USA would “...help the NCAA a lot.”

Leafs TV President, John Shannon, offers support for this reasoning when speaking of negotiations held with management from the OHL and NCAA for a television contract on Leafs TV. Shannon is critical of the approach taken by OHL management while he applauds the perspective adopted by the management of the NCAA, noting, “It was outrageous. U.S. college hockey saw it as a marketing tool. The Ontario Hockey League thought it could be a profit center. And we’re not there yet” (Houston, 2004, p. S2). As a general point, it would also be true, that televising hockey at a lower, rather than a higher cost, would benefit television companies.

**Historical Awareness**

A related aspect of awareness might be called “historical awareness” and it concerns knowledge of the history and traditions of the OHL. A sense of history can be beneficial and powerful for brand building (Davis & Dunn, 2002; Knapp, 2000; Mariotti,

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6 Leafs TV is a Canadian specialty channel available in Ontario.
Knapp (2000) maintains that such elements as inspiration and optimism, preservation of brand heritage, motivation of stakeholders, and the ability to put a face on the brand can be derived from a strong historical brand “story” (p. 121). Although the player-consumers were very familiar with the OHL, most seemed relatively uninformed in terms of its history and heritage. What knowledge these young men had focused on personalities (former players) and the Memorial Cup (national championship trophy). Affiliated consumer Buzz, for example, stated “I don’t know that much [about the history]. I know they have a great reputation for sending players to the next level and all that, and it’s a good league to play in, but I don’t know too much about the history, no.” NCAA Rookie, Bruce, explained: “I’m not really sure. I know the Memorial Cup. I know it’s like the winners of each league or something, and whoever’s hosting it.” Perry, a Draft Eligible consumer, also combined players and the Memorial Cup as the sum of his knowledge: “I know there’s just a lot of great players that have come out of there. I know the Memorial Cup is one of the hardest trophies to win in sports.” Similar sentiments came from Affiliated consumer Blair: “…big teams that go to the Memorial Cup every year” and, “just that it’s [OHL] been around for a while, and it’s produced a lot of NHL players.” Recognizing the OHL as a league that has produced a “lot of NHL players” certainly is a positive aspect of the brand equity of the OHL. Indeed, the aspect of the league’s history that was most widely known amongst the interviewees was that NHL “stars” had served an apprenticeship in the OHL. An awareness of the Memorial Cup was considerably less widespread and participants tended to mention it only in response to direct questions. However, two player-consumers who knew much more of the league’s
history than most, made direct comparisons with the NCAA. One, a Draft Eligible consumer, Larry, discussed both positive and negative points:

I went to the Kitchener Rangers and I found that a lot of the NHL, the alumni - they really enforce that, they really make sure you know who came out of there - but I found there was more tradition in NCAA, more of a background.

A similar observation was made by Bill, a NCAA Rookie who claimed, “the tradition there [NCAA], I mean - the tradition here [OHL] is just [pause], is rich and everything, but you never hear about it.” It appears that the history of the OHL, beyond former players, is not widely known amongst these player-consumers and, where such awareness did exist, it was not always exclusively positive in terms of OHL brand equity.

We shall now turn to the final topic in this category, that of organizational or team awareness.

Organizational or Team Awareness

An analysis of the data revealed that particular teams had a bearing upon how player-consumers tended to view the league in more general terms; it is after all, the teams that constitute the league. This aspect of awareness can be further subdivided into areas to do with a team’s playing facility, the atmosphere generated by the crowds at various stadia, and what might be called the “quality” of particular coaches.

Playing Facility. In terms of the facilities used by teams in the OHL, opinions varied widely. A small number of respondents felt the playing facilities of teams in the league were of little consequence in shaping perceptions of the OHL in general. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Drake offered a view that “a rink’s a rink, as long as the ice is good.” Draft Eligible consumer Kramer who stated, “that doesn’t matter, not at all”, presented a similar view. He continued: “As long as there’s ice and it’s good ice,
that’s all that matters.” Of interest both respondents’ attention was on the quality of the ice (the playing surface) rather than the facility itself.

Responses from a second (and much larger) group reflect the fact that they felt the quality of the facilities to be a consideration, even if it is not a defining factor. This supports the work of Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman who researched recruiting of NCAA Division I football players (2001). When considering the effect of a facility on a player’s perception of the league and, potentially, on their decision to go [or not to go] to the OHL, Draft Eligible consumer Rich explained:

I think in my mind, I’d probably like a team like Kitchener cause I’ve been in their arena a lot and they have an awesome - The Aud [Kitchener Auditorium] - I’d be like ‘Oh I want to play for Kitchener, they have an awesome arena,’ but if I ended up being at a place like Toronto where they have a crappy arena [pause] I don’t think I’d care.

The poor quality of Toronto’s facility was singled-out by a number of respondents for special mention. Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy explained: “I would never say I wouldn’t want to go [to Toronto] cause I’d do it for sure, but it would be tough to play in an arena like that, it’s awful. I wouldn’t want to play there.”

NCAA Rookie Oscar also recognized the influence a facility could have on player-consumers, but similarly emphasized that the facility would not determine his final decision. “It [a good facility] might attract some kids, but for me, it wasn’t a big decision in where to play.” Draft Eligible consumer Lucas addressed the potential influence of the quality of a facility, especially perhaps in relation to Affiliated consumers. He explained:

… say you go to camp and it’s a really bad one [facility] and I guess you think, ‘I gotta come to this rink, day-in-and-day-out for the next year, moving away from home’, you know what I mean? So I guess it would get depressing sort of. Windsor doesn’t have the best rink so I’m sure the players don’t get too much, you know, too enthralled about going there every day and having games there.
Affiliated consumer Marc offered his view of the OHL facilities in comparison to those found in the NCAA:

**Marc:** I think that if you were to look at the playing facilities for the ‘O’ [OHL], or the CHL compared to the NCAA, the NCAA is a lot better.

**CC:** Could that influence your decision?

**Marc:** Maybe. Yeah. Yeah, it could.

All participants did not share the view that NCAA facilities were “better” than those in the OHL. In fact, many shared an opinion similar to NCAA Rookie Bruce, who explained:

...they [the OHL] might be a little more professional in the way everything goes on, like the more expensive arenas, as opposed [pause], everyone has a good arena ... When I came to [OHL team] their facility is unbelievable, it’s professional. Like, I walk into their dressing room and they’ve got a trainer’s room, a coach’s room, an athletic room, and there’s a weight room ... and it seats 10,000 people or whatever. So, when I went down to [NCAA school] I really expected a lot more. Like, [NCAA school] a really old arena comparably; the locker room’s not as nice, the arena only sits like 2,000 [people]; it’s not its own arena, its part of a big complex ... so that was a really big factor, and that was almost a deterrent.

This player eventually chose to play in the NCAA; indeed he went to the school he described even though the facility was “almost a deterrent.” While he revealed that the superior quality of the facility he had seen in the OHL had been a significant factor in his perception of the OHL brand and his decision-making, it had obviously been overridden by more powerful considerations. Affiliated consumer Buzz expressed similar feelings about the influence of the quality of a facility and the attendant “trappings” enjoyed by players:

*When you go down [to training camp], and you’re sixteen years-old and you see the big rink and you got the trainer, and they do everything for you, and you’ve*
got your own equipment and your name on the stall, I mean, you’ve never had that before. It’s pretty neat. I think it definitely lures a lot of people into it.

Buzz highlighted some of the “professional” aspects of the OHL in terms of the size of the arena (most OHL venues can hold 3,000 to 5,000 spectators), the services of a trainer who works full-time at the arena/for the team who “does everything for you” and of players having their “name on the stall” (having an assigned space in the changing room). He believed these elements, as outward signs of “professionalism” could attract player-consumers to the OHL through enhanced perception of the brand.

For the vast majority of the player-consumers, the fact that some poor facilities – Toronto was mentioned with some regularity – were to be found in the OHL did not enhance their view of the brand, all made it clear that this fact would not determine their decision about where their future lay; the playing facility would be one factor amongst others to consider. Similarly, outstanding playing facilities would not be enough to “win the day” as it were when a player chose their developmental path.

While opinions were somewhat divided on both the significance of the quality of playing facilities and where the better facilities were to be found, there was far more agreement on the significance of the “atmosphere” generated during games.

Atmosphere. The level of support (spectator) for teams and the size of their crowds appeared to be of greater consequence to the league’s brand equity than the individual facilities; many respondents made specific reference to this issue of atmosphere within and surrounding the sports facility. Affiliated consumer Kelly stated:

... People see the atmosphere, like, obviously players - like recruits that go to London - they’re obviously going to be drawn to it right away with their new facility; and its probably really fun to play in front of eight or 9,000 fans each
game, so, yeah ... the games I've been to, it's the best atmosphere, next to a pro

game.

Lou, an OHL Rookie, spoke of the influence of the “playing atmosphere” on his
perceptions of the OHL and the effect this had on his decision to pursue his development
there, noting, “when I was coming [to watch] last year in playoffs and stuff, like after
[OHL team] would score a goal and the place just went crazy, you almost get a tingling
feeling, you know? That could be you one day scoring that goal.” Another Affiliated
consumer, Levin, spoke of the positive effect that enthusiastic support can have on brand
equity:

Kids get all excited, they really do. If you go to Ottawa or one of the big teams,
like now London, you'd be so fevered up [excited]. Look at the great building
they got, the great hockey town and everybody loves it! Like, Belleville’s another
one. My bantam7 team, we all went to watch a tournament there and we were all
flustered. The whole town, all they talk about is Belleville Bulls. For four days
it’s just Belleville Bulls, Belleville Bulls - the guys in the mall meeting people
and signing autographs; we're just like, this is unbelievable ... we gotta do this,
we were all excited – ‘I want to be that guy who's signing autographs in the mall’.

While teams with strong support and quality arenas can garner positive brand
equity, the reverse also holds true, as the following segment of an interview with Hap (an
Affiliated consumer) revealed:

Hap: … I think if I was drafted by Owen Sound or something way up there and
people don’t necessarily care about it [shrugs].
CC: So if you were drafted by Owen Sound, you might say ‘I’d rather play
NCAA?’
Hap: Well maybe. I really like hockey when there’s a great environment, when
people are loving it and people are there, and that, I think, makes the organization
that much better too.

7 “Bantam” is an age classification for minor hockey players in Canada: fourteen to fifteen year-olds.
NCAA Rookie Matt also discussed this kind of negative brand experience when he attended a game of the team that had drafted him:

**Matt:** It did influence me, negatively if anything. I mean, there was no one there that went to the games so, I mean, it wasn’t the most exciting place to play.

**CC:** At the same time were you looking in the US?

**Matt:** Yeah, I’d seen Michigan State, University of Michigan, I was at Mercyhurst, which wasn’t great for crowds, but I mean Michigan State and Michigan, it was pretty wild there.

As Matt explained later in the interview, because the atmosphere varied between stadia in the OHL, precisely where a player was to play (or had been drafted) would be an important factor:

I mean, you go to a game, like [OHL team] who get five hundred people there, or you can go somewhere like Kitchener who get eight or nine thousand right? So, I mean that definitely is kind of a drawback. I’ve always wanted to play in front of big crowds and going to watch them play [OHL team] with two hundred people in the stands was not that exciting.

While participants identified the playing atmosphere in the OHL in variable terms, depending upon which venue was being discussed, there was more consistency on the part of those who knew the NCAA better. The atmosphere at NCAA games was highlighted by a number of respondents. Affiliated consumer Craig explained:

… going down there and visiting [NCAA university], and even the crowd. That shouldn’t be the reason, but just seeing how it is, how their hockey is – awesome hockey. The first game I went to there was 14,000 people. The second game there was 15,000. When you get there, I was almost in awe.

When asked whether the atmosphere could affect perception of the OHL brand and influence decisions on where to pursue future hockey development, Affiliated consumer Blair discussed fans’ behavior at NCAA games in positive terms. Specifically, Blair recounted an experience from a recent visit to an NCAA hockey game:
Yeah, I look at the NCAA game and you get 5,000 people out at Cornell [NCAA university] and they’re just screaming. I went there last weekend and they played Colgate [NCAA university] and you get the kids throwing the toothpaste and the newspaper out\(^8\) [onto the ice] and, I think that’s the environment you want.

OHL Rookie Tim noted that the NCAA has “a lot of spirit” and that “rivalries are huge. They get a lot of fans out.” Another OHL Rookie, Harry, recognized the attraction of such atmospheres in the NCAA. Initially he claimed that the NCAA had little to offer but then explained: “I guess there is one thing – the atmosphere at school [university] games.” Draft Eligible consumer Karl, when asked about his thoughts of the NCAA, expressed similar sentiments:

**Karl:** … good atmosphere.

**CC:** Do you want a good atmosphere in the rink?

**Karl:** Oh yeah, I mean, that’s one of the things that’s great about NCAA. You got all the students at the games, it’s packed. Its just a different atmosphere than the OHL, just things they do after goals and after penalties, it’s just so loud.

**CC:** Does that influence you?

**Karl:** Oh yeah. I mean, you go watch a game you get all pumped-up\(^9\), just watching it.

Another Draft Eligible consumer, Krandell, recalled a conversation with his cousin to sum up his knowledge of the NCAA:

A lot of crowds, I know that part. My cousin goes to [NCAA university]. She’s on a rowing scholarship and she says the crowds are amazing; they really get you pumped. The hockey is not much different compared to the CHL, that’s all I basically know about the NCAA.

\(^8\) A student-body tradition at Cornell University is to throw newspaper onto the ice surface (at the opposing team) prior to play beginning (after pretending to read the paper when the opposing team entered the ice surface, to seem disinterested). The Colgate reference is with respect to Colgate University sharing the same name with the toothpaste produced by Proctor and Gamble!

\(^9\) “Pumped-up” refers to individuals becoming full of excitement and enthusiasm.
The appeal the NCAA held for Krandell was further enhanced when his cousin was unable to obtain tickets to a hockey game (the game had been sold out) that was to take place during a proposed visit. NCAA Rookie Marvin held a similar view of the NCAA:

There’s something about college hockey that I found that like you go out there and it’s kind of like the rinks are always packed and a lot of it has to do with the die-hard fans that are chanting everything at you or everything for you, and it’s a whole different atmosphere, and it was something that I always really liked.

NCAA Rookie Morris, when asked if atmosphere could influence player-consumers' brand perceptions acknowledged the appeal of the “crazy” fans at NCAA university matches in positive terms:

I think one of the big factors for me when I went - when I was in minor bantam I went down and watched a University of Michigan game and I mean the atmosphere, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a college hockey game, the atmosphere is just unbelievable. I mean it’s just not matched anywhere in Canadian sports. I think Americans are just friggin’ crazy ... I think that’s one of the biggest draws - we played our first two games, my first college game was at [NCAA university] this year and we played, I played, in front of 12,000 people and they pack it every game, and I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of [NCAA] arena, this place is just unbelievable.

These comparisons between size of crowd and atmosphere at arenas are also addressed elsewhere. Former NCAA hockey player, Matt Keator, expresses his memories of NCAA hockey including “school bands, school spirit and outrageous fans” (US College, 2004). Kariya (2004) writes of his time at the University of Maine playing hockey for the NCAA “Black Bears”: “Now I’m playing in 20,000-seat arenas in the NHL, and the atmosphere isn’t the same. Those 5,500 in Maine felt like more than 20,000” (p. 34). Writing of the atmosphere at games played at the University of

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10 "Minor bantam" is an age classification for minor hockey players in Canada: thirteen to fourteen year-olds.
Michigan, Colvin (2003b) acknowledges the effect of having 6,600 fans in close proximity to the ice, "a large and vocal student section, and a band that whips everything into a frenzy" (p. 35). It would appear that brand associations related to atmosphere in the college arenas provides the NCAA with a positive point of differentiation from the OHL brand when competing for the services of player-consumers. No participant commented negatively on the atmosphere to be found at NCAA games.

While it is evident that having an exceptional playing facility, strong fan support and a highly charged atmosphere at games will not reflect negatively on the brand, there were also other considerations related to teams. Two respondents made general points about the quality of the people involved with particular teams and how that affected players. OHL Rookie Russ explained, "it's not so much the facility itself, it's mostly the treatment [players receive]. You hear from word of mouth and advisors [player agents] and stuff." Draft Eligible consumer Larry made a similar point. He explained that, "it's nice to play in a nice arena and that, but it's more the people that surround the organization, that's more my concern." In terms of the quality of people involved with the team, it may be that the coach is a pivotal figure and one that, if held in high regard, would be a positive influence on player-consumers' brand perceptions.

Quality of Particular Coaches. Analysis of the interview data indicated that coaches were important in relation to both their competence and their personalities. As far as the former was concerned, OHL Rookie, Barry, spoke positively of OHL coaches specifically, "...of course, you want to learn from the best right? And, some of the best are right here in this league." The NCAA too has its share of accomplished coaches; it has been argued that college coaches are "just as knowledgeable as their major junior
counterparts" (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 166). Overall, there was a general feeling that anyone who had risen to become the coach of a major junior team or a coach in the NCAA would be competent. For example, Affiliated consumer Malone explained that, “once you get up to that level, all the coaches are great.”

There was more variance however with respect to the personalities and reputations of particular coaches, and this had an effect upon players’ perceptions. In some instances, the fact that a particular coach was/is viewed very favourably can be influential in a player’s brand perception. OHL Rookie, Lou, was adamant that coaching was an important influence on players’ perceptions of the OHL and ultimately on decision-making:

...that was definitely one of the big reasons why I came [to the OHL], and came here [to OHL team specifically]. Being drafted, you know, [coach] and [assistant coach] here are, I’d say, the best coaches in the CHL right now, so that definitely played a huge part in me coming to this league.

Hap, an Affiliated consumer, recounted a story of a friend who had been influenced to pursue the OHL developmental route because of a particular coach in the league.

I know this kid I played with who has been drafted [subsequently into the NHL] who, as a 15 year-old got offered\(^\text{11}\) to Michigan University, but then was drafted to [OHL team] and he really liked that coach and ended up going to [OHL team] because of that coach.

Hap clearly felt that his friend had been influenced by the presence of a particular coach.

NCAA Rookie Sully also spoke of the attraction of coaches in the OHL noting that,

\(^{11}\) It is important to recognize that Hap’s interpretation of his friend being “offered” to Michigan State as a 15 year-old is incorrect – players cannot be offered to a university; players can be “recruited” but, ultimately, they choose what university they would like to attend.
lots of the coaches are high profile. They are on TV all the time, coaching World Junior teams, kind of going from OHL to NHL, or vice versa. They're pretty big names so they have a lot of pull just from their names.

In fact, the names of two or three prominent coaches who had worked in the OHL for a number of years and/or had coached Canadian National Junior teams came up a number of times in the interviews. Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy was a little awestruck at the possibility of playing for one of these prominent coaches: “Yeah, I’d love to play for someone like that. That would be awesome! That would be amazing, just franchises like Peterborough and Kitchener and stuff like that. You know how many guys they put up? Man it’s crazy.”

Another Draft Eligible consumer, Sam, acknowledged the importance of particular coaches and their record of developing players, “like Brian Kilray and, guys like that, and guys who have been leaders and tough coaches and put guys up in the NHL.” Again, a coach’s ability to develop players to the point where they progress to the NHL was seen as crucial; to be coached by someone with that ability was important. OHL Rookie Gus spoke of his situation noting, “my coach, I heard nothing but good things about him developing players to move on to better hockey, so I mean, that was a real big deal for me, to know that I have one of the best coaches.”

However, in terms of personalities, some coaches were not seen in such a positive light and NCAA Rookie Marvin’s was an interesting case in point. He was not impressed with the coach of the team to which he had been drafted and this played a significant part in his decision to pursue a scholarship in the NCAA. Ironically, his rights were subsequently traded to another OHL team and after meeting the coach of his “new” team,

12 This reference to “putting guys up” refers to the number of former players who have progressed to play in the NHL.
he felt his decision might have been different. “When I was traded to [team] I met with [new coach], the coach of [team], who was a very nice man, and had I met the guy when I was 16 years-old I probably [pause], that may have made that little bit of difference.”

Another NCAA Rookie, Matt, had such a poor experience with the coach of the team that drafted him while attending his first OHL training camp that he felt pushed towards the NCAA. He recounted:

I remember when I was at camp13, [coach], he was the head coach of [team], the guy was just, so ignorant. I don’t know, when I look at a good coach I look at a coach that kind of, interacts with his players and, you know, talks to you, like, ‘Hey, how ya doing? I’m [name]’ you know? This guy’s just got the whistle on the neck – ‘two laps’14 [motions with his hand] - and he’s just trying to get guys to fight; guys who are trying out for the team. ‘You don’t be afraid to go out there and mix it up a little bit’, you know? Trying to get guys to go15. This guy’s an idiot, that’s what I was thinking. I’m thinking - cause I had heard from other players, the OHL is just all this fighting, there’s no skill, and I hear the head coach saying, ‘go out there and mix things up’ you know? To someone who was just drafted - I was like ‘is he gonna be asking me to do that?’ Am I gonna be on the fourth line16, like, tap on the shoulder every shift, ‘hey go mix something up?’ Are you kidding me?

Ultimately, a player would like to play for a coach with whom they can “get along”, but whether or not that is the case can only be truly established through a period of working together. However, in practice for most players, they have very little choice in the matter of which coach will be involved in their development and indeed where they will play their Major Junior hockey. That is because the Major Junior leagues operate a

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13 Training camps are held prior to the start of each regular season. Players may attend a training camp for up to 48-hours - and not play a game (including exhibition games) - and maintain their NCAA eligibility.
14 “Two laps” is a reference to the coach having players simply skate around the ice surface two times; arguably, an irrelevant task.
15 When players wish to engage in a fight they are explained to “go”. Sometimes combatants will ask another player if they “want to go?”; essentially asking for a fight.
16 Teams can dress 20 players which equates roughly to four lines of forwards – offensive players. Typically, the less skilled or “role players” will play on the fourth line.
Priority Draft system, where teams select players rather than the opposite. NCAA Rookie

Oscar addressed this point:

...to tell you the truth, I was hoping to play for [team] who had the next pick. But my parents and I were very honest with [another team] and [a third team] saying we didn’t feel the developmental aspect of those programs [pause]. With [coach] in [team], you know, I thought maybe that was a little better way to go, and since things didn’t work out, I thought, ‘let’s look at other options’.

Since the Priority Draft removes (for most) the ability of players to choose their coach or indeed their team, the positive or negative influence of particular coaches, playing facilities and so on, is only fully exerted once the draft has been made. It is only then that players can weigh their options with the full knowledge of where and for whom they will be playing (or at least starting) their OHL hockey. Some of the comments above indicate that these specifics have been powerful influences on players’ perceptions of the OHL and their decision-making.

Priority Draft

The annual Priority Draft gives OHL team managers the ability to acquire the “rights” to a chosen player. If a player then wishes to play in the OHL, he must do so for the team that holds his rights. This is a system that is common at the professional level in North American sport (Fort, 2003; Leeds & von Allmen, 2002; Li, Hofacre, & Mahoney, 2001). The primary purpose of a draft is to distribute new talent evenly throughout the league. In theory, this promotes competitive parity and, if successful, provides obvious benefits for a league comprised of a number of franchises. The age at which players are drafted to the OHL, pre-draft communications between players and representatives of teams to which they may be drafted, and team ownership of the players’ rights emerged
as factors that may influence players’ perceptions of the OHL brand and as a result affect decisions about their future.

Age Drafted

Given that individuals are typically (exceptions can be granted for ‘exceptional’ players to be drafted one year earlier) eligible to be selected in the Priority Draft in the year they turn 16 years-old, there appears to be two facets, in relation to the age at which players are drafted to the OHL, that influence the league’s brand equity. One facet was viewed positively by most of the respondents, while the other caused a level of discomfort for some at least. Many participants were anxious to become involved in the level of competitive hockey offered by the OHL, but some wondered if they were really prepared to leave home at such a young age.

Level of Competitive Hockey. The CHL is often viewed as the best league in the world for teenage hockey players and the fastest route to a professional career in hockey (Buczkowski, 2000; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; McPhee, 1999). The level of competition and speed at which players could develop their skills in the OHL were both issues that emerged as ones that could influence perceptions of the league. The ability to play at the highest level of hockey, right away, was an attraction for many young Canadian hockey players. Affiliated consumer, Jerry, addressed this attraction:

Right now I’m more towards the OHL cause I know it’s the highest level I can play at, at this age, or next year. The NCAA I’d have to wait like a few more years … I want to play at the highest level possible, so, that’s probably it cause if I could make [team] next year, that’s the highest level possible that I could play, so that’s the major factor.

This kind of rationale was offered by a number of the participants. For example, Shane, one of the OHL Rookies, felt he had outgrown the league in which he played in the year
previous and needed to move to a higher level to continue his development. He stated, “I
didn’t want to stay in Tier II another one, or two years… it was getting frustrating
playing against the smaller guys.” Lou, another OHL Rookie, spoke of the developmental
benefit of playing in the OHL, noting “…at a younger age you get to play at a higher
level…You know that with the NCAA, if I had of gone that route, I wouldn’t be going
for another year.” OHL Rookie, Buck, similarly spoke of the need to move to a higher
level of hockey in order to continue his progress:

Playing back home in Junior B or A would not have retarded my prospects, but
not helped me blossom as much as I could…the process of waiting a couple of
more years to go NCAA is probably not good for a kid who’s already playing in a
junior league back home. If he stays there for the next couple of years he won’t be
progressing as he wants to. That’s one of the reasons I came here.

The prospect of waiting for an opportunity in the NCAA and the effect it may
have on their development as players was addressed by a number of respondents. Morris,
an NCAA Rookie, spoke of this period in negative terms: “A downfall [of going the
NCAA route] is having to wait two more years. I think it’s really hampered my
development.” Bill, another NCAA Rookie, also subscribed to this view: “…if you’re
one of the top players, why wait till you’re 19 or 20 to go to the NCAA when you can go
and play 80 games and practice everyday; like the CHL is basically the pros, right?” A
number of respondents, especially from the OHL Rookie group, clearly felt they were or
had been ready to graduate to the Major Junior ranks as quickly as possible. On the other
hand, this hurried development might not be right for all. Buzz, an Affiliated Consumer,
sounded a note of caution on this issue:

I think it’s tough. I think kids could use maybe one more year. There’s a few guys
that could go and play that year, but for the guys that can’t, going and not playing
and getting much ice time, I think it hurts their development as opposed to going
back, playing another year in Midget\textsuperscript{17}, like I did, and be the number one guy and
get to touch the puck. Get lots of ice time.

Cory, a NCAA Rookie, spoke in similar terms and felt the decision to wait and go to the
NCAA rather than pursuing the OHL path had been right for him:

The one thing maybe is just giving myself time to develop as a player. I didn’t
really want to throw myself into the meat market when I could be a top guy
somewhere else, you know what I mean? And, just kinda develop at my own
pace.

Cory’s mention of the “meat market” was in reference to the Priority Draft where
players’ rights are acquired (and perhaps traded) as commodities. However, specifically
from a “playing” perspective, the OHL was noted as the best league for teenagers to
practice and develop hockey skills. Developing the “life” skills necessary to move away
from home at 16 years old was another issue.

Preparedness to leave home. The second theme related to age that emerged from
the interviews concerned the prospect of leaving home after being selected in the Priority
Draft. Although generations of young hockey players have moved away from home to
play Major Junior hockey, such a move may be problematic as “the league [OHL] can be
a tough transition for a young athlete. The player usually has to move to a new city and
new home” (McPhee, 1999, p. 6).

At the time of interviewing, the OHL Rookies had most recently taken that step to
pursue their hockey development in the OHL. As a group, they seemed the most
comfortable with leaving home at a young age, perhaps because they had made the
transition successfully. However, when recalling their decision process, many recognized

\textsuperscript{17} “Midget” is an age classification for minor hockey players: fifteen to seventeen year-olds.
that moving away was a hurdle to be overcome in order to play Major Junior hockey.

One OHL Rookie admitted:

**Harry:** It's a challenge. When I thought about moving away from home when I was 15 I thought 'Whoa, I don't know if I can do this' ... For sure I wasn't hoping to go to Sudbury or the Soo [Sault Ste. Marie], or at that time I think it was, Saginaw, where were they?

**CC:** North Bay.

**Harry:** North Bay! I dreaded going that far away but I happened to go to [OHL team] and they were a great organization.

It is interesting to note that Harry seemed more anxious about moving to certain locations, such as Sudbury, North Bay and Sault Ste. Marie, than with leaving home *per se*. Clearly the way in which the Priority Draft operates is an issue here and had one of the teams in a “dreaded” location acquired Harry’s playing rights, his decision to play in the OHL may have been different.

Lou, another OHL Rookie, recounted how his mother was hesitant about him leaving home: “My Mom was, you know, ‘I don’t want you leaving, you’re just a kid’.” Family concern was not uncommon; however, in one instance, family support made the transition easier. Mitch explained, “my Dad moved to [city] so I’m actually living at home now with him. It makes things easier. I like it a lot.” Barry, an OHL Rookie who was drafted in the first round, expressed the feelings that many players from this subsample had. “It was a tough decision, you know? It was a tough decision to make at a young age, but it’s something you got to do.”

A few of the OHL Rookies were relatively unfazed by moving from home to further their hockey ambitions. Gus explained: “It would be nice to be close to home, but it’s not a big deal.” Mike was even more direct: “I was ready to move. I was ready to get going.” OHL Rookie, Buck, expressed a similar sentiment as he was: “…excited to move
away from home” while Russ, simply accepted moving as something an aspiring hockey player must do when he noted: “…this is my third year away. I moved away in Bantam and then last year I was in [city], so I kind of got used to it.”

The NCAA Rookies, like the OHL Rookies, had also left home recently, but at an older age. However, they had previously decided not to pursue their playing career in the OHL. In recalling that decision, there were some divergent views of the Priority Draft and of the prospect of leaving home. However, the majority of this sub-sample felt that players were too young when the opportunity to play in the OHL arose. NCAA Rookie Carter articulated the feelings of many of the NCCA Rookies when he stated:

Well, I think it’s too young personally [the Priority Draft], but I think it’s just more, I didn’t want to leave my friends and what not at that age, you know? I was comfortable with my high school, and I guess, yeah. I think 16 is too young; a lot of kids don’t need to be leaving [home] that young.

The Affiliated and Draft Eligible consumers were, overall, the groups most bothered by the prospect of moving away from home. This is not unexpected since for them it was a future prospect whereas the OHL and NCAA Rookies had, at the time of interviewing, already made this transition. Jerry, an Affiliated consumer, explained, “sometimes I think they draft too young. Like, kids our age have to make decisions young, like life decisions pretty much, like what they want to do.” Kelly, an Affiliated consumer recognized the individualized nature of the decision to move away:

I think it would [be tough to move away at 16 years-old]. Just the type of person I am I think that’s a little young for me to be moving away; you’re still not that stable with going away from home that young. But for some guys it’s fine with them I guess. It depends on the person.
Malone, another Affiliated consumer, felt that an individual’s goals could influence brand perception and the decision of whether to move away to play in the OHL at 16 years of age or to stay at home and wait for an NCAA opportunity. He explained: “... I can probably do it [move away]; I just don’t want to be in that position right now. I mean, it’s OK to move away from home if you’re focused on that one thing but I’m not focused on that one thing; it’s just really not worth it.” For some elite players then, the prospect of leaving their home and family at such a young age had been a major factor in their decision to pursue an alternative option and some specifically addressed the challenges that would be faced. For example, Affiliated consumer Buzz explained:

**Buzz:** I was *not* ready to go that year. It was the whole thing, I wasn’t ready to leave home. It’s pretty young, 15 years-old, to leave home and all that.

**CC:** Why?

**Buzz:** I think it could be tough on guys; I know it’s tough. I’ve talked to guys, especially if you’re not in the lineup every night and it’s tough to be away from your family for whatever it is, eight months of the year.

Former Major Junior and NHL player Lee Fogolin highlights the potentially “tough” transition young players face in the CHL (Houston, 1998). Cressman (2004a) also indicates potential challenges for young players quoting an unnamed scout who notes, “it’s a tough league for a 17-year-old rookie” (p. 33). When asked whether the thought of moving away influenced his perception of the OHL, Affiliated consumer Craig, who was leaning towards the NCAA developmental path, explained:

A little bit. Obviously it does a little bit, like you don’t want to move right away. That was another part of the reason why I’m going NCAA; maybe you’re not ready to move away at that time [when drafted]. Obviously moving away from home, my family and my friends - a little early - I would have moved away two years ago - that was a burden.

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18 Focusing on “one thing” is in reference to playing in the NHL.
The responses from the Draft Eligible consumers were similar to the Affiliates on this particular topic. When asked if the thought of leaving home was a factor in his brand perceptions Larry explained: “...yeah, my family is here and they come to a lot of my games and that, and, I don’t know if I could leave at 15 or 16 years-old.” Draft Eligible consumer Drake explained:

I think they draft kids too early 'cause, if a kid gets drafted in the first round and they have to go to Plymouth and they have to move away from their family. I really don't know if I'm ready to move away from my parents for a while; not that I get homesick, I just don't think I could do that.

While Drake took care to point out that he does not "get homesick", other participants felt that it was a factor for them. Draft Eligible consumer Kris explained, “I haven't really been away from my parents since, like a week maybe for camp, or something like that, but -- I'd probably get homesick a little.” Krandell, echoed this concern, however, his trepidation was mostly related to being really far from home. He stated,

Sault Ste. Marie would be tough. Having to go down there for camp for two days and having to come back, if I'm driving and stuff. It would be tough. For my parents too, them having to come watch, they couldn't really do it, so I'd probably get like homesick or something.

This point, in a sense takes us full circle, in that it links with the opening response of OHL Rookie Harry (see p.78) and highlights the concern many players had with the Draft; that is, most individuals cannot control or even influence which team will acquire their rights. If their desire is to play Major Junior hockey, most have no influence over where they will do so. Overall, it appears that the Priority Draft, and the prospect of moving away from home can have an influence on player-consumers' perceptions of the OHL. In some instances, moving away at 16 was the deciding factor that meant players
went elsewhere. There was another factor though, related to the Priority Draft that emerged from the data. This concerned the nature and content of communications with representatives of OHL teams prior to and during the Priority Draft process.

Pre-Draft Communications

As the annual Priority Draft approaches, coaches and/or General Managers of OHL teams may contact a player to gauge his interest in playing Major Junior hockey. It is apparent therefore, that interactions with team representatives, prior to the Draft, could form an impression in the minds of player-consumers, thereby affecting the brand equity of the OHL. Connellan (1997) states, “every time a customer comes into contact with your company, you have an opportunity to create value. Capitalize on that opportunity and you win. Waste it and you lose” (p. 43). One potential influence on OHL brand equity clearly emerged from the interviews where coaches and/or managers initiate pre-draft communications with potential player-consumers.

Reference to the significance of communications can be found in the work of Temporal (2002) who explains, “companies are judged by their behavior. Everything they say and do affects their image and reputation” (p. 214). As such, communications between players and team representatives can be very important. Overall, the majority of participants had little to offer on the topic of pre-draft communications. Draft Eligible consumer Kramer was typical of the majority-response to this area of inquiry, stating: “...they just send us stuff, or talk to us; it's all pretty organized.” However, some specific instances emerged that produced negative “judgments”, or perceptions, towards the OHL and are worthy of further consideration. Affiliated Consumer Jake explained:

I was told, you’re a second round, third rounder - but I ended up getting drafted a lot later so that was a bit of a shocker to me. I was pissed ‘cause I was looking as
they went up\(^1\), they were getting down to the fourth round and I’m like ‘what’s going on here?’ I was supposed to be drafted a lot higher.

At the time of interviewing, Jake was still leaning towards playing in the OHL. However, his experience with the draft had made him more cynical about Major Junior hockey. He explained questioningly, “I’m looking at it like, I thought this is a great league to play in, but [pause], it’s hard to say.” As a result, Jake had begun to give more consideration to the option available in the United States through the NCAA.

A passage from the interview with NCAA Rookie Bruce also highlighted how pre-draft communications had affected his views of the OHL negatively:

**Bruce:** I was ranked pretty highly\(^2\) and I talked to a lot of teams and - that was another one of the, I don’t know if you’d say management things, but the integrity in the OHL is not as good as one would like it be, or expect it to be. Like teams were promising me, I was going to get taken in the third round - maybe in the first or second round. That team who was going to pick me, I watched them take another goalie instead. And then - I talked, I think there are 20 teams, and I talked to about 16 of them about taking me, and the team that takes me in the fifth round, the [team], I had no contact from at all so, it’s really weird. Like, I was pegged as a second or third round pick and when the fifth round came around I was getting pretty anxious and kind of upset. I didn’t really know what happened you know? Promises were coming through, people’s predictions, what was explained, everything was kind of thrown out the window. So, you’re thinking about that all the time - that year\(^2\) [between draft year and eligibility to play] you’re always thinking: ‘is this what I want to do?’

**CC:** Did that tarnish the image of the league for you?

**Bruce:** A little bit, especially now when I’ve watched players, some of my friends go through the league...like, I think personally, the NCAA is a better league for the integrity and keeping their word.

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\(^{1}\) The Priority Draft was held at an arena and draft-eligible players would often attend the draft and walk onto a stage when (and/or if) their name was called. A large board posted the draft results so people could consult the board and view who had been previously drafted. This practice has now been abolished and the draft takes place over the Internet.

\(^{2}\) Each year the Central Scouting bureau has a projected list of all the players who might be drafted in the upcoming Priority Draft. This document often becomes public and players gain an indication of where they are ranked by the Central scouting agency.

\(^{2}\) Players drafted in the first two rounds are eligible to play in the OHL the following season, players taken in rounds after this are required to wait one year before becoming eligible to participate on a full-time basis.
Bruce's experience with OHL team managers prior to the Priority Draft and events during it, prompted Bruce to consider the option of the NCAA even though he had not seriously considered it before.

Matt, another NCAA Rookie who had been approached by OHL management before the Draft, had a similar story. He explained: “I was projected to go sixteenth overall by OHL Central Scouting, which didn’t happen, so, I was pretty disappointed, but I definitely would have went right away, at that point, yeah...I would have played for sure.” Matt, like Bruce, turned to the NCAA only when he felt betrayed, when conversations communicated during the pre-draft period with team representatives failed to materialize. He was emphatic that if he had been drafted according to his pre-draft ranking, in the first two rounds, he would have played Major Junior hockey in Ontario.

Another NCAA Rookie, Morris, had been through a similar experience. He too claimed it was likely he would have stayed and played hockey in Canada had pre-draft discussions evolved as “planned.” He explained: “...they [OHL team representatives] told me they were probably going to take me with their second pick. But draft day came and I didn’t get picked by them - for reasons that I’m still confused about. But, I mean, I probably would have gone if [OHL team] had picked me.”

Morris’s view of these pre-draft communications were much more “understanding” than those of Bruce, Matt, or Jake, as he saw the “promises” made there in a different light. He explained: “Promises in that kind of a situation, I mean, they’re not really promises, they’re kind of just beliefs of what’s going to happen. I don’t think I would take it as a broken promise.” Morris did not hold the OHL accountable for
breaking pre-draft “promises” in the way that other respondents clearly did. For those latter individuals, draft-related communications significantly damaged the brand equity of the OHL. It is always possible, of course, for players to misunderstand communications with team representatives and develop unrealistic expectations as a consequence. But however formed, when those expectations were not met, it adversely affected their views of the OHL and their future within it.

Team Ownership of Players’ Rights

The final antecedent influence in terms of the Priority Draft, concerned the fact that once drafted, teams then owned a player’s rights. The ownership of players’ rights appeared to have two related aspects, the first of which might be called the matter of free agency and the second draft hierarchy.

Free Agency. Former NHL player Howie Meeker is vocal in his criticism of the draft (Houston, 1998). A Globe and Mail editorial (“Putting the Canadian”, 1998) reasons that, “the top young teens and their families should decide where they will play…The junior draft should be illegal” (p. D6). The editorial described the draft as a type of sweatshop, in this case, “a league-assigned hockey factory” (“Putting the Canadian”, 1998, p. D6). Walter Gretzky, the father of the greatest hockey player to play the game, recognized the challenge inherent with the Priority Draft, where players must go to the team that drafts them at a young age.

Hockey was telling us that if he wanted to play junior 'A', he'd have to play 500 miles from home. We were still talking about a young boy…, but now it wasn't a case of what we wanted, it was a case of what hockey wanted (Gretzky & Taylor, 1984, p. 121).

Leeds and von Allmen (2002) make a comparison to other workers to highlight the problematic nature of the draft system: “Imagine, however, how you would feel if a firm
chose you in an entering worker draft when you graduated from college. Once selected, your choices were to work for that firm or not work at all” (p. 244).

Free agency is an alternative mechanism of talent distribution, where players may sign wherever they choose. The practice is, in professional sport, typically reserved for players who have fulfilled a specified number of service years in their league or for those players who were not drafted. Most amateur leagues (the NCAA, CIS, and Tier II junior leagues) operate on a free-agency basis. Here, notwithstanding educational qualification, it is the players who select the team and/or university for which they would like to play for, providing of course that the team/institution wishes to sign them. Recognizing that a “focus on the actual rather than on the abstract or hypothetical” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 200) should drive research inquiry, perceptions of free agency often emerged in discussions on the Priority Draft and will therefore be considered.

Since the alternatives are “having a choice” or (for most) “having no choice”, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of participants viewed a prospect of free agency positively. Draft Eligible consumer, Kramer, explained, “Oh definitely [he would like free agency]. I would go to where I think is best; I would want to try and stay close to home.” Karl, another Draft Eligible consumer echoed that view, stating:

Oh yeah. That would be great. You get to choose where you want to play, like if you had all these scouts talking to you and you got to choose which team you can go to, I mean, of course you’d like to choose where you want to play.

Affiliated consumers, Jake and Malone, were similarly enthusiastic. Jake stated, “…if everyone’s a free agent you could go wherever you wanted to and there’s no complication with getting picked.” Malone, who refused to play for the team that drafted him, felt that his ability to choose a Major Junior team to play for would change his
decision to go to United States. He stated: “I would choose Kitchener, Ottawa, or London. I would love to be playing there right now.”

OHL and NCAA Rookies were similarly intrigued by the thought of selecting a team, rather than being selected in the draft. OHL Rookie Lou explained simply that, “it would be awesome”, while Buck felt “it would have made my decision a lot easier to come to, between the two [NCAA and OHL].” NCAA Rookie Kevin felt “it would be tempting, yeah, to be a free agent” while NCAA Rookie Oscar, like Affiliated consumer Malone, would also be playing in the OHL if he had been able to choose where to play. He addressed what he believed were inequities of the draft system and how free agency could alleviate such problems:

I just don’t think that the draft gives kids the chance to play in their area. It just forces you to go and play where you don’t want to play. I think if you tell a team you don’t really want to come here and they still pick you, I just don’t think that’s right.

While free agency was viewed favourably by almost all of the participants, there were a few who viewed the process as possessing some potential problems. Most of their concerns were focused on the challenges of distributing new talent relatively evenly throughout the league while maintaining the level of competition in the league. Marc, an Affiliated consumer, recognized the potential difficulties of free agency, noting: “I guess you could start stacking teams and stuff, right? So, they’d have to have some kind of rules.” NCAA Rookie, Bill, highlighted the same challenge:

I bet it would be appealing to some extent, but at the same time, some teams would just have a way bigger advantage. Like, there’s a lot more players in Toronto. I’m not sure if the competition would be there.
Draft Hierarchy. During the process of fieldwork and initial data analysis, an issue of what will be termed “draft hierarchy” emerged from the data. This draft hierarchy concerned the ability of the very best young players to exert influence over which team would choose them in the draft process, thereby making them “de facto” free agents.

Affiliated consumer, Steve explained:

I know tons of guys actually stated like, ‘look, I’m not going to play, I’m not gonna go to the ‘O’ if you draft me’, and they say that to every single team, except the team they want to be drafted by and then the team that drafts them is the team that they wanted to be drafted by and it’s perfect, so, they get to go wherever they want.

OHL Rookie Shane, also addressed the ability of some players to manipulate the Draft:

I knew where I was going so it [the Draft] didn’t really concern me. I knew I was coming to [team] so - first rounder - we made some side deals and stuff like that so I knew I was coming here ... I think, hypothetically, that’s mostly happening [free agency]; players are choosing where they want to go like I did. Like, I know this whole draft, basically that was how it went my draft, first round anyway; everyone knew where they were going.

Shane believed “first round” draftees had made arrangements with particular teams but it seemed that beyond the first round, players’ ability to manipulate the draft was greatly reduced or non-existent. Affiliated Consumer, Jake, made the point when he conceded that his skills did not provide him with the ability to control who selected his rights: “I wasn’t good enough to get [pause], I didn’t have the choice pretty much; I got picked to who I was going to go to.” Despite Shane’s belief that the most talented players can “control” where they are drafted, sometimes the plans of even the very best can go awry.

Wes O’Neil was selected by the Kingston Frontenacs (with the second pick overall in the 2002 Priority Draft) despite the fact he had stated that he would not report to Kingston if they drafted him (Koreen, 2002). OHL Rookie Shane actually spoke of the O’Neill
situation when he explained, "just to be pricks about it, they [Kingston] took him anyways." Clearly, despite an exceptional player's influence, the ultimate decision of which individual to draft lies with OHL managers. Post-Draft, a chosen player may gain a level of influence; he can choose not to report to the team that selected him and attempt to force a trade, or he can pursue a scholarship in the NCAA, as was the case with Wes O’Neill who became the highest drafted OHL player to play in the NCAA (Colvin, 2003a). However, if the player wants to play in the OHL, even the former option does not guarantee that he will play for the team of his choice – whereas free agency would make that prospect much more attainable.

Associations of OHL Culture

More broadly, a culture will equip the members of a particular society with a design for living in that specific social milieu. It informs them of the ways of seeing, thinking, feeling and behaving that are seen as appropriate amongst the group. Organizations too will have their own, related, corporate culture (Fekete & Keith, 2003) that at its simplest, may be "described as 'the way we do things around here.'" Essentially, it is the sum of a complex blend of employee attitudes, beliefs, values, rituals, and behaviors that permeate a company and give it a unique style and feel” (Temporal, 2002, p. 215).

In reality, societies tend to consist of a number of subcultures, some more dominant than others, which coexist more or less easily together. Often, the same is true for organizations in that a uniform universal culture does not exist (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2001) but rather a pluralism of subcultures is present, though one may dominate the others. Any divergence of organizational cultures is, of course, much more apparent
from the inside as it were and those differences may be masked to those viewing the organization from the outside. Such was the case for all the interviewees, prior to some of them deciding to play in the OHL and remains the case for most participants as the majority had not, at the time of research, played in the Major Junior league (only 15 of the 54 players sampled had played in the OHL). From their point of view, the ways in which organizations operate, their apparent corporate culture or “the way we do things around here”, form part of the associations the brand generates. To this end, brand associations have been recognized as vital components to building brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Knapp 2000).

In the following section, the perceived nature of OHL corporate culture, or its ethos, is examined. Though not part of a formal mission statement, aspects of the way the league operates and the way the game is played there can be powerful influences on the way in which potential/actual player-consumers view the brand. Analysis of the data produced three subtopics worthy of further consideration. These have been identified as players’ physiques, style of play, and connections to the NHL.

Players’ Physiques

In terms of players’ physiques, almost every respondent noted that there were many larger players playing hockey in the OHL. The following responses were typical.

Draft Eligible consumer Karl explained:

The OHL, I mean, the scouts, they want big players … the OHL, they’ve got skilled players, but they also got a lot of the big guys too. They also want a lot of the big players, like, if you’re big, you’ve got a good chance of getting drafted.

Affiliated consumer, Kelly, concurred: “The OHL Draft, there’s going to be some good players selected in the high rounds but looking at who’s been selected, I think it’s based
on size at the time." Stuart, another Affiliated consumer, stated: "... the OHL, I’m not going to say they’re like big goons or anything, but they’re bigger, like over six feet, over 200 hundred pounds right?" Affiliated consumer Jake, himself a very large young man, recognized the preference of OHL managers for larger players and therefore he felt he was more suited to the OHL: "I see myself in the OHL cause I’m such a big hockey player, that’s where I fit in." In Jake's case, he perceived that bigger was obviously better for the OHL, but this perceived emphasis on size was enough to prompt two Affiliated consumers to consider pursuing an NCAA scholarship. Buzz noted: "I wasn’t a very big kid, so I wasn’t very strong and all that, so, I didn’t know if it [the OHL] would be the right fit for me." Craig, explaining his decision to take an NCAA scholarship, felt "size was a consideration...and just the type of player I am suits the NCAA more than the OHL."

The large physiques of many OHL players featured in the perceptions of OHL and NCAA Rookies as well. Bill, one of the latter, explained: "I think, especially when I was making a decision whether to go there [OHL] or not, the OHL is just all big guys and I was a lot smaller than I am now, so it just didn’t really make sense." Matt was critical of the preference he felt OHL managers had for larger players. When asked the question ‘what comes to mind when you think of the OHL?’ He explained:

Honestly, what comes to mind? I picture big guys, bigger players, you know? Guys that played juniors and like to fight, you know? Obviously each team has one or two real stars, one or two top lines and then there’s no depth after that, just a lot of big donkeys that can’t really skate, that’s what I think of when I think of the OHL.

Matt clearly recognized the skills possessed by the best players in the OHL, but referred to the remaining players as “big donkeys.” Later in the interview, when considering
factors that determined whether a player was selected in the first/second rounds or in later rounds, Matt returned to the subject of physical stature:

What's the difference? Just the size I thought. If you look at the first two rounds drafted to the OHL, I think there were two kids under six feet that got drafted in the first two rounds - that's besides goalies - just, the kids were just bigger, and I was, you know, 5'8", 170 at the time, or something.

OHL Rookies also believed that physical stature played a part in the draft process. When explaining his own selection in the early rounds of the Priority Draft, Peter noted that, "I grew last year; that helped." Lou, a shorter player, mentioned both the emphasis given to physical size and his personal philosophy on the subject.

I mean, I'm not the tallest guy, but I'm, you know, almost two hundred pounds, so I'm not the smallest either. But, you know, as long as you're prepared to take a hit, no matter how big you are, you're not going to go flying.

OHL Rookie Shane, the largest of all the 54 interviewees, noted the preference for size in the OHL: "in this league everybody's, you know, over six feet." Sam, a Draft Eligible consumer, summarized the emphasis he thought physiques were afforded in the OHL:

I think they really overemphasize size way too much, I think, it's kind of my opinion, I think like, I'm a decent size, but they'd rather take the guy that's 6'3" cause they think they can teach him how to play hockey, than the guy that's 6'0", so, it's kind of a downfall.

Data from the interviewees revealed a general perception that the OHL is seen as a league where larger players are both favoured and dominate in numerical terms. Support for this view also came from an interview with the Kitchener Rangers' coach-General Manager, Peter DeBoer, who spoke of a player he selected in the previous OHL draft. "You've got to give yourself a bit of a gut check when you announce a player in the first round that's 5-foot-8 and 165 pounds, but he's one of those rare guys who can play
at that size" (Cressman, 2004b, p. 31). Clearly, this coach too believes in a general rule of thumb that “bigger is better.”

Style of Play

Perhaps the perceived style of play in the OHL is, at least in part, a consequence of team managers’ preference for larger players. However, the issue of the “style of play” in the OHL produced one of the most widespread and consistent views amongst those interviewed of all the antecedents considered in this study. Analysis of the data revealed that player-consumers generally viewed the style of hockey played in the NCAA as both faster and more skilful than the one played in the OHL. About the NCAA style of play, OHL Rookie Gus claimed, “Flashy, smaller guys go there, go that route.” Draft Eligible consumer Drake noted, “Speed. More small but skilled players for the most part … it’s more of a finesse league.” Affiliated consumer Marc explained: “…they’re all little quick guys.” Affiliated consumer Kermit thought of: “…smart kids who skate fast.” NCAA Rookie Matt noted: “…the first thing I think is fast” while NCAA Rookie Sully offered the perception of: “…faster paced, good hockey, not as many fights.”

These thoughts highlight the brand associations that exist amongst player-consumers with respect to the style of play in the NCAA. They clearly believed that smaller, skilled, fast players would fit in the collegiate system. The obvious inference is that the opposite is also the case. That is that the OHL is generally more suited to larger, slower, and less skillful players. Draft Eligible consumer Kramer made the point explicitly: “I think the NCAA is more skill involved … the smaller skillful players are going to the NCAA, and the big and powerful players are going to the OHL.” Affiliated consumer Jake corroborated this view stating, “I’d probably go to the OHL cause I ain’t
no finesse player.” NCAA Rookie Matt’s comparison of OHL players to “big donkeys” also highlights the point as does Houston (1998) who notes the emphasis on “size and aggression” (p. 204) in Canada’s Major Junior leagues.

There is the obvious potential for these views of playing style to influence player-consumers’ decisions in the sense of which would be better for their personal strengths. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Eric offered a self-assessment of his personal fit in Major Junior hockey: “I’m not a big hitter and the OHL is a lot rougher than [pause], pretty much any league. It influences me.” Draft Eligible consumer Perry stated that the OHL was “basically for tougher hockey players, whereas the NCAA is for smaller players.” Overall, this difference was deemed to have little bearing on his personal circumstance as Perry is a goalie and so the physicality of the game was less of an issue at that position. Draft Eligible consumer Kramer, however, shared a similar opinion of the physical nature of the OHL; given that he was not a goaltender, this element of the league was more of an issue. Kramer explained: “I’m a smaller player and I like to finesse and stickhandle and shoot the puck and stuff like that. I think in the ‘O’ I would find myself, as a smaller player, taking pretty nasty stuff.” This feeling that he might be a target for physical intimidation on the ice had Kramer doubting his future in the OHL. Kramer did not feel that his size, coupled with his view of the style of play in the OHL, would help him develop his hockey skills there. The following passage is from an interview with Affiliated consumer Hap, who had decided not to play in the OHL. Here, the apparent style of play in the OHL had been an important factor in that decision.

**Hap:** I think college hockey is a totally different game than OHL hockey. It’s really high pace, there’s not much stick work, there’s virtually no fighting and all that rough dirty stuff after the whistles. I just think it’s more of a clean, fast paced, high tempo game.
CC: Is that more your style?
Hap: Yeah, more what I prefer.

OHL Rookie, Barry, explained: “I think NCAA is more talent. Less physical. More all-skill-type-deal. But this [OHL] is more all-round hockey. More hitting and contact.” OHL Rookies, Peter and Buck, echoed this view. Peter explained that, “the OHL appealed to me because it's a big tough league and it's just kind of the way I want to go,” while Buck stated: “…it’s more the route I wanted. It’s more my style of play. It gets me going a lot more. I think I play better in a game when I’m using my body a lot.” Buck’s OHL teammate, Harry, also spoke of the style of play in the OHL when he explained: “I like it. It’s more physical, grinding kind of. NCAA, they’re physical, but they shy away from the rough, fighting and stuff like that.”

It was interesting that a number of the NCAA Rookies were adamant that the more physical style of hockey did not deter them from playing in the OHL. For example, Cory explained: “I like the fighting, I don’t mind the fighting, or like, the physical play.” Oscar, in response to the suggestion that the rougher playing style may have deterred him from playing in the OHL, responded bluntly: “No! Playing juniors, fighting was one of my favorite things to do.” Whether these types of responses were simply denials of any apparent “weakness” on the part of these young men is beyond the scope of the study; however, overall there was ample evidence from the interviews to conclude that the style of play in the OHL was seen to be less skillful (overall), slower, but considerably more violent (both within and outside the rules of the game) than the style of hockey played in the NCAA. Perhaps the style of play in the OHL is more akin to that which has
historically been on display in NHL arenas throughout the hockey season and is one way in which the leagues are connected.

Connections to the NHL

"Canadian hockey is a subculture in which the NHL represents the pinnacle of success and in which NHL-style, customs and values remain the ones that really count" (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 162). It may be that if OHL players have aspirations to play in the NHL, this will be one influence on the way they attempt to play the game in the OHL. For, in order to play in the NHL, one must demonstrate capabilities to excel at the NHL-style game. Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy made the connection explicitly noting that, "the OHL is more of an NHL-style game, more bump-and-grind-dump-it-in kind of thing. I think it would probably prep you more for the NHL.” The working relationship between the OHL and NHL managers also promotes a similarity in style. OHL director of hockey operations, Ted Baker, states simply “we follow the NHL rulebook” (Cressman, 2005, p. E3). Draft Eligible consumer, Karl, addressed the influence the NHL had on the OHL style of play: “I’d say it’s more NHL kind-of-thing. It’s more fighting, hitting. It’s more play-off hockey ... I mean, the NHL, like most of the guys that go to the NHL are from the OHL cause it's more that kind of style.”

This perception of the OHL as a junior image of the NHL in terms of style was discussed by a number of participants. Affiliated consumer, Pat, explained “...the OHL is basically a mini-NHL; all the rules are the same...I guess you could say bigger and stronger guys, in general, that’s the kind of preference.” NCAA Rookie, Oscar, lent further support to the Major Junior/NHL connection noting, “...the OHL is more of an

22 Typically, the intensity of play-off games is enhanced and more physical play is on display than, comparably, during the regular season.
NHL game. Rinks are smaller, more hitting and fighting.” Buck, an OHL Rookie, spoke positively of the professional influence on Major Junior hockey when he described the OHL in terms of, “...lots of games, lots of hitting, lots of fighting, a lot of tough stuff; I like that. I’d rather play in a league that has proven itself as a feeder to the NHL.” Barry, another OHL Rookie, echoed the sentiment: “...it’s just, I think, the best place to make it to the NHL is going through the OHL.” Many support the notion that Major Junior leagues in Canada act as a springboard to the NHL (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Hood & Townsend, 1999; Kelly & Askin, 2000; McPhee, 1999; Parcels, 1999; Robinson, 1998). The idea that the OHL may be the better place to develop talent destined for the NHL is a further connection between the leagues and takes us on to the next section of skills development.

Skills Development

The notion of skills development has a number of facets. Most obvious is the development of individual hockey skills, but there is also the development of personal, life skills to consider as these young men mature. Both of these aspects, of course, take place (as far as the OHL is concerned) in the context of a playing career in a commercial enterprise which will be considered first.

Development in a Commercial Enterprise

The OHL is a business (Houston, 1998) and as Brunt (2005) states, “when it comes to junior hockey, it’s important to remember what it is, and what it is not. It is, at base, a ticket-selling, entertainment business. Those who buy franchises do so with the intent of turning a profit” (p. S1). One aspect of business practice in the OHL has already been considered in the discussion on the ownership of players’ rights where brand
perceptions were discussed encompassing the lead-up to one particular event: the Priority Draft. After a player is drafted, however, many of their former conjectures about where and for whom they will play, the identity of their coach, the nature and atmosphere at their stadium, become concrete factors in their decision-making. However, just as one set of possibilities become concrete, a number of other possibilities concerning a player’s future emerge, for there are many potential outcomes of a decision to sign for the team that selected them. This is because a signed player becomes an asset in that particular business and could be utilized (or not) in a number of ways. A player may play for the team that drafted him throughout his OHL career, a player’s rights could be traded to another team in the league, a player may progress to the NHL while still eligible to play at the Major Junior level, or a player could be released, or “cut” (cease to be utilized). Player-consumers realized that their futures with particular organizations would be based upon business decisions, but two of the possibilities (being traded and/or being “cut”) seemed to touch a chord with the interviewees more than the others and influenced brand perceptions of the OHL.

**Trades as part of the business in the OHL.** The practice of trades (or player transfers) is an integral part of many “professional” sports and the OHL is no exception. If a player no longer fits into the plans of one team, but may well do so in the plans of another, then that player is likely to be traded as a business decision. There was both some uneasiness amongst the interviewees at the prospect of “being traded” and a level of acceptance that it was a “fact of sporting life.” For example, Affiliated consumer, Kermit, stated simply that, “there’s a good possibility of that [being traded] in the ‘O’.” Kelly, another Affiliated consumer, made it clear it was not a prospect to be relished: “I guess
there’s always that scare of getting traded, but that’s a risk you take going to the OHL.”

In this, Kelly seems to acknowledge that trades are an acceptable (if unwelcome) “risk” of pursuing the Major Junior path. Some feel it is just “one of those things.” OHL Rookie, Shane, explained: “It’s just another thing, you know? Business is business; wherever it is you got to go.” However, NCAA Rookie Sully, recognized some additional pitfalls with the practice of trading players in the OHL, but he too was not explicitly opposed to the practice: “I think for the younger kids in the OHL, since they are so young, it might have an effect on their schooling, which would be my only concern. But other than that, going from team to team isn’t a big deal to me.”

While the majority of participants accepted trades as an integral part of the OHL, some, particularly from the NCAA Rookie group, viewed the practice much more negatively. NCAA Rookie, Oscar explained, “lots of my buddies have been traded around. Kyle Wellwood was the leading scorer in the league and he got traded, so it wasn’t one thing that pulled me away from the CHL, I’ve had so many experiences to draw from.” NCAA Rookie Carter explained: “I know a lot of good players in that league don’t stay on one team, they get moved around to three or four teams and I think that’s a problem, especially when you’re that young, you know? Who wants to get moved around all the time?” NCAA Rookie, Bruce, offered a similar view on the business issue of trades in the OHL:

That was another thing I thought about, was, you know, you can just get traded at the drop of a hat and go from, like my friend went from Barrie to Toronto … people just go all over the place and it’s really, like, really weird, and it’s not structured or very, like, there’s no guarantees in the league at all.
Former Major Junior and NHL player, Lee Fogolin, notes the disruptions and upheaval that can accompany mid-season trades (Houston, 1998). The absence of guarantees, or the lack of a "secure future" in terms of which team they played for appeared to be a major problem for many of the NCAA Rookies. It may be that those who see "trading" as a major problem tend to weigh this possibility more heavily in their perception of the OHL and hence in their decision-making process. However, a more widespread concern about future security involved the possibility of being released or "cut."

**Being "Cut."** Being "cut" was a disturbing prospect for player-consumers, especially since once players had signed for an OHL team they were no longer eligible for an NCAA scholarship. Being released from an OHL team also considerably reduced a player's future playing and educational options. Draft Eligible consumer, Jeremy, explained: "...like if you go up and play a couple of years and you get cut and stuff, you pretty much get ruined." Affiliated consumer, Marc, addressed the same point when he discussed his decision not to go to the OHL after being drafted, pointing out that, "I could have gone out there and played like ten games and they could cut me and then now I can't get a scholarship and I can't play in the 'O', so that's the main thing that kind of deterred me." Affiliated consumer, Levin, expressed the same concern, noting his possible status as a tradable/dispensable asset: "...you're going to get used where they want you. They can sign you and send you down, or they can just say 'oh it's too bad' you know? And you might never get to play a full season, or three seasons or whatever it
is.” Affiliated consumer Buzz, also mentioned the lack of security in the OHL as a negative influence on the brand:

They sign you right away and the next thing you know, a 21 year-old comes around, and you’ve already played one game so now you can’t go to the NCAA and then they cut you and you’re back playing junior [Tier II] for the rest of your career cause now you don’t have the option to go to the NCAA.

Affiliated consumer, Hap, reflected on the topic of security in the OHL when he recounted a story of a former minor hockey teammate:

Another guy who got drafted to Plymouth ended up coming home at the end of the year, but he’s screwed because he lost his NCAA [eligibility], so things like that. I don’t know, they say a lot of stuff to you and then you get there and they think of a new story.

NCAA Rookie, Cory, was even more disturbed by the experiences of some of his friends:

I’ve seen guys get raked over the coals in the ‘O’ and you know, just get screwed right over. Like a good buddy of mine went there, I won’t name names, but he was 19 when he went there; they promised him an overage year\(^2\) and then this year came around and they just kind of screwed him over [released him].

NCAA Rookie, Bruce, also drew on the experiences of a friend and formed a negative impression of the OHL brand because of it.

I have one friend who played in the OHL - they told him he was going to play, he was going to be set on the team, he was going to be one of, you know, the main guys. And then, before the end of the year - by the start of the second year - they told him they didn’t want him anymore.

These cases and the perceptions formed of the OHL are reminiscent of the pre-Draft communications where players believed that OHL managers had made a “promise” yet, ultimately, had taken another path.

\(^{2}\)OHL Teams are allowed to carry three 20 year-old “overage” players each season.
One of the main areas of concern with respect to being “cut” related to circumstances beyond a player’s control. Draft Eligible respondent, Rich, explained:

“...the OHL, they can, you hurt yourself or you’re not playing good, they can boot you out of there like that!” Another Draft Eligible consumer, Larry, made a similar point about his future security in the way he believed injuries were handled in the OHL. He explained:

The thing is I don’t like that if you get injured, I don’t think they care about you that much...as I explained, you’re more of a commodity in the OHL, it’s more of, I don’t know, it’s more based on winning rather than like, personal injuries or anything else; it’s more of a business...it’s all hockey and winning, and that goes with the thing with injuries, they want you to win every game, so, if you are injured they’ll have you playing so they might win a couple of extra games.

In contrast, respondents generally saw the NCAA as a far less risky alternative, with a more secure medium term future than was available in the OHL. Affiliated consumer Kelly made the point that, “you’re there to develop for four years; there’s no way they can send you home - that’s your home for four years.” NCAA Rookie Bruce offered a similar sentiment:

With the NCAA, you’re locked in for hockey and school for four years ... like NCAA you kind of almost feel secure you don’t have to worry about getting traded and you don’t have to worry about getting cut, you know they’ve invested so much money into you they can’t really afford that.

Overall, the issue of security was seen to be very influential on perceptions of the OHL brand for a number of the Draft Eligible, Affiliated, and NCAA Rookie respondents. For some players, it was enough to turn them away from the OHL; for others, it was an issue of considerable concern and would be an important factor in their ultimate decision. The same level of concern over these issues though, was not apparent
amongst the interviewees who were OHL Rookies. It may be that having made their
decision, these concerns were now considered in the past for them. Moreover, it may be
that having been with their organization for a period of time had given them confidence
that they can play at the OHL level and enjoy success. None wanted to contemplate the
prospect of serious injury.

NCAA Rookie Sully made a rather cynical (or realistic) summary of players’
relationship with their OHL team when he explained: “...teams just look out for what’s
best for their team, and the business-side of it and they don’t really care if you’re 16 and
it might screw up your eligibility for school, or screw up your schooling already.”
Another NCAA Rookie, James, was less scathing but made the same point: “…perhaps
it’s more of a business; there’s a business-side of it.”

Hockey Development

If there were strong elements of concern over the possibilities of personal and
educational development in the OHL amongst three of the four sub-samples (more on this
to come), there were more positive views to be found concerning the development of
hockey skills in the OHL. The majority of participants felt the OHL was a league where
some supremely talented players were to be found. The route is, after all, a major source
of talent for the best league in the world: the NHL. Draft Eligible consumer Max thought
that having talent was a condition of playing Major Junior hockey in Ontario. He stated:
“...I think that whoever plays there obviously has to have tons of talent.” Playing with
talented players is seen as one of the ways in which individuals can improve their own
skills and so it was with the OHL. Affiliated consumer Buzz described the OHL as a
“good place for younger players to go and develop their hockey skills.” OHL Rookie,
Dean, spoke of the OHL as “a great place to develop. It gives teams and young adults a great opportunity to play and further their hockey ambitions.” In many instances, the advancement of “hockey ambitions” actually meant acquiring the skills and experience to act as a springboard into the NHL. For example, Draft Eligible consumer, Lucas, noted NHL players who had once played Major Junior hockey in Ontario. He explained:

“...there’s a lot of good players now in the NHL who came from the OHL originally, so, they’re doing something right, I guess, how they develop the players in the league.” Draft Eligible consumer, Eric, also acknowledged the “great” players who had played in the OHL and recognized them as an influence on his perceptions: “…they influence me to pretty much go to the OHL cause it seems like a better route from how good they are.”

Another Draft Eligible consumer, Perry, explained: “I think it’s a great route for a hockey player to take; it’s been known for a way to get to the NHL.”

OHL Rookie Barry addressed the issue of skills development when he spoke of the OHL. He explained: “I think here [OHL] is more developing players. NCAA is like, schooling. You’ve got to worry about that ‘you-don’t-get-good-grades-you-can’t-play-hockey-type-deal’. Here it’s just all development to play hockey; that’s what I love too.”

The focus on education in the NCAA, to some degree, and a far less demanding schedule in terms of numbers of games played, seemed the most important aspects of a player’s development in the NCAA. “Obviously we don’t have as heavy a schedule as some of the CHL players do, but we do have a heavier practice schedule which allows us time to develop” (Ewell, 2002, ¶ 8). However, a number of player-consumers felt that games being played less frequently in the NCAA would hamper a player’s development. For example, Affiliated consumer Blair explained, “You only play on the weekends so it’s
only like a 40-game schedule versus the 80 games that the OHL or the CHL will play each year." OHL Rookie Shane explained: “I wanted more games and stuff. It seemed really boring that you practice five times a week and play once or twice at most, it seemed pretty boring and I didn’t want to go that route.” NCAA Rookie Matt acknowledged what he perceived as a drawback in the NCAA:

I would like to play more games - we only play 30 games in a season, it’s a short season but I don’t know, I would like to play 70 games in a season…I wish maybe they could extend the schedule, maybe throw in a Thursday night game, so three games a weekend then maybe then get up to 42 games a year.

Affiliated consumer Kermit had the same feeling. He explained: “Well, they play like 20 games a year and I don’t think, like, to develop to get to the NHL you should be playing everyday and practicing all week and playing two days a week.” Some of the player-consumers, however, felt the lower frequency of games was a positive aspect of the NCAA brand. For example, Affiliated consumer Hap explained:

If you’re playing 80 games a year then that gets tiring and it wears you down and you’re not into\textsuperscript{24} every game. Whereas NCAA, you’re playing 25, 30 games a year and you’re up, you’re pumped, you’re ready. All you want to do is play that game, whereas OHL, you may be like ‘oh we have another game, I’m tired. I don’t want to play.’

NCAA Rookie Marvin also developed a positive outlook for the less frequent game schedule when he explained:

The only thing I would say is that we don’t play as many games as you would in the OHL, I think that’s why a lot of teams, NHL teams, would think that it’s not really as much like the NHL as the OHL is, but I mean, for me, I would almost say it’s opposite because you kind of know how to prepare, because I mean you know you’re preparing all week for one or maybe two games.

\textsuperscript{24} If a player is “not into every game” they are deemed to lack excitement or focused on the game.
Interestingly, the focus on the lower frequency of games in the NCAA as a positive aspect was found only amongst those who had already chosen the NCAA route and was a minority view even there. The overwhelming majority of the overall sample and a majority from every sub-sample perceived playing more games in the OHL as a positive feature of that brand and playing fewer games as a negative feature of the NCAA. It has even, in part, prompted some individuals to move. For example, Michigan University freshman, Duncan Keith, left the NCAA to return to Canada and play in the OHL. One of the reasons for him doing so was the limitation of the NCAA's 36-game schedule. Among other reasons was a desire to gain more exposure to NHL scouts (Eidelbes, 2003) but in that respect at least, changes may be coming. Schafer (1988) states, “rest assured, if your skills warrant professional assessments, you’ll be seen in Orono, Maine or Grand Forks, North Dakota just as you would be seen in North Bay, Ontario or Saskatoon, Saskatchewan” (p. 21). The perception that players will be giving up exposure to NHL scouts if they choose to play in the NCAA does not seem to be as widespread as was once the case. Draft Eligible consumer Larry was clear about his own longer-term ambitions. “I want to go to the NHL, but I realized if you’re going to get there you’re going to get there no matter what way you go, NCAA or OHL.” Similarly, NCAA Rookie Oscar explained: “I’ve always been told that if you’re good enough, they’ll find you.” Connelly (2003) would seem to share that view, noting that “impact players graduating from the NCAA Division I ranks are now the rule, rather than the exception, on your favorite NHL team” (p. SO1).

On the other hand, the OHL was universally seen as a good league to play in for aspiring professional players. For example, when asked ‘what comes to mind when you
think of the OHL?" Paul, an OHL Rookie, explained: "...the level of hockey, and there's a lot of great players that have come out of the OHL." NCAA Rookie, Oscar, followed the same theme when he recognized the history of player development in the Major Junior ranks, stating "I know it develops the most, like OHL, has developed the most NHL'ers, that's all I know."

Affiliated consumer, Levin, recognized this fact as a powerful and positive brand association for the OHL:

Part of the mystique of the league is, like, you think of all the guys that are gonna go to the NHL from here...the OHL turned out this guy so you think 'I could play with a guy that's gonna be in the show', then you're thinking, 'if he can play there [OHL] and I can play there, there's no reason why I can't go to the NHL'.

The view that the OHL could be the place for players to significantly develop their hockey skills was one held by most participants. However, while the development of those skills may be seen as important, respondents also saw other aspects of development as significant.

Personal Development

OHL Rookie, Gus, spoke of the personal development in the OHL with respect to players leaving home to play for "their" respective Major Junior team. He felt "moving away, helps you become more independent." Draft Eligible consumer, Kramer, who spoke positively about the influence the OHL could have on his personal development, also referred to independence, but discussed it in terms of an opportunity to acquire this independence. He explained: "...it would give me a chance to be not so dependent on my parents, I would have to do more myself." Affiliated Consumer, Levin, supported the view offered by Kramer, that playing hockey in the OHL would make player-consumers
“grow-up” and take more responsibility for their own development. As he put it: “...it is, I guess, good for development as a young man. They are going to make you into a man really quickly; you’re going to be away, you’re going to be doing your own thing.”

The primary reason for this “accelerated” personal development is that, for the vast majority, being drafted means leaving home. OHL players live with a billet family who are screened and selected by OHL team management. Although players are not expected totally to fend for themselves, they are no longer living in their family home. Therefore, there is a perception that because of this, OHL Rookies tend to mature at an accelerated pace. This is a view that can be found in OHL marketing literature. Former OHL player, Perry Pappas, identified the benefits to his personal development from playing in the OHL when he explained, “not only do you get to play hockey at an extremely competitive level...you begin to mature and grow as a person, that’s a big benefit to any young person” (Harris, 1993, p. 4).

Another aspect of this accelerated development was described by OHL Rookie Barry who explained, “It’s simple. You’re playing with older guys. You’re younger, they’re older so you mature a bit faster outside the rink. It keeps you out of trouble; you’re always at the rink doing stuff.” It was unclear whether Barry’s comment that he is “always at the rink” implies that time spent with older players means he “keeps out of trouble” or the time spent there means he has little time to find it – or perhaps a combination of both. OHL Rookie Paul had a similar view of the beneficial influence the veteran players had in developing and shaping the younger OHL players: “...as a rookie you just take from what these guys have to bring to the table.”

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25 Billet families provide temporary accommodation to players for the duration of the hockey season.
While many of the OHL Rookies offered positive views of aspects of personal development to be found in the league, a number of respondents involved with the NCAA did not hold such positive views of these aspects of the OHL. James spoke of the challenges away from the arena that his brother encountered by moving away from home at the age of 16 to pursue an opportunity in the OHL. He recalled how his sibling was “forced to mature at an earlier age, definitely not always maturing in the right direction necessarily, gone from your family and parents.” NCAA Rookie, Cory, alluded to the potential pitfalls awaiting OHL Rookies on leaving home when he explained, “I think it’s good to stay at home, I mean, a lot of guys who go away in junior get into trouble and there’s some bad habits.” Perhaps, NCAA Rookie Bill was more perceptive in his observation that “…everyone matures at different times you know?” He was not set against the OHL as a route for development, but he recognized the problems that could be associated with young players moving away from home and maturing under the influence of the “older”, veteran players. These individuals were certainly veteran in terms of playing status in the OHL, however, in fact, they were still just young men themselves.

Education

The final league-related antecedent, to be discussed, that exerts an influence on the brand equity of the OHL concerns issues of continuing education while playing in the league and future educational prospects once a decision has been made to play in the OHL. Gruneau and Whitson (1993) note, “there are real and potential downsides in the major junior system, the most endemic of which involves education” (p. 165). This statement highlights the challenges OHL managers face with respect to perceptions of the educational opportunities associated with playing in the OHL. In contrast, the NCAA is
often seen as an effective way of continuing (and financing) education while playing hockey, while also preparing individuals for a life after hockey (Schafer, 1988). Analysis of the data revealed that educational prospects were relevant considerations for player-consumers as they weighed their brand options. Those who were seriously considering, or had chosen the NCAA, viewed the educational opportunities there positively, but as one might expect perhaps, those opportunities were deemed to be somewhat less compelling for the OHL Rookies. That is not to say that the OHL Rookies saw little or no value in the opportunities presented in the NCAA, for they did. It was just that for them, those opportunities were not viewed positively enough to influence brand consumption. OHL Rookie, Paul, expressed a typical view when he explained: "... obviously, the education with it [the NCAA] was a really good deal; you couldn't ignore that. But now the OHL is offering a little bit of education too."

Generally, however, these players were not as focused on the educational opportunity available in the NCAA as other groups appeared to be. And while university "packages" are available to OHL players (reducing one element of "risk" attached to this choice) it does seem that, historically, the OHL has been perceived as a favoured option for the less academically inclined and this perception is communicated in numerous works (Baker, 1993; Brunt, 2004; Laskaris, 1994; Maki, 1994; Naylor, 2003b); the data here presented does little to alter that view. Educational initiatives developed by OHL management were perceived as more of an "insurance policy" should professional careers not materialize, rather than as a positive reason to choose to play in the OHL. The

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26 University packages are offered to players who pursue the OHL developmental route; the amount of the package depends upon a multitude of factors such as draft position, team, and alternate options. This is a negotiated item for players.
data revealed three distinguishable elements in participants’ views of education and the OHL, categorized as associations and stereotypes, perceptions of the CIS, and financial packages.

Associations and Stereotypes

Associations and stereotypes refer to the actual and perceived demands placed upon players in the OHL and how those demands could affect their educational progress. It also refers to the types of individuals considered more “suited” to pursue their hockey in the Major Junior leagues. These can be usefully subdivided into categories of time commitments, OHL players’ aptitude, and commitment to education.

**Time Commitments.** Laskaris (1994) notes, “most OHL players don’t finish at the top of their high-school classes, primarily because of the large number of hours they devote to hockey” (p. 12). Player agent Gilles Lupien, acknowledges the amount of travel and distances covered that players must endure to compete in the Major Junior leagues in Canada (Naylor, 2003c). This aspect of life in the OHL was commented upon by a number of participants, more specifically, from groups other than the OHL Rookies. In most cases, their focus was on the time spent traveling. Affiliated consumer, Hap, explained: “I know it’s a lot of traveling and tough schedules.” Blair, another Affiliated consumer also saw the amount of traveling involved as a negative aspect. He explained:

...if you go OHL they don’t really care about your school; well they do, they say they care, but you know, you’re on the road a lot, you’re on the bus and your teacher is like your coach ... you’re on the bus a lot of the time, traveling from Ottawa to Toronto to Windsor, so you can’t really be in the class a lot.

NCAA Rookie, Bruce, noted the differences in playing schedules when comparing the OHL and NCAA: “...[in the OHL] you’re playing games on Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday;
whereas in the NCAA, we only play strictly on Friday-Saturday.” Bruce’s perception is interesting given that the playing schedule in the OHL also has the large majority of games played on the weekend; one of the reasons OHL managers advanced this format is that it enhances their players’ educational experience. However, weekday games do exist and should a team enjoy a successful run in the Memorial Cup, this can place greater demands upon players. As Brunt (2005) explains:

... look at the playoff schedules for the country’s major-junior teams. Consider the hours, the travel, the games and the practices. Consider that those teams making a run all the way to the Memorial Cup will be awfully, awfully busy through what is traditionally the most important part of the school calendar” (p. S1).

NCAA Rookie James held a similar view of schedules in the OHL and the impact they could have on players’ education: “...they [OHL players] tend to focus a lot more on the hockey aspect than on the educational aspect because they’re on the road so often and they’re often playing weekdays, four or five hour bus ride away, so, school often gets neglected.”

NCAA Rookie Matt felt the perceived rigors of travel in the OHL was a factor in his own brand perceptions and decision-making. He explained: “I wasn’t a big fan of the bus trip - the OHL bus trips - you know, the weekend when you go to Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, and North Bay on a weekend and then you got to drive home on Sunday.”

Draft Eligible consumer Rich held a similar view on the effect travel in the OHL could have on education as “you travel all across Ontario, so, it’s - you’re not going to have a lot of time for schoolwork.” Some in the OHL Rookie group also mentioned the potential effects of long distance travel. Russ explained: “I was big on school, that was one of my things, so being in the Sault you’d be on lots of road trips and stuff and you
wouldn’t have time to do your schoolwork, so that was a big thing.” Russ clearly
recognized the educational challenges that could exist if he was playing in the “Sault” (a
team that is forced to travel a large number of kilometers each season because Sault Ste.
Marie is located in northern Ontario27), because he was “big on school.” The fact he was
playing in southern Ontario (team locations are much closer) became a “big thing.” Had
the manager of the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds drafted Russ, when the conjecture over
“where I might be drafted” became a “known”, perhaps his decision to play in the OHL
may have been different.

Draft Eligible consumer Larry, who recognized the importance of school marks if
he wanted, subsequently, to study at a Canadian university, highlighted extended travel,
and the subsequent effect this could have on school grades. As he put it: “...you still have
to get accepted. If you don’t go to school much cause you’re on a lot of bus trips – it’s
hard to get accepted...you don’t really get a chance to do much homework, you’re
playing hockey four times a week.” Affiliated consumer Hap developed this theme in
relation to the financial packages (to attend Canadian universities after their Major Junior
career) available to those who play in the OHL. He explained it was all very well “to say
we’ll pay for whatever school [university] you get into but how do you get into those
schools [universities] you know? All you’ve been doing is playing hockey and your
weekends are all traveling.”

Considering the effects travel - and the time spent traveling, presumably at the
expense of completing schoolwork - could have on OHL players’ ability to fulfill their
scholastic potential, was clearly an influence on perceptions of the OHL for some player-

27 Sault Ste. Marie is located approximately 800 kilometers north of Toronto (500 miles).
consumers. However, this association with games and travel schedules contradicts with
the prior discussion on player development where the majority of participants considered
the number of games played in the OHL as a positive and the limitations of the NCAA
schedule as a detraction from that brand. Clearly, there exists a disjoint between the
concept of playing more games (a positive) and the necessity to travel to those games (a
negative).

OHL Players’ Aptitude. A second element of the associations and stereotypes
linked to education and the OHL revolves around perceptions of OHL players’ academic
abilities. Historically, a view has existed that “junior hockey and school go together like
oil and water” (Maki, 1994) and that the “smarter” players might look to the NCAA. For
example, when describing a player who was injured in a NHL game, it was noted that,
“he has options in life. He is a product of the Ivy League28, not of major-junior hockey”
(Brunt, 2004, p. S1). The insinuation is apparent that the NCAA combines hockey and
education, thereby producing “options in life” while the OHL does not. And, although
CIS hockey coach, Murray Nystrom, notes the “old adage that your [sic] giving
something away education wise when your [sic] playing in the OHL just isn’t true
anymore” (“OHL Graduates”, 2004, p. 2), it appears this “old adage” has not fully been
dispelled. The data did reveal some residue of this perception, so it would seem to still
hold a degree of currency. OHL Rookie Mitch admitted that his poor grades in school had
made the OHL/NCAA choice a simple one. He simply did not have the grades to make
the NCAA a realistic option. As he explained: “My SAT29 marks weren’t good enough. I

28 The Ivy League is a group of eight private NCAA university institutions located in the northeastern
United States.

29 The SAT – formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test - is used by colleges and universities in the
United States to aid in the selection/admission process of prospective students.
originally turned [OHL Team] down to pursue a scholarship, then I came back after it looked unlikely to be fruitful.” Mitch’s experience was in line with the stereotype in that he had chosen the OHL when he failed to get the grades necessary for an NCAA scholarship. Other participants were also clearly aware of the stereotype and one (OHL Rookie Mike) even made a joke of it prior to the interview when he quipped, “you’ll make me sound smarter later, right?”

Affiliated consumer Levin addressed the same issue when he explained, “… there’s still that perception [players in the OHL are not as intelligent as those players in the NCAA]” and later added that he “skated with a bunch of kids from the OHL in the summertime and you sit there, like, bad brains or something, I don’t know.” In Levin’s case, his own experience had clearly reinforced this stereotypical view. Affiliated consumer Stuart also acknowledged that this stereotype existed and related it to his own experience:

I have a couple of friends who are in there now [the OHL] and they’re not like the brightest kids in the world, like not only school smarts but like street smarts as most people would call it … I shouldn’t generalize that the OHL is like dumb or whatever because there definitely are smart kids in the OHL, but [shrugs], I don’t know, these guys aren’t too bright.

Affiliated consumer Hap offered a similar perspective: “the guys I know who are in the OHL right now are sort of - in high school they were 50, 60% students - they just figured they were going to the OHL and they wouldn’t get into any US schools.” Affiliated consumer, Malone, expressed the view more explicitly:

The guys who are in the OHL, they probably - well, all the kids that were drafted my age into the OHL, all of them are just retards in school - most of them are. They are just totally concerned with hockey cause that’s what they want to be, and I mean, it’s fine, but when you have, like, marks and stuff – like I have an 83% average – I don’t know, you have more options.
The last four quotations were all from players leaning towards the NCAA (although Malone did state that he would be playing in the OHL right now if he could select for which team to play); perhaps, their experiences may have helped them formulate that preference. Other participants too recognized that achieving higher grades in school kept doors open in terms of their future and failing to do so meant some of those doors would close. Draft Eligible Jeremy recognized the opportunities that success in the classroom could provide for his friend:

I think it depends on how you’re doing in school too, like, if you’re like a [Tier II teammate] and you have a 94 percent average, or if you’re me and you have like a 70, 75, you got to base it on that too...he [Tier II teammate] talks about it all the time [NCAA route] and it makes me think about it, but, I don’t really have as much of a choice because of his grades and stuff.

OHL Rookie Tim, perhaps unsurprisingly, held the view that whichever path was chosen, scholastic ability was important. As he put it: “...both ways you got to be academically smart cause you don’t get nothing – if you’re dumb you go this way and if you’re smart go this way...you have to be smart either way you go.” This view may better reflect the empirical reality, however, the stereotypical educational picture associated with the OHL still held a degree of common currency and that could have a bearing on some player-consumers’ perception of the OHL.

Commitment to Education. Naylor (2003b) interviewed a graduate of the OHL (and current, at the time of research, CIS player) whose view is that “in junior hockey you never think about even high school. You just think you’ll play hockey for a living” (p. S2) and this deals with one of two aspects of commitment to education. That is, the level of commitment that OHL players, themselves demonstrate to their own education.
The second aspect would be the level of commitment shown by management in the OHL to their players' educational needs. Let us deal with the former first.

NCAA Rookie Kevin addressed a perceived lack of commitment by OHL players towards their education. When thinking of OHL players, he explained:

I think of guys who are a lot less focused on school. It's not every single player, it's not 100 percent of the players, but I'd say probably 75, 80 percent of the guys are going to the OHL for one reason, I think that's to go pro. They're kind of putting their education on a back burner type thing.

Draft Eligible consumer Lucas seemed to have a similar view: "when I think of the CHL, like OHL, I don't think of schooling, I think completely of focusing on hockey." NCAA Rookie Marvin recollected his perception of players' commitment to education in the OHL, drawing from his own experience relating to a friend who had chosen to go to the OHL:

I think he has expectations to be in the NHL ... I think he hasn't really cared as much about the whole academic side. I mean, I think - like both my parents went to college or university and I think that's probably where a lot of that [focus on education] comes from. It's that, you know, they kind of stressed the whole education thing and neither of his parents did, which is cool - but it's probably just something that wasn't stressed as much. And with him, I hope he'll make enough money where he doesn't have to [work], but, I think he's ok with being, you know, a cop or something, and with me, I'd like to do something a little different.

Affiliated consumer Darwin was quite clear where he placed education in his list of priorities. He felt that the "OHL is pretty much my best route ... like, school's not even number two, it's like [gestures widely with hands], way down." Another Affiliated consumer, Pat, who was also leaning towards the OHL talked of his modest academic success. He explained: "I do OK in school I guess. I guess 'cause mixing hockey and school, I find really difficult, even now playing Junior 'A' [Tier II]...I think it would be a
lot easier just focusing on hockey.” It was clear that Pat felt that the OHL provided him with the better opportunity to do that. Other participants expressed similar views. NCAA Rookie Cory explained, “all the guys I see who play in the ‘O’, just don’t go to school” while Affiliated consumer Blair spoke of OHL managers’ attempts to change perceptions, although he too believed there was a lack of commitment on the part of players themselves. He explained:

I think its changed a little bit; they [OHL managers] prepare the players as students; they try to encourage them to go to school, but what I’ve heard is a lot of players go to school, they sign out, and a lot of teachers let them do it because they’re hockey players.

While the levels of tolerance of these players’ absence from class amongst teachers is indeterminable from this research, the perception exists that Major Junior players tend to be treated differently (Robinson, 1998; Grange, 2004) and this too could influence perceptions of the OHL.

A second view on the relative lack of commitment to education emerged from the data and addressed the part of OHL managers in this role. Baker (1988) acknowledged that many once considered a “less than strong commitment from OHL teams to education” (p. 20). Affiliated consumer Kermit, who was in regular contact with the manager of the team to which he was drafted, explained: “...in the ‘O’, the vibe I get from them is they don’t care about that stuff [education], but just that I contribute on the ice.” When asked his perception of managers’ commitment to education in the OHL, the following exchange occurred with Affiliated consumer Hap:

I was given the impression that the OHL was more hockey first and then academics [sic], cause most guys in the OHL, their grades aren’t really that good and NCAA I know is a lot - they really focus on academics [sic] and then hockey on the side sort of ... I think they’re [OHL Managers] definitely trying to put
more emphasis on school ... I think they're really trying to start to focus more on that [education] cause they realize that guys who want an education, or I shouldn’t say that, but guys who are focused more on school may want to go back there after the OHL.

Hap continued with a more cynical appraisal of OHL managers’ commitment to education offering that, “I would think it’s lip service, just based on what the guys there now say.” Draft Eligible consumer Eric, had also apparently been led to believe that education was less important than hockey in the OHL. He explained: “I think if there is less focus on academics [sic] I wouldn’t kind of like that because that would kind of just go through my mind - like after being influenced for a while I’d just be like: ‘oh hockey, hockey, hockey’. You wouldn’t think of school.”

The perceived lack of commitment to education in the OHL had been a direct influence in the decisions of two NCAA Rookies. NCAA Rookie Bill explained that the prospect of having “no education is the big one” for why he chose not to pursue the OHL while NCAA Rookie Bruce explained that in “the OHL in particular, one of the big knocks on it was the schooling ... the school aspect isn’t as highly regarded [as in the NCAA].” There was even some evidence that, perhaps unexpected, an emphasis on education and the fact that “schooling” is used to describe high school and university studies in North America, led to some confusion for at least one player-consumer. OHL Rookie Lou explained:

My draft year was 2002 and I talked to a fair amount of teams and I told teams that wherever I was gonna play hockey, I was gonna go to school too, and they misinterpreted that as I wanted to go to school [NCAA] and not come and play in the OHL. So, I mean, on draft day, it was coming around, you know, sixth round and I still hadn’t been drafted.

30 “Lip service” insinuates that the issue is not really supported with any real conviction.
From the data it appears that, although a number of steps, including the introduction of financial packages and team advisors, have been taken to address the perception that managers in the OHL are indifferent to education, there is more to do. As Brunt (2005) notes, "there is no direct connection between high school and the juniors. No one is monitoring graduation rates. There are no sanctions against teams whose players drop out of school. There is no such thing as being academically ineligible" (p. S1). Perhaps, this lack of connection between scholastics and the OHL aids in the perpetuation of historical stereotypes.

Perceptions of the CIS

Analysis of the data highlighted a modest level of awareness of university hockey in Ontario. Generally, players knew the university league existed, but little else. The relative lack of exposure of the CIS game was perceived to be a problem for the university league and, through its association with it, a problem for the OHL. Players considering combining education and hockey were far less likely to think of the OHL and the CIS as an attractive combination; they were far more likely to focus on the NCAA.

The following passage is from an interview with Draft Eligible consumer Kramer, who emphasized two points. Firstly, the CIS is not a league where player-consumers aspire to play; and secondly, that the level of interest in that league matches neither the OHL nor NCAA.

CC: Ever been a goal to play CIS?
Kramer: No it hasn’t. That’s not what I’ve been focusing on.
CC: Could the CIS change anything to attract players?
Kramer: Definitely, the Canadian university is not really talked about compared to the OHL or the NCAA.
The view that CIS hockey is “not really talked about” was common. In fact, the league has been referred to as the “best kept secret” in Canadian sport (Nystrom, personal communication, November 15, 2003). The lack of knowledge of the Canadian university game can lead to negative perceptions of the league as a minor backwater in terms of the game. What little was known (or thought to be known) about Canadian university hockey was also problematic in terms of its image. Former CIS coach Wayne Gowing noted, it was seen “not as a step sideways but as a step backwards ... the end of the hockey road” (Laskaris, 1994, p. 12) for those who did not achieve professional aspirations (Oklobzija, 2003). In other words, it is perceived as a “league for failures” and secondly, a place where there is little in the way of interest on the part of fans, confirming its status as an inferior backwater. Given the links between the OHL and CIS, such associations would also be problematic for the former.

Affiliated consumer Darwin expressed a typical view of the prospect of playing CIS hockey:

Well, I guess, it’s not really a goal, cause, once you come out of the OHL you are able to play pro, and if you aren’t playing pro you go back to play university and, I guess, that’s why people don’t really look at it as such a good thing, cause, it’s like, ‘ok, I got cut from pro, I’m going to go play’ [CIS].

OHL Rookie Paul offered a similar view of players “failing” in their hockey careers, should they be playing in the CIS, when he described how he would feel should he one day be playing in the CIS, stating “…it’s hard to say, cause you’d kind of feel like, I guess your hockey aspirations are over.”

The fact that his aspirations in hockey would be “over” if he were to play in the CIS confirms that it is perceived as a relative “failure.” Overall, the CIS was not viewed
as a "stepping-stone" or means of advancement into anything - it was viewed as a step backwards, or the end of the proverbial hockey-road, at least in terms of developing a professional career. The idea that the CIS was a league in which players aspired to play in did not exist amongst the participants whatsoever. At best it was seen as an acceptable alternative in the absence of better options. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Perry explained: "...for me personally I really want to go to the show, like the NHL. But, you know, if it didn't work out my next goal would be to get an education out of hockey and if that meant going to a university in Canada that would be fine [pauses and shrugs], I guess." Such a response is, of course, hardly a ringing endorsement for the CIS. OHL Rookie Buck was more direct: "I don't want to be playing there. If I am, I guess something has gone wrong with my career." Affiliated consumer Malone explained: "I think that Canadian university, all of it is old OHL players. I mean, they don't make it, they don't get drafted, then they come back and play hockey there [CIS]." Draft Eligible consumer Drake concurred:

...it's mainly OHL players who never made it, and that's just like the impression I get from hearing, like just looking at the stats, like where they came from [played hockey prior to the CIS]. It's decent hockey, don't get me wrong, but that just doesn't appeal to me."

Each of these quotations highlights a perception of the CIS as an inferior league where hockey "dreams" are gently laid to rest. NCAA Rookie Marvin made explicit the links between the CIS and OHL and how the two are seen as bound together:

I think it's almost like something you do after you can't really play [will not make the NHL]. And I think that's the mentality that the CHL has given it ... it's almost like the OHL is kind of a feeder for that league [players who do not make it professionally use their school packages to attend a Canadian university].
Marvin felt the OHL managers had contributed to the image of the CIS as a league of last resort, even if the hockey played there was “actually quite good.” NCAA Rookies Sully and Carter echoed this view of the talent in the CIS. Sully explained:

I think there’s a lot of good players that play in that league. I know a lot of players who have played in that and are playing in that – they’re a little underrated. There’s some better hockey players and teams than people think.

Carter offered a similar view noting, “a couple of years ago I didn’t really think it was anything special, but now I think it’s pretty good.” Most of those who recognized the quality of play in the Canadian university leagues were NCAA Rookies who would have had the opportunity to play against a Canadian university team prior to the research interview being conducted. However, it is obvious that recognizing the level of play in the CIS long after the OHL/NCAA brand decision had been made can have no effect whatsoever upon that decision. To have any bearing on OHL brand perceptions such knowledge must be more widely available to all groups of player-consumers at the time of decision-making.

Financial Packages

A consideration of the educational packages offered to OHL players is now considered. Three distinguishable elements in participants’ views of these packages emerged from the data. These elements are categorized as understanding the packages, financial support from Canadian universities, and the “safety-net” perception.

Understanding the Packages. In Mullin et al.’s (2000) framework for understanding consumer decision-making processes for their involvement in sport, the

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31 Often CIS and NCAA teams will play exhibition games prior to the beginning of their respective league schedules.
second phase posits awareness or an information search as a critical stage before an evaluation of choices and subsequent purchase decision can be made. Clearly therefore, it can be inferred that without awareness, or access to pertinent information, this critical stage may not serve its function (i.e., to inform so that alternatives can be assessed in context). With respect to the OHL’s education packages, there was an array of responses that corresponded with the stage of awareness or information search.

There seemed to be widespread understanding that OHL players can and do receive some form of financial assistance for subsequent university study. There was a general view that the quality of the packages offered to players would vary depending upon the round in which a player was drafted. Affiliated consumer Kelly explained, “I guess they vary from where you’re drafted, or what round, to if you’re drafted at all.” Affiliated consumer Buzz explained, “…the later you get drafted you don’t get such a great package.” NCAA Rookie Morris offered the view that such packages would not be available to all draftees. He explained, “… if you’re not drafted in an optimal spot you’re not really given the option of school packages and that kind of stuff, so you’re kind of dusted off to the side, so to speak.”

Another common view of the education packages was that they would be tied to the number of seasons a player spent in the OHL; the longer a player plays in the league the greater the size of the educational package. Draft Eligible consumer Rich explained, “… they give you, like, every year you’re on a team they give you money towards university.” Both of these commonly held views tend to reflect the reality of being drafted into, and playing in, the OHL. Though there are no concrete rules, draftees in higher rounds tend to receive better packages and one season’s play in the OHL generally
equates to one year's financial support (at the negotiated level) at a university or community college. There are however, no standardized contracts and, as a result, variations exist between draft round, years of play, and even by the team to which a player is drafted. Consequently, the more detailed knowledge of these packages held by player-consumers may be correct or incorrect, depending upon their sources of information.

It was interesting that a few participants were totally unaware that such packages existed or knew almost nothing of them, as the short section from an interview with a Draft Eligible player shows:

CC: Are you familiar with the academic packages in the OHL?
Eric: No. What do you mean by that?
CC: The school packages, money, from teams?
Eric: No, I didn’t really know anything about that.

Another Draft Eligible consumer, Kramer, also seemed confused when he stated, “...the NCAA would pay for my education ...in the OHL I would have nothing after the OHL. I would have to pay for my university.” Later in the interview, Kramer demonstrated some (though flawed) knowledge:

Well, I heard only the first couple of rounds get a full package or something like that, so the later rounds just get drafted and that's that. So, if I were to go, if I was to get drafted top three rounds, I would go the OHL route cause then I’d get my education paid for.

As far as the educational packages available through the OHL are concerned, there are still some ill-informed potential consumers in this market and they are consumers just months away from, potentially, making their brand decision. Kramer, in particular, was of the opinion that he would stay in Canada if he could get his education “paid for”, but
he believed this to be the case only if he was drafted in an early round, those drafted in
the later rounds “get drafted and that’s that.”

It is perhaps illuminating to note that some of the OHL Rookies also knew little of
their educational packages; this may reflect their level of interest in the topic. OHL
Rookie Harry explained that he “didn’t know much about it [academic packages]” and
OHL Rookie Paul explained: “I didn’t really know about it too much actually, but you
kind of get informed as you go.” One of the potential problems in this approach of
finding out as one goes, is that once a player plays a single game in the OHL, that player
is then ineligible for an NCAA scholarship. It would then be too late to find that their
educational package was not to their liking. Perhaps this reflects a lack of interest or
perhaps parents had already agreed to pay for their university education; the data did not
reveal these prepositions. However, knowledge of the character of the educational
packages on offer would appear to be valuable in forming brand perceptions and making
an informed consumption decision.

Although no OHL Rookies shared this view, another element that seemed to
cause some confusion in understanding the packages was the conditions of the
agreement. For some NCAA Rookies, the OHL contracts diminished perceptions of the
OHL brand. For example, NCAA Rookie Marvin explained:

…the thing that scared me was, not so much scared me but the thing that I thought
- just reading the contracts and stuff that they’d send - it seemed that there was a
lot of stipulations to me. And the thing I liked about college was that it’s ensuring
that you get that education and everything kind of tied in.
university wants to recruit. University entrance is therefore available to students who might not be eligible at Canadian universities. Finally, the place of athletics in many American universities is such that the athlete can usually expect much more intensive training than is available at Canadian schools (p. 205).

Canadian universities do not offer full scholarships, but that did not seem to be a particular problem for participants. On the contrary, some viewed the fact that financial assistance, regardless of specific amounts, to supplement their OHL package, was available from universities positively. For example, OHL Rookie Gus explained: "...a lot of guys go there [CIS] after, and get whatever's not paid by their school package. And they play hockey there, which would be not a bad route if you can't play pro hockey."

Gus spoke of financial assistance from Canadian universities however, in Ontario these stipends are only available to returning students; incoming, or “first-year” students do not qualify for any financial endowment (K. Danylchuk, personal communication April 8, 2005). While this is not the case across the CIS, it is a factor for those wishing to attend university in Ontario and Quebec. Furthermore, assistance would amount to no more than a maximum of $1,500 and so players would need a sizable package from their Major Junior team for the two sources to cover all the costs involved in university study. According to Johnston (2005), the average cost to attend a post-secondary institution in Ontario varies; however, individuals could expect to pay between $4,500 and $5,050 in tuition fees alone. The costs for student residence, inclusive of meal plan, range from $4,860 at Laurentian University to almost $9,500 at the University of Toronto.

Draft Eligible consumer Perry addressed the point directly. He explained: "...you know, the thing about Canadian university is they can't really give out those scholarships like the NCAA, so it's hard to compete." Affiliated consumer Kelly held a similar view:
NCAA Rookie, Bruce, had also found these contracts less than straightforward. He explained: "...there's a lot of loopholes and stuff like that that we were aware of that, I think they were, kind of, just telling us about for show, so that we would sign."

NCAA Rookie Matt, spoke of the uncertainty he felt about the offers of educational packages being made:

...[team] offered me a pretty good - they explained something like if I play for four years, every year I play there they'll pay for a year at Canadian university - but that wasn't even on paper, that was more of a verbal thing, and I know [team] doesn't have a lot of money in that system so I really didn't trust it.

It is clear from the data that reducing the variability of the educational packages offered to potential player-consumers would make it easier to communicate information about what is available to them. It is also clear that the information about what is available has not reached the entire market at the moment.

There is another source of potential support that may be available to OHL players to supplement their existing educational packages. Although the current levels are relatively low and the debate over them has been ongoing for years, Canadian universities do provide financial assistance to qualifying student-athletes in Canada.

Financial support from Canadian universities. Hall, Slack, Smith and Whitson (1991) offer a brief synopsis on the benefits of the scholarship system that has, historically, been offered through the NCAA and resisted in the CIS:

The scholarship route is attractive to many athletes for a variety of reasons. First, it offers financial assistance. When access to higher education is as costly as it is, and when these costs must be met through personal and family savings or through student loans, athletic scholarship can make it possible for athletes from less privileged families to attend college. Second, the range of entry standards at American institutions is broader, and even these are flexible for athletes that a

32 A scholarship is a provision of financial aid, in this instance, on the basis of athletic merit.
"I don't think any of their deals can compare to a full scholarship to school in the States."

NCAA Rookie Carter spoke about the limited funds available from Canadian universities:

I actually talked to a guy from [CIS university], the head coach there, but it just, it wasn't enough money I guess. I think that's kind of selfish to say but, I think, I knew what the American colleges could offer so I kind of, I wanted to go that route [NCAA] cause if I could get the free education to play high level hockey at the same time, that's what I wanted.

Although Carter appeared keen to downplay its effect, it was clear that monetary considerations had played a major part in his decision-making. Draft Eligible consumer Max was less concerned with how it might appear when he spoke of the Canadian scholarship system in Canada:

...you can't get a hockey scholarship for Canadian university. So, if I can get a university scholarship to play for an American hockey university then of course I would take that cause it would save me some money… I think that the American system is much better, I don’t know, like hockey is huge in Canada but it doesn’t seem to be that huge for university. I find America takes it much more seriously, there aren't very many good packages for Canadian university for hockey. Like, they don’t really offer much; you go to the university and you play on their team but they don’t really help you, financially, for any of the university really.

While this was a mistaken view in that some financial assistance may be available to some students, the belief that full scholarships do not exist was correct. But others too have made the point that American universities tend to take hockey, and sport in general, much more seriously (Hall et al. 1991).

The opinion that “Universities should be encouraged to establish better hockey programs, as in the United States” (“Putting the Canadian”, 1998, p. D6) is not an isolated one. For example, Pooley (1987) argued that a move towards a scholarship system would keep Canadian athletes in Canada, help student-athletes attend university,
enhance the athletic standard of athletes, promote media attention on university sport contests, and help athletes focus upon their sporting endeavours. Such a system might have made a difference to NCAA Rookie Marvin, who said of the present situation: “I think what the problem is, is that it’s just not funded enough like the US would be.” Affiliated consumer Kelly, when asked if he would stay in Canada and play in the OHL if he could attend a Canadian university at no cost, confirmed it would “make the decision a lot tougher, that’s basically getting a scholarship I guess…so, yeah that would be big.”

A system of offering full athletic scholarships at Canadian universities is not entirely without risk though. For example, Hall et al. (1991) recognize the potential for compromising the integrity of educational standards; however, keeping Canadians in the Canadian education system could be beneficial in numerous ways, for both individual players and educational institutions.

**Safety Net Perception.** Participants tended to view the financial packages offered in the OHL as a form of insurance policy; having an education package provided players with peace-of-mind that there would be something for them to fall back on, should their professional hockey aspirations fail to materialize. Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy put it bluntly: “I think it’s [academic package] more of a safety net” and this view was widespread. OHL Rookie, Harry explained: “I think it’s a safety net for sure cause you never know cause hockey is not a real secure first option you know? If you can have an education to fall back on, it’s pretty good.”

There was a sense that players appreciated the availability of educational packages in the event their hockey careers faltered, however, none of the respondents felt the OHL should be a stepping-stone to Canadian university hockey. In fact, most players
explained that they would be disappointed if they were playing in the Canadian university league in the future; doing so would, in a sense, mean they had failed to achieve their ambitions in hockey success. And this view, of course, accounts for the way in which the CIS is seen. The point here, however, is that should players go to the OHL, few if any plan to use those educational packages, they plan to play hockey professionally and keep the education packages as insurance. OHL Rookie, Barry, made the point:

To me, it’s like, I want to go all the way, so it’s [education package] something to fall back on. I know if I went NCAA there’s a slight chance of me making it to the pros; if I went here [OHL] I can have a good chance of making it to the pros, but also my schooling is pretty much paid for. So, I always got something to fall back on in case I get hurt, or, just don’t make it. It’s just like a safety thing for me, something to fall back on.

The fact that players’ careers can be damaged or terminated by injury was made several times during the interviews, so “insurance” was necessary. For example, OHL Rookie Tim also saw these packages as a form of security: “I know I have something to fall back on if hockey doesn’t work out or a knee injury or something like that bad happens, then you know you have something to fall back on.” OHL Rookie, Peter, made the same point: “I always want a back-up plan, cause anything can happen in hockey, like one day you’re on top and the next day you know, your knee is done.” This issue of security was identified in another context earlier when the OHL was generally viewed as the “riskier” choice between the OHL and NCAA. However, combining education and hockey through the NCAA route was also seen as a form of security and the following quotations highlights this point. Affiliated consumer Kelly, who was leaning towards the NCAA path, explained:

I think the main factor is having a future after hockey cause not everybody is going to make it to where they want to be whether that’s the NHL or whatever
and someday the day's going to come when you're not going to be able to play hockey anymore. And, to combine hockey and education and to have something to fall back on after hockey that's just the main reason that I chose to take the NCAA route.

NCAA Rookie Oscar explained, "I just wanted to ensure that if hockey doesn't work out for me, or if I hurt my knee, that I will get a good education and get school to get a really good job, and [NCAA university] is a top notch university." Affiliated consumer Malone explained, "A lot of players that go NCAA get to the NHL and if they don't then they fall back on their PhD or their Masters or something... it can take you wherever you want to go." Perhaps, NCAA Rookie Marvin sums up several aspects when talking of the NCAA:

...it's a whole education-thing that, you know, saves my parents a lot of money, and it's something that I think, now, every kid needs I guess...I think for me it's easier to chase that, sort of dream, I guess, knowing that you have something [education].

It appears that a difference in perception related to education gained through playing hockey in the NCAA and one achieved at a Canadian university after playing in the OHL exists. The former path would seem to be one of choice; player-consumers choose to pursue an education and hockey development through an NCAA university. Players can chase "the dream" knowing they will be equipped with a university degree. Alternatively, an education through the CIS option is only exercised when professional hockey aspirations do not materialize or an injury occurs. The choice to pursue an education is made after other options have been extinguished "in case I get hurt, or, just don't make it." Clearly, both avenues provide a level of insurance however the OHL/CIS route seems to be viewed more strictly as a "safety net."
Draft Eligible consumer Drake summed up the more general view of most player-consumers and addressed the safety net perception of the education packages when he explained, "I guess if nothing else worked out, playing Canadian university wouldn't be too bad." Clearly, there are no strongly positive associations with the CIS brand in the minds of these player-consumers. It was seen, almost universally, as a "decent" hockey league where players go to "wind-down" their hockey-playing days; a hockey "retirement home" before the ultimate death of a playing career. It was also perceived as a league of "last resort", to be considered only when all other doors had closed and so was seen to be populated by "relative failures" and "has been" players. This was also felt to be connected to the relative lack of spectator interest in CIS games. Given the close association of the OHL and the CIS, these perceptions of the latter would inevitably reflect negatively on the former to some degree.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed league-related antecedents that influence the brand equity of the OHL. These influences, together with market-related antecedents and those of socializing agents form a comprehensive account of the OHL's brand equity amongst these player-consumers. It is clear that young Ontario hockey players have a high level of awareness of the OHL. Many players are exposed to the Major Junior league as they mature and often aspire to play in it. Much of this exposure originates from the media, which cover the Major Junior leagues across the country much more than competing leagues in North America. Players' aspirations, which may be met through playing in the OHL, are fuelled by dreams of a later professional career in the NHL. Awareness of players playing in the world's best league, having previously played in the OHL,
provides the most compelling link, and an important influence on player-consumers’ perceptions.

The annual Priority Draft, intended to distribute new talent throughout the league, was a cause for concern for a number of player-consumers. The idea of playing in the world’s most competitive league for teenagers was definitely attractive; however, for the vast majority of players, the lack of control over where they might play their junior hockey was problematic. In some instances, a drafted players’ reluctance to play for the team to which he was drafted meant that player did not choose the OHL. In the same vein, the respondents almost universally embraced the concept of “free agency.” Issues such as the players’ age and preparedness to leave home were common concerns.

There was also a common view of the style of play in the OHL. It was seen as less skillful but more physical, hard-hitting, and with greater tolerance of violence both within and outside the rules when compared to the style played in the NCAA. There was also a widespread perception that OHL league managers favoured larger-built players which mirrors trends in the NHL, where players are becoming larger (Berkowitz, 2006; Montgomery, Pearsall, & Turcotte, 2001; Wennberg & Tator, 2003). Indeed, Canada’s Major Junior leagues have been described as a “scaled-down version of the big leagues” (Grange, 2004, p. A6) and the “closest thing there is to the NHL” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 165).

To attract the best talent to the league, OHL managers must address concerns surrounding security for player-consumers who may be contemplating a future there. It seems that many players accept that they could be traded if they play in the OHL, but the prospect was not relished. Even worse was the prospect of being released with
consequences for their educational package and these concerns clearly affected the league’s brand equity. Players generally liked the idea of educational packages in the OHL but, if released, those packages accrue only up to the point when the player is “cut.” The same can be true if a player can no longer play through injury. In addition, players who are released will have lost eligibility for an NCAA scholarship; being released is bad news indeed. These factors certainly weighed heavily in the decision-making processes of a number of player-consumers.

Finally, although the education packages associated with the OHL were viewed favourably, these packages were not really seen as an “enticement” to play in the OHL. Rather, the education packages seem to be viewed more as an “insurance policy” if hockey aspirations do not work out as planned. This approach seemed to be reinforced by league managers. Draft Eligible consumer Rich felt that OHL management actually discussed the package in such terms: “They say ‘here’s a university package if it [pro hockey] doesn’t work out’, and then people are saying ‘oh well, I have a backup plan’.” NCAA Rookie Marvin also addressed the way in which he perceived that OHL managers marketed these packages: “I think it’s [going to a Canadian university and playing hockey] almost, like, something you do after you can’t really play anymore [deemed not good enough], and I think that’s the mentality that the CHL has given it.” In this sense, the CIS was not viewed as a place where hockey skills are developed but a place where hockey aspirations are “laid to rest”; a league populated by “has-beens” and “relative failures” who had activated their OHL-sponsored “insurance policies.”
CHAPTER V

MARKET-RELATED INFLUENCES ON THE BRAND EQUITY OF THE OHL

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the remaining market-related influences on the brand equity of the OHL. An analysis of the data identified four market-related antecedents worthy of more detailed consideration. Two of these four (the CIS and the NCAA) have already been detailed at length within chapter IV. The final two important antecedents are identified as politics and hometown.

Politics

Only three participants offered views that related to the internal “politics” of the game, however, such views seemed to significantly colour their perceptions of the OHL. Furthermore, although the numbers involved were small, in each case the interviewee deliberately initiated this discussion. In each case, internal politics were held to influence the selection of players to provincial and/or national teams (e.g., Team Ontario, or the National Junior Team). These participants felt that a player’s decision to pursue their hockey development via the NCAA, or through the OHL, had an effect upon the likelihood of their selection for one or both of these teams. Of interest, given that the participants who selected the OHL developmental path would not perceive any negative “politics” as they had selected the “Canadian” developmental path, and the Draft Eligible participants would not have been exposed to any “selection” politics as of yet, because of their age, the three responses become more relevant. Taken one step further, only the very best players would even entertain consideration for these provincial and/or national teams, therefore, three participants initiating dialogue on the issue of “politics” is worthy of further exploration.
Malone, an Affiliated consumer, initiated a discussion on the issue of politics in response to a query about how the OHL was managed. He held the view that coaches for provincial teams favour player-consumers who play in Canada, as opposed to the NCAA:

**Malone:** Well, if you go NCAA and you don’t play in the OHL, like - this year’s under-17 [Provincial Select Team] - pretty well, they took all OHL players. They think that the OHL players are the best … Because of the fact that I’m going NCAA - I’m going over to the States - that’s why, pretty well, I wasn’t chosen for the under-17’s when I ‘lit-it-up’ \(^{33}\) and stuff but, anyways. Oh, and also, all the general managers, they all help each other out. They - the GM’s - are like ‘Well next year I’ll take your player, and next year I’ll take your player’ when they are struggling a little bit. Like, ‘you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours’. It’s a really tight hockey league.

**CC:** So NCAA is out of that loop?

**Malone:** Yeah, out of that circle.

**CC:** Would that influence some guys to go OHL?

**Malone:** That influences a lot of players every year to go to the OHL.

Bruce, an NCAA Rookie, also initiated a discussion about politics, bias, and favouritism playing a part in the selection of the Canadian National Junior team. He explained:

**Bruce:** When they pick the Canadian junior team, like this year they kind of - it’s a lot harder for us Americans, well not Americans, but us Canadian players who have gone down to America to play because they kind of feel like we’ve turned our back on the Canadian development program and everything like that. Even this year there was like 30 players that got invited [to try-out for the National Team] and only one was from the U.S. \(^{34}\) so, that’s kind of a deterrent.

**CC:** But you still chose the U.S. route?

**Bruce:** Yeah. I kind of knew that was something that was going to affect me. Like, even when I was making my decision I was like told, and aware, that if I go here I’m probably going to limit my opportunity to play for the Canadian Junior team.

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\(^{33}\) Somebody who plays extremely well is said to “light it up.” The term comes from the fact that, in hockey, a goal-light is illuminated every time a goal is scored.

\(^{34}\) This reference was to a Canadian playing in the NCAA.
Morris, another NCAA Rookie, also believed Major Junior players were unduly favoured when representative teams were selected.

**Morris:** I know they are pretty biased to Canadian hockey players and kids who play in the CHL - I know that from experience …

**CC:** Biased?

**Morris:** Well, it was kind of funny. I had an experience with the under-17 Ontario team where I was down to the bubble for the last nine ‘D’ [defensemen] who were supposed to be selected. They came to my Dad and I and were trying to pressure me to sign with [OHL team] and we explained 'no, we weren’t going to because we were talking to some schools and weighing our options.’ It ended up I didn’t make the team. They took all guys, on defense anyway, all guys that had either signed with OHL teams or had already played [in the OHL].

**CC:** You hadn’t signed with [NCAA school] yet?

**Morris:** No.

**CC:** Did you think ‘Maybe I should sign-up for this opportunity?’

**Morris:** I mean, when you’re right there and it’s an option, I mean, to play for Ontario and to have the opportunity to play for the under-18 team [National], I mean, it’s all glitz and glamour, you know what I mean? But, I mean, now when I look back at it and look at the big picture I don’t think it would have been worth it.

These participants were convinced that their decision to play in the NCAA had negatively affected their chances to represent Team Ontario and, in all likelihood, would diminish their prospects of representing Team Canada at future World Championship tournaments. These participants offered the view that player-consumers might be influenced towards the Major Junior route of development to avoid this form of retribution at the hands of those selecting Team Ontario and Canadian National Teams. It is entirely possible of course that these disgruntled individuals simply did not merit selection to representative teams and their decision to play in the NCAA was irrelevant. Goffman (1961) describes the process of denying one’s detractors as a form of self-

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35 All players would have to be Canadian to be eligible for these teams. The meaning is that the bias exists towards players playing in Canada and the CHL as he points out.

36 The “bubble” refers to the final players to be selected. It is perceived that those on the bubble could make the team or be released; they could go either way.
preservation, where the opinions of selectors are simply denied (i.e., where self-perception/reasoning is concerned). While it is impossible to be sure of the reasons for the non-selection of these particular individuals from the data generated, there is more general consideration. If such views about the ways in which internal politics affect the composition of representative teams are more widespread, but perhaps less fervently held than by those on the cusp of selection, this would have an impact upon the brand equity of the OHL amongst the most talented young players.

**Hometown**

Data generated in the pilot study seemed to indicate that a player’s hometown could exert an influence upon their perceptions of the OHL and subsequently on their choice of developmental route. That is, where a player lived and/or had been raised might make a difference. However, the major study itself failed to support this. The vast majority of participants from all groups felt that where a player had been brought up played little or no part in their decision to play in the OHL—or not. It is possible, that the pilot study picked up on former stereotypes where it was held that those from “small town” or rural backgrounds were more suited to the OHL. There were still however a **small** number of participants in the study itself who held these beliefs. For example, Matt, an NCAA Rookie, noted that many players taken in the OHL Priority Draft were from “little towns, you know, like Dublin, Ontario.” Carter, another NCAA Rookie, felt that there were a number of “small town guys from the farm” playing in the OHL. Larry, a Draft Eligible consumer, also noted that tendency and felt those players might be considering it “a way out. They don’t want to be stuck in the family business so they’re a lot hungrier.” It may be interesting to note that all those who expressed such views were
playing, or hoping to play in the NCAA and had been brought up in an urban environment. Thus, while this belief did not appear to affect positively the view of the OHL held by those from more rural areas, it may have had a negative impact for some individuals at least, in urban Canada.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to complete an assessment of the market-related influences on players’ perceptions of the OHL. The issue of internal politics and how that may influence the selection process for Provincial, and/or National, teams appears to be important and colours the views of some who believed they were contenders for selection but were ultimately passed over. It is impossible, from the data gathered for this study, to determine whether any bias towards Major Junior players actually exists. There was, however, a strong feeling on the part of a small group who were inclined towards the NCAA that this was a factor in the selection process. It is also possible that while it may be less important to others, this view may not be confined to a handful of individuals.

Overall, there did not seem to be a widespread belief that where a player grew up was a great influence on their perceptions of the OHL. Gruneau and Whitson (1993) note the effects of urban lifestyles reaching into small-town Canada and a consequent standardization of childhood may contribute to a lack of difference between urban and rural philosophy. They state “the combined effects of province-wide competitions from an early age, the presence of professional scouts at these competitions, and even the reach of coaching certification programs minimize the differences between suburban players and their rural counterparts” (p. 158). However, this study may provide some suggestion that where such views remain, the perception may be a negative factor for those talented
young players growing up in Canadian cities, without being a positive factor for those playing hockey in more rural areas. Given the material rewards of a career in the NHL, hockey can for the chosen few, provide a "way out" of any social context, be that urban or rural.
CHAPTER VI

SOCIALIZING AGENTS’ INFLUENCE ON THE BRAND EQUITY OF THE OHL

Socialization is defined as the process through which people “acquire the skills and knowledge relevant to consumer purchase...and involves various reference groups, from the family to mass media” (Wells & Prensky, 1996, p. 203). Shank (2002) describes socialization as a process that happens when individuals learn about “skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for participating in sport” (p. 166). Indeed, it is one of the important ways in which they acquire those skills necessary to participate in life. Berger and Luckman (1967) identify those who are most involved with an individual’s process of socialization as their “significant others” (here called socializing agents) and can include family, friends and perhaps teachers. Through analysis of the data a number of socializing agents had an influence on the perceptions held, and decisions made, by these talented young hockey players. In short, the perceptions about the OHL held by socializing agents played a part, in some cases a central part, in the way potential player-consumers perceived the league. The result of these perceptions, in many instances, was a significant influence on player-consumers’ decision-making on what developmental route to pursue. Reference is made to this decision-making throughout this chapter.

Throughout this chapter the net of socializing agents is cast quite widely, as the data indicated that organizations or groups identified as the media and hockey people exerted an influence on player-consumers’ perceptions as, of course, did friends and family. Each of these groups will be considered before the final component of this chapter, an introduction to a conceptual framework that emerged as a result of the data generated for this research study, is delivered.
The Media

While general reference to the media was made in the section dealing with awareness of the OHL, specific consideration of the influence the media can have on brand perceptions of the OHL requires more consideration. "The mass media have become one of the most ubiquitous and inescapable facets of our society" (Reynolds & Wells, 1977, p. 246). The media was found to be a beneficial factor for the OHL in terms of general exposure and a level of general familiarity with the Major Junior league was highlighted as a point of competitive advantage. However, not all media exposure of the league contributes positively to brand equity, as in the case of hockey violence for example. In terms of the relative importance of different forms of media, the data indicated that television was considerably more important than all others; this supports the work of (Lauer & Lauer, 1994). Participants felt the print media had some influence on brand perceptions, but radio and the Internet were generally discarded in this regard.

Television

"The overall entertainment package is enhanced when the media are present, particularly in the case of television" (Gladden et al. 1998, p. 9). While the authors are primarily discussing the experience of fans or spectator-consumers, it may also have a similar effect upon the playing experience of player-consumers. The presence of national television at OHL games had been secured through a contract between the CHL and Rogers Sportsnet. That presence was seen to provide players with at least three types of benefits and enhanced the perception of the OHL. Firstly and more generally, the television presence contributes to the status of the league in that it showed the games to be "worthy" of broadcasting. Secondly, it provides exposure for individual players in the
Major Junior system and finally, it enables those in the process of making a decision about their future to assess how they would cope with the playing demands of Major Junior hockey because they could obtain a sense of “what it takes” to play in the OHL.

Status of the league. Almost all participants felt the existence of a national television deal showed the OHL in a positive light. Russ, an OHL Rookie, explained that television coverage made it “so professional; you’re watching it and, well, it looks like a pro game.” Lucas, a Draft Eligible consumer, also recognized the benefits to the OHL as a result of the television contract; “Yep, that makes them look more powerful…obviously someone wants them on their television.” Overall, there was a general consensus that having OHL games on national television made the league seem high-quality.

Exposure. The second recognized benefit of television presence, to players in the OHL, was the exposure it afforded them. There was, of course, the novelty aspect for some players of playing on television, but there were also felt to be benefits for players’ ultimate aspiration to compete in the NHL. Addressing the former benefit first, Kris, a Draft Eligible consumer, explained, “You see the players on TV and you say ‘maybe I want to be on TV’, or something like that.” Sully, a NCAA Rookie, explained, “… it’s on national TV, so kids see that and they’d like to be on that one day so, that might have an effect, yeah.” Affiliated consumer Levin explained, “Yeah, you’re thinking about that – ‘I get to play on TV; all my friends get to see me; my parents’ – you get all excited.” NCAA Rookie Marvin also spoke of the pleasure of playing in front of a television audience:

I think that every kid’s dream is to kind of play hockey and have a million people watch it type of thing, and I think any kid that told you that that’s not why they are playing, you know, when they come out before a game and the game’s on TV and people back home are going to be watching and there’s you know like 10,000
people in the stands - you're going to play a little bit harder, and I think that it does help a lot.

Beyond the novelty aspect of playing in front of a television audience, it was also found that playing on television was believed to enhance a player's chances of coming to the attention of NHL scouts and NHL General Managers. Lucas, a Draft Eligible consumer, explained, "it pretty much means there's going to be a lot of people watching it in your hometown, or scouts could watch it possibly, on the television, so that's a bonus." This view of players being "scouted" through games aired on television was offered by Gus, an OHL Rookie, who recognized the benefits of a national television deal stating, "to be able to be seen yeah; being exposed, some guys are like that, they want to be exposed as much as possible." When asked if the media exposure was an influence on his perception of the OHL, Affiliated consumer Steve explained, "I think for me personally, no, but for a lot of people it does ... that's where you'll get exposure for the NHL."

Assessment. The final theme to emerge from the data, related to the media, was the way in which televised OHL matches enabled individual players to judge their own abilities against the standards they saw on television. The use of television to measure one's playing ability was not widespread, but was a factor mentioned by a number of participants. It may be of interest that no participant who played in the NCAA explained they had used television as a means to determine whether their hockey skills would have been adequate to play in the OHL, the other subgroups, however, did. Jeremy, a Draft Eligible consumer, felt that television exposure "gives you more of an opportunity to watch it and see what it's all about." Affiliated consumer Blair also spoke of the ability to
assess the level of play in the league when he explained, “You have the games and you can see how fast it is and just how everything works.” When asked if the national television contract could be an influence on player-consumers’ perception of the OHL, Affiliated consumer Jerry explained, “I think it does, cause it creates more of an awareness for kids coming up and stuff, like, that they know, like, the caliber of hockey and how they are gonna have to get ready to play if they want to make it there.” This ability to assess one’s own capabilities against players currently playing Major Junior in Ontario was addressed more directly by OHL Rookie Barry who explained, “I watched it because I wanted to know what I was up against.”

One of the aspects of television and other forms of media coverage that was viewed as less positive, was a feeling that there was a focus on the “tougher” style of hockey played in the OHL and a particular focus on the violence. For example, Affiliated consumer Blair, noted:

Lots of young kids watch Sportsdesk,37 or Sportsnet, whatever, and they see all the OHL highlights. You barely see NCAA. You don’t even see the Frozen Four.38 But, a lot of the stuff they show will be big fights and stuff, they don’t really show lots of goals.

By highlighting the “big fights”, the media may help perpetuate an image of the OHL as a tough league, potentially more suited to bigger players.

Kris, a Draft Eligible consumer, offered a similar view on media portrayal of what might be called the “darker” side of junior hockey:

You see things about players getting suspended, and like, lately it’s been kind of bad...it’s just there for you, you always get more exposure. Around here you hear about it. It persuades you a bit, but you hear about the suspensions and it turns

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37 Sports Centre, the sports highlight show aired on The Sports Network was formerly called SportsDesk.
38 The “Frozen Four” is the NCAA national ice hockey championship tournament comprised of the four best teams in the country.
you off a bit... OHL is more clutch and grab, more, suspensions. NCAA is better that way.

One participant, OHL Rookie Barry, recognized that elements of the media will all have their own agenda, including concerns with ratings and selling newspapers.

I think they [media professionals] criticize it [the OHL] a little bit. Of course they got to keep people interested; they don't want to redo the same thing every week, so they always look to the bad parts of everything, blow it up and make it sound a lot bigger than it really is.

The media focus on "the bad parts" of the OHL and the tendency to sensationalize stories did not dissuade Barry from pursuing the OHL option, but had coloured his views of the media. He explained, "I just don't like the media, I'm sorry to say it, I just don't like the media." Similarly, NHL star Chris Pronger noted the same issue when he explained "all you hear are the horror stories... because they are the only things that make the paper" (Davies, 1993, p1).

Overall, the media, and specifically television, was recognized as an influence on the OHL brand through exposure and the resulting awareness of the OHL amongst these young players. The national television deal was seen as the most significant element in that exposure, but with the NCAA airing games in Canada with a competing network, the OHL's advantage in terms of awareness may well be eroded in the future.

In addition to influencing the player-consumers considering their futures, Gladden et al. (1998) note that "the presence and attention of national exposure may also impact the antecedents and, in turn, brand equity" (p. 9). This point was made explicit by Steve, an Affiliated consumer, who explained, "it's not so much that the media influences you, but the media influences your peers and they're the ones you want to impress." The
recognition that people such as family, peers or others can be a significant influence on player-consumers’ views is important. The extent of that influence will now be examined under the headings of hockey people and, friends and family.

Hockey People

Analysis of the data highlighted the potential influence of two groups of individuals directly involved in hockey; namely players’ agents or advisors, and coaches. The rules of the NCAA preclude their players from employing agents and thus none do so officially. However within the rules, NCAA players may (and many do) retain the services of a “family advisor.” Here, the term “agent” will be used to refer to individuals of both official statuses.

Agents

Over half of the 54 interviewees employed an agent. Of this group, the vast majority did not feel that their agent had a significant influence on their perceptions of the OHL. However, where such an influence was perceived to exist, in only one instance was a player being advised that he ought to pursue an NCAA scholarship. Of course, the reasons why agents provide the advice that they do to their clients remains unknown and many, no doubt, act from the best of motives. At the same time, a more cynical view of this tendency might recognize the fact that agents would receive remuneration more quickly should a player choose to play in the OHL.

In terms of explanations of that influence in individual cases, there appeared to be some variety. Jake, an Affiliated consumer, explained, “I have a family advisor, or an agent; they pushed me towards the OHL because their son [name] plays for the same team [OHL team] and he sort of pushed me to get drafted there.” Gus, an OHL Rookie,
spoke of the role his agent played in influencing his decision, "I was told that my style of play wasn’t meant for school [NCAA]; well, my agent told me I would be better to go the OHL route just cause the way I play hockey. Just my style of play." Clearly, the playing style of the OHL seemed to be an important factor for this agent when advising his client. Tim, an OHL Rookie, highlighted the timing of a player’s development as a factor in the advice he received from his agent (who also advises his older brother who is currently attending an NCAA school). “We trust our agent that what he tells us is the right way, and the right way for him [brother] was to go NCAA, cause he developed later in his years. And I’m ready to play in the OHL.” This case would seem to indicate that advice was actually being tailored to individual circumstances.

The sole instance of an agent ultimately offering advice to pursue an NCAA scholarship concerned Malone, an Affiliated consumer, who was initially advised to be patient. “They influenced me to do nothing because [OHL team] wanted to sign me and I was talking to some pretty big schools - and how do you sign for [OHL team] over [NCAA university]?” However, in two other cases, player-consumers felt that financial arrangements had coloured their agents’ advice and both eventually went against that advice. NCAA Rookie Morris explained:

they really felt that I should go and play in the OHL, this is after my first year in [Tier II], and the big reason for that was they had talked to some NHL scouts and they explained that I would probably go in the second round [NHL Draft] if I was playing in the OHL the following year. And that, it was all about, I mean, agents and money are two in the same, so it was, the whole conversation was about money … and I mean, that could be a big draw for guys too.

Morris did not harbor negative feelings towards his agent for advising him to pursue the earlier financial opportunities and remained with the agency, describing his
agent as “a great guy.” Morris noted that his family was quite affluent and, therefore, he did not have the pressure to chase a big “payday” that other young players might face. His decision was based on his personal development and preferences rather than primarily upon financial considerations. In the other case Matt, an NCAA Rookie, was less accepting of his former agent’s endorsement of the OHL, for what he believed were predominantly financial considerations.

Oh, he was total OHL. “You want to go to the NHL, play in the ‘O’.” And I was like, “well, I want to play college hockey”, and he was like, “Oh no, not a good idea. Not a good idea, go to the ‘O’.” He wants me to go to the ‘O’ and hope I get drafted [to the NHL] and then go play pro so he can make money. He didn’t care about me at all. He just wanted to make money.

Clearly, Matt felt his agent was more concerned with his own financial rewards than with his client’s well-being and the relationship ended shortly after Matt decided to play in the NCAA.

Overall, most of the interviewees felt their agents did not exert a significant level of influence on their perceptions of the OHL or their decision-making. Most saw their agents much less in the capacity of advisors and more as individuals who facilitated a path the player-consumer had chosen to take. Generally, respondents felt their agents would provide relevant information on the alternative options for their hockey future and let the players themselves make the choice. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Larry explained:

...either way he didn’t mind at all. He explained whatever way you want to go. He exposed me to both ways as well, he just told me - he was very honest about it, so that’s one thing I knew he didn’t mind either way. He could have tried to influence me but he didn’t at all...he just explained either way it doesn’t matter, he actually has some people that are in the NCAA, so and they are getting exposed to the NHL, a couple are expected to get drafted to the NHL, so he
realized that you can go from either way as well, its just a matter of what style you are.

NCAA Rookie Oscar noted how his agent, “provided options for me; he supported either way.” Affiliated consumer Steve recounted a similar view, “he explained ‘look, this is what you have for NCAA; this is what you have for OHL. You decide’.” OHL Rookie Russ explained, “They just basically set both things out on the table, showed me what they [OHL team and NCAA school] offered, and then let me decide.”

OHL Rookie Buck perhaps summarized the views of many of the respondents on the issue. He explained, “I think they needed to know which way I was leaning towards, then they just fluff it up a little bit for me. They explained whatever you want we’re happy. We’re behind you, whatever you do.”

Coaches

The second group of “hockey people” who were believed to exert some influence on players’ perceptions and decisions were team coaches. These coaches are not to be confused with the influence of coaches in the OHL that was addressed in chapter four: league-related antecedents of brand equity. The coaches under investigation here are the “minor” hockey coaches who may have influenced player-consumers’ perceptions prior to and during their decision-making processes. Generally, coaches were seen to be more influential than were agents. Over half of the respondents felt their minor hockey/Tier II coach(es) had some influence in shaping their perception of the OHL. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Lucas explained, “he actually talks to me about the OHL route a lot and he’s pretty fond of the OHL, of the OHL route.” OHL Rookie Barry spoke of the influence his coach had on his perception of the OHL when he was considering which
developmental path to pursue, stating, "...he coached me last year and steered me
towards the OHL as the place to go." OHL Rookies, Lou and Harry, offered insights into
the influence coaches had on their perceptions of the OHL. Lou explained, "He told me
my style of game was more of an OHL style, as opposed to an NCAA style." Harry
recalled similar sorts of discussions, "He explained it’s a great league to play in, it’s elite
and all this stuff. He pushed towards me playing here." Another OHL Rookie, Tim, was
disenchanted with his former coaches who advised him to pursue an NCAA scholarship.
He felt that the fact that he could continue to play Tier II hockey for two more years
while completing high school, if he chose to go to the NCAA, had influenced their
advice.

...my coach put a lot of pressure on me to stay - more than he should have cause
he wanted me to stay - to go to the NCAA, just because he wanted me to play for
[him for] another couple of years ... he was more self-interest than my-interest.

Tim clearly believed that his coach offered that advice in order to retain an
excellent goaltender for the team, rather than in his (Tim’s) best interests. Affiliated
consumer Malone offered similar thoughts on how coaches may act in their own interests
in this context. Referring to his own coach he explained, "...he influences me NCAA
cause he wants me to play for him...he’s an OHL guy, but he wants to be first, kind of
covering his own butt a little. But, I mean, everybody does that.” It is interesting that
Malone thought of his coach as an “OHL guy” (pro-OHL) but clearly, if these are not
isolated cases but part of a wider tendency, then the advice offered by Tier II coaches
may damage the Major Junior leagues. However, the perception of the advice of coaches,
as reported by the interviewees, was not all one-sided. Some interviewees claimed their
coaches were/had advising/advised them to go to the OHL and, on occasion, this was also
felt to be out of self-interest. Karl, a Draft Eligible consumer, explained, “...this year they all want me to get drafted in the top round, you know what I mean? I'm sure they, they want me to get drafted cause it looks good on them.” NCAA Rookie Kevin recounted his feelings about the situation with his minor hockey coach:

I think he kind of would have liked to see me go to the ‘O’ cause that was draft year and, it's just kind of like, you know, not necessarily to look good on him, but like, you know, they’re hockey guys!39

The fact that the coach was a “hockey guy”, or an individual who put hockey above other pursuits such as education, reinforces the stereotypes present in the OHL. The implication is that playing in the OHL would be the route chosen by other “hockey guys” and this too would reflect positively on the coach in the sense he had developed another “hockey player.” In addition to the feeling that players selected in the draft (and particularly in the early rounds) enhanced a coach’s reputation, there was also one reference to financial considerations. OHL Rookie Shane spoke of a monetary incentive that could have motivated his Tier II coaches to advise him to play in the OHL:

...well, my Tier II coaches, they influenced me last year to go to the OHL for obvious reasons, I mean, they're going to make money off of me getting drafted in the first round, so I mean, that's one reason I guess. They get $4,000, or 2,500 bucks, or 4,000, something like that so, and they don’t get anything from the NCAA.

Shane was the only participant to discuss the compensation minor hockey teams receive when a player is drafted and signed by an OHL team. This may have arisen from a misunderstanding of the mechanism of compensation, where the money is paid to the

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39 The reference to his coach being a “hockey guy” relates to the conversation about education and commitment to schooling in the OHL versus a focus on the game.
organization from which the player was drafted rather than to individual coaches. Also, while the sums in question may be of some consequence for individuals, as far as the organizations involved are concerned the sum is insignificant. During an informal conversation with an OHL manager the money was described as “pocket change.” Clearly then, such sums were not considered sufficient to influence the advice coaches may offer to players.

Some of the participants recounted how their coaches’ advice, particularly perhaps when based upon the coach’s own experience, had been influential in shaping their perceptions of the OHL brand, and influenced their decision-making. Three NCAA Rookies, Marvin, Morris, and Matt each recalled particular instances. Marvin explained,

...he actually talked to me about how he wished he would have played in the NCAA - he played with [OHL team] I guess when they were in the OHL, or the CHL I guess. A lot of schools were calling him when they wanted me to come visit and he kind of related to me how he felt about what he did. And I think it’s kind of different when you talk to a guy who’s played in the NHL, and you go to his house and the place is just massive. Like, I think, you know what I mean? - the guy pretty much has everything he wants and for some reason that’s one of his regrets [not playing in the NCAA].

NCAA Rookie Morris had played for the same coach in Tier II junior and recounted similar feelings, “I mean, he played in the OHL, but the feeling I got from him, after playing for him for a year was, if he would have done it again he would have gone to college.” NCAA Rookie Matt described a conversation with his Tier II coach that proved to be extremely influential in his brand decision, stating:

Like, there was times when I was in [Tier II team] and, you know, early in the year when I wasn’t getting a lot of school [NCAA university] attention - and I was leading the league in scoring at one point and I hadn’t talked to one school and I was kind of like ‘well coach, you know, I think I’m going to go play in the ‘O’. He’s like ‘That’s not a good idea for you. Just keep sticking it out here; things will work out, I guarantee it’. And then, like, two weeks
later, schools [NCAA universities] were calling me you know? Putting options on the table ... he’s a real good coach, very pro-NCAA ... He’s like go play, why not get a free education, better hockey, and then you’ll be 22 and if you don’t play pro you can get yourself a job you know, and get started on life. If not, go play pro and you’ll have your degree and no one can take that away from you.

This coach was clearly an influence on Matt. Clearly the security of an education while developing hockey skills (as noted previously) was an influence for this coach. The recognition that this coach was “very pro-NCAA” because of the educational packages offered as part of that option, was evident in his advice to Matt. Other coaches offered similar views. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Max stated, “My coaches told everybody on the team to go the NCAA route … they explained to get an education.” Put in these terms, it seems that these coaches discounted the educational opportunities offered through the OHL virtually out of hand.

Affiliated consumer Buzz also felt that his Tier II coach was significant in influencing his perception of the OHL by specifically promoting the NCAA route in at least two ways: explicitly, through expression of his views and less explicitly, through a strong history of players from the team going to the NCAA. He explained:

...he doesn’t force me one way or the other but he definitely sends a lot of guys to the NCAA, and he definitely pushes that view upon you, and you see the benefits. But, he doesn’t say “you have to go this way or that way.” But, definitely, the odds are stacked NCAA when you come here and play for a coach like that.

Of the respondents who felt their minor hockey coach(es) was not a major influence in shaping perceptions of the OHL, few totally dismissed the role these individuals played. These players were more likely, as was the case with the agents/advisors, to think of their coach as an individual to help facilitate their own preferences for their future. Affiliated consumer Jerry described the role of his coaches,
"At the beginning of the year they [coaches] asked me what way I wanted to go and explained that they would help me get there so, they were willing to do that." Draft Eligible consumer Kris offered a similar story of his relationship with his minor hockey coaches, "I mean, they don’t really push you or say, ‘yeah, you should go to the OHL’, they just let you do your thing." OHL Rookie Russ also discussed the relatively *laissez-faire* approach by his coach when they discussed his future in hockey: "Last year he asked me what I was gonna do, and from there he would talk to me about it. Like, he wouldn’t push me either way; just ask me what I was gonna do, and I’d tell him."

Similarly, Sully, an NCAA Rookie explained succinctly. "I guess it was my own decision and ones [coaches] that I had in Junior [Tier II] just helped push that along."

Overall, it seemed that minor hockey coaches were more influential than were players’ agents in shaping these young players’ perceptions of the OHL and ultimately, their developmental decision of OHL versus NCAA. However, while more influence appeared to exist, there was no consistent pattern of advice offered by coaches. Some seemed to favor the OHL as an option for their players, others the NCAA, while many simply tailored their advice to particular players and their circumstances. One of the major reasons for coaches offering advice to go to the NCAA was based upon educational considerations. In short, a number of coaches seem to feel that the NCAA is the better (if not the only real) way of getting an education through playing hockey. Let us now consider friends and family as sources of influence on players’ brand perceptions.

**Friends and Family**

The role of friends and family as an influence in consumers’ decision-making is well recognized (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1990; Moschis, 1987; Reynolds & Wells,
The data generated from the interviews indicated that this category could be further broken down into four subcategories of teachers, peer groups, siblings, and parents.

Teachers

Overall, teachers are of interest if only for their lack of perceived influence in shaping these young players perceptions of the OHL. Only two of the 54 participants acknowledged any level of influence from teachers, a low number given the role of teachers in the lives of students. Of interest, the “advice” followed historical stereotypes: OHL for hockey development to attain a career in the NHL and NCAA for the education. Stuart, an Affiliated consumer, recalled how some teachers had favored the Major Junior option when he had expressed an interest in pursuing an NCAA scholarship. He states, “they explained, ‘don’t rule out the OHL or anything like that because, you know, you could get to the NHL quicker’.” On the other hand, OHL Rookie Barry had different advice from his teachers. He was, he explained, leaning towards taking the Major Junior option, but had “teachers talk to me about going NCAA [shrugs] – because of the schooling.” It may be that in these instances teachers were keen that neither Stuart nor Barry ruled out any option too quickly, rather than actively seeking to influence their decision. Of the other 52 respondents, none felt their teachers had any real influence on shaping their perception of the OHL or decision-making, an interesting finding given the role of teachers in the lives of students.

Peer Groups

Moschis (1987) claims that, “peers can influence a youth’s consumer behaviors directly via several communication processes, including reinforcement, imitation, and
social interaction processes” (p. 104). Each of these forms of influence was found to exist amongst those interviewed. Typically, influence seemed to be based on peer dynamics. Firstly and relatively unsurprisingly, hockey peers, especially those who were slightly older, tended to promote the developmental route they had themselves chosen. This would support the work of Donnelly and Ivancevich (1970) who noted that ‘buyers’ are more receptive to items they themselves had purchased. Secondly, school friends (not involved in their hockey circle) placed a greater emphasis on the OHL. This too may be relatively unsurprising, given the greater level of exposure and thus awareness of the Major Junior league in Ontario compared to the NCAA. So amongst peer groups there were at least two sources of influence. One from those peers who were choosing (or had chosen) their own future path in the game and another from those peers who did not themselves play hockey, at least at an elite level.

Those peers who played elite hockey were (or had been) in a similar situation to the participants and so discussions of the options were common. Affiliated consumer Jake explained, “We talked a lot about it. We thought, yeah, let’s try the OHL.” For Jake, this may have been a genuinely joint decision, or it may be that the desire to conform to the group view was an important factor in coming to his decision. This could be classified as a type of conformity or a form of reinforcement according to Moschis (1987). OHL Rookie Peter did not discuss a desire to conform to the group’s view but addressed the influence of those who had already been through it.

I guess from having older friends, they went that way [OHL] and the experience they had - and I always wanted to go that way and you get kind of influenced by that. But they never put any pressure on me… I guess I had a couple of friends who were older and they were playing in the OHL. It might be different if I had friends playing NCAA.
Perhaps this is a form of imitation and/or social interaction as recognized by Moschis (1987). The recognition that friends who had "gone before" could be influential in shaping brand perceptions was addressed by Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy who had "a lot of buddies already drafted." When asked if this influenced his perception of the OHL, he explained, "...yeah, it does definitely, cause just all the stories they say and stuff how fun it is and stuff like that." Stories about "fun" were influential for Jeremy; he was excited to follow in the footsteps of his older peers and join the OHL to partake in the "fun."

Affiliated consumer Buzz had friends who had taken both the major options available and in a similar way to Jeremy, he felt these word-of-mouth stories were clearly important sources of influence. Buzz noted,

Stories you hear from people, you hear stories about how great the OHL is or you hear stories about how great people or how much fun it is at university. It just makes you think and the more stories you hear the more you’re gonna be interested and look into it and find out what’s really about each scenario.

Typically, peers who had already made their own decisions on their hockey future tended to promote their chosen option, but this was not always the case and I shall deal with the sole clear exception first. NCAA Rookie Kevin recalled a discussion with an older player from his hometown, a discussion that took place when he was still finalizing his decision to play OHL or NCAA.

Kevin: ...I had a couple friends, three friends drafted to the NHL now, and so, in hockey-terms they like - I always think like how nice it would be to play pro you know?
CC: They went the junior route?
Kevin: Yeah, and that's always kept my mind on hockey. And then I've had friends from juniors [Tier II] go to D1 [Division I NCAA] schools while I was still playing juniors [Tier II] and that always influenced me so.

CC: Any specifically tell you 'this is the route?'

Kevin: Actually one of my friends [who played in the OHL], who's actually in [Minor Pro team] right now, he'd always say to me like, 'You're lucky' you know what I mean? And he just signed, like a big contract, and obviously he's very lucky but he's like, "You're lucky to be going to college" and he's like "You should keep with that." He'd always say that, so he was an influence I would say.

Davis and Dunn (2002) highlighted three distinct consumer phases: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. In the above case, the influence of this older peer was present in the “pre-purchase” phase and continued to reinforce Kevin's decision well into the “purchase” phase of consumption. More often though, those who had been through the consumption decision tended to promote their chosen option. Affiliated consumer Kelly recounted such a story of interactions he had with a friend: “…he got a scholarship to [U.S. university], so I talk to him a lot about it and he says NCAA is the way to go.”

Draft Eligible consumer Karl spoke of the influence his teammates had on his perceptions of the Major Junior brand in Ontario. “They all know this is my draft year so they all want me going to the OHL so they all want me to get drafted in the top round and go to the OHL.” He also explained that none of his teammates had offered any support for the idea of his pursuing a scholarship in the NCAA. In some instances, where respondents had initially maintained their fellow hockey peers had little or no influence on their decision-making, their subsequent comments did not entirely bear this out. The following conversation is from an interview with OHL Rookie Barry:

CC: Any influence from your peers?

Barry: Not really influence but pressure. Not to brag but I was always one of the better hockey players out of my friends so it was always a lot of pressure on me. They were always 'you're going' dah, dah, dah. You're going to do this, you're

46 By “Going” his insinuation is that he is “going to the NHL.”
going to do that’. When I got drafted [to the OHL] they’re like saying, ‘you’re going to score 100 goals’. So it wasn’t really influence; they were like, ‘do what you want’.

CC: Any friends point you to the NCAA?
Barry: NO. NO. NO.

Clearly, this involved a simple difference in terms, since none of his peers had “pressured” him to “score 100 goals” in the NCAA.

NCAA Rookie Matt, who addressed how the experiences of two friends and former teammates had influenced his perception of the OHL negatively, even though they themselves advocated that choice, deciphered an interesting form of influence. The two players had joined the OHL while Matt played in Tier II for another year while weighing his alternatives. When he went to see his friends play he was, he explained, influenced by his own interpretation of their situation. Matt explained,

I mean they kind of influenced me a little bit when they went there and weren’t playing and sitting out.41 They went the year I played in [Tier II team], they went to the ‘O’, one played in [OHL team] and one went to [another OHL team]. And they, you know, they were kind of treated like pieces of meat, you know? ‘Get out there and mix it up’ and a lot of penalty minutes and stuff. And that kind of made me think.

The influence of other peers, those who did not themselves play elite hockey, seemed just as ubiquitous. Draft Eligible consumer Kris offered a possible explanation for the generally positive views of the OHL taken by his school peers when he explained,

A lot of guys don’t really know much about the NCAA, they, like it’s not really on TV that much up here; it’s not really advertised as much up here as it is down there [United States]. The OHL, CHL, like all those leagues are advertised a lot more up here so they would probably lean towards the OHL more.

41 “Weren’t playing” alludes to his friends not receiving much ice time but actually dressing (playing) in the game. “Sitting out” actually would happen where a player does not dress at all and does not play in the game whatsoever.
Draft Eligible consumer Larry offered a similar view when he explained, “A lot of people only know about the OHL so they want the hype. Go to the OHL.” Draft Eligible consumer Rich also touched upon the same point:

**Rich:** A couple of my friends actually think, ‘Oh it would be good if you went OHL’ just cause they really like the OHL and they know a lot about it so.

**CC:** Friends within hockey?

**Rich:** Well they do play hockey, they just play house league, but they know about the OHL and they say “Oh if you got drafted that would be good.”

The fact that school peers knew much more of the OHL than they did of the NCAA emerged as a very common theme amongst respondents from all groupings. In the case of Cory, a participant who had chosen to play in the NCAA, his former school friends would, he explained, often question why he was not playing for the local OHL team because “most of them don’t know what NCAA is, you know what I mean? So they’d be like, ‘what are you thinking?’” Draft Eligible consumer Krandell also noted his friends’ lack of knowledge of the alternatives when he explained, “two of my friends want me to go OHL, or CHL route. I don’t think they know much about NCAA so they’re all about the CHL.”

Beyond the issue of general awareness of the OHL amongst the peers of player-consumers, there appeared to be some differences associated with the status of their high school. Two participants who had attended private schools during their draft year made mention of this. NCAA Rookie Morris explained:

I think [private school] in general, I mean, it’s a big deal for the [private school] community to go through there for six years and graduate; I think that was a big factor… I think just [private school] in general just being in the private school
system and because it’s such a good school, just staying there and finishing high school was a big deal.

OHL Rookie Shane, who attended a different private school, spoke of the distinct change in the mood of his school community towards the OHL after a former schoolmate was drafted, and took the Major Junior option.

I remember the whole school was you know the OHL sucks and all of a sudden he [former schoolmate] gets drafted by [OHL team and draft position] and the whole attitude of the school changed so. Some of the kids, they were just like ‘OHL’s great, OHL’s this, OHL’s that’.

Shane’s perception was that the general view that the NCAA was the preferred route for hockey development was (albeit temporarily) changed by a pupil’s success in another option. However, Shane also took time to emphasize that, in general, the collegiate route of development remained, by far, the “preferred path” for those players who attended private schools. In one other instance, a participant who did not attend a private school but was an outstanding student spoke of his friends’ awareness of prominent American universities. Affiliated consumer Blair explained:

a lot of them [peers] really don’t follow hockey that much so they don’t really know OHL and where it’s ranked on the level, but a lot of them know about NCAA where you have Yale and Michigan and all those - well they just know the schools [universities] and know that there’s hockey there.

Clearly, awareness of the more prominent universities, those that have a reputation in Canada, can influence peers in providing advice to player-consumers. From where those individuals receive their information on the American universities is, however, unclear. Much like his discussion regarding the influence of coaches on his
brand perceptions and decision-making, OHL Rookie Tim spoke of the influence school-peers had on his perceptions and of the possibility that their advice was self-serving.

Well, I think all my friends wanted me to go NCAA; they wanted me to stay at home for a couple of years, but I knew that coming to [OHL team] was the right decision; it would be a good place for me to develop and learn new things. They wanted me to stick around, cause they’d like to see me play again and cause [prospective NCAA school] is about an hour away from where we live so, a lot of my buddies go up to see my brother play every weekend.

Clearly, Tim felt his friends’ advice was based less on his personal development than it was based on keeping their social group intact and maintaining the possibility of watching him play. While Tim was able to take a relatively detached view of this influence and eventually went to the OHL, his friends’ views still mattered and made his decision more difficult.

While it is clear that peers could play a role in influencing perceptions of the OHL, the sentiment was not unanimous. Approximately half of the respondents believed that peers were not influential in shaping perceptions of the OHL. However, where a peer influence was recognized, it was most influential when it came from older, hockey-playing peers who typically promoted the route they had chosen. In general, the influence of other school friends was their positive view of the OHL, with the apparent exception of those who attended private schools.

The final two components to be considered under the antecedent of Friends and Family relate to the influence of siblings and parents. The importance of these familial groups has been recognized in consumer behavior literature where Moschis (1987) notes, “the family context of interpersonal communication is believed to have the greatest influence on consumer socialization” (p. 73). Reynolds and Wells (1977) write,
"probably the single most influential consumer stimulus is other family members" (p. 280). To those individuals we now turn.

**Siblings**

Typically, siblings’ influence on player-consumers’ perceptions of the OHL was quite subtle where it existed and was largely dependent upon relative statuses in terms of sport, age, and gender. Generally, a sibling’s influence was greatest, when he was an older brother who played elite hockey. Conversely, the views of younger sisters, who did not play hockey, were discounted. In fact, the views of all younger and/or female siblings were routinely dismissed as an influence on perceptions of the Major Junior league. The views of older, male siblings might also be ignored if they had primary interests other than hockey, or did not play at the “required” standard. For example, Rich, a Draft Eligible consumer, explained of his brother “no [he does not influence], he’s more into his band now.” Max a Draft Eligible consumer addressed the second condition when he explained, “I’m the only one in rep so, not really.” This pattern is, of course, related to the participant’s view of those siblings’ credibility on the issue, as people are more likely to believe and/or be influenced by a message if the source is credible (Shank, 2002). So, while the majority of player-consumers dismissed the idea that their siblings had influenced their perceptions of the OHL, there were some instances where older brothers had helped shape their views to varying degrees. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Kris explained, “I’d probably say my brother [has influenced his thinking the most], cause he’s, I mean, by the time I get to his age he’ll likely be at a college [university] somewhere down in the States.” When asked if his brother’s choices could influence him,

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42 “Rep” is the term used to describe “representative” teams or “select” teams that indicates a superior level of competition versus “non-rep” or “house-league” teams.
Kris stated, “Yeah. I want to go NCAA too.” Affiliated consumer Craig spoke of the influence of an older sibling on his perceptions of the OHL, “my brother told me that NCAA would probably be a better route for me. Just the way I play, my size, and the education part of it.” Elements in this advice are based upon some more widespread perceptions of the OHL, dealt within the league-related antecedent section pertaining to playing style and education. NCAA Rookie James recounted how his brother’s experiences in the OHL influenced his decision to play hockey in the NCAA, although his brother never attempted to influence him directly. For James, observing his brother’s struggles with “moving away at 16” to play in the OHL, and “not always maturing in the right direction” influenced his views of playing in the OHL. Sully, an NCAA Rookie was also of the opinion that siblings influenced the way he perceived the OHL, “I think it has to do with my brothers, older brothers who told me what they thought would be the best plan.” Two of Sully’s older brothers played Tier II junior hockey in their hometown, “the oldest one wanted to go NCAA, it just didn’t kind of work out for him.”

OHL Rookie Tim was in an interesting position because his brother was a NCAA rookie while he had chosen the OHL developmental path. Tim recounted the influence of his brother’s decision to play in the NCAA on his own perceptions of the OHL and his subsequent decision-making. He recognized, “that certainly influenced me a bit to go with my brother and get the same scholarship that he did. He went to [University], a very good school, a lot of great facilities down there … this is my first time doing anything without my brother.” Tim wanted to make it clear that his brother never tried to pressure him to join the NCAA, rather that the influence was unintended. It was simply the fact
that his brother had chosen the collegiate route had made him wonder if he should do likewise.

Overall, there emerged a relatively clear and quite predictable pattern in that older brothers, at least those who played representative hockey themselves, had a significant influence upon the thinking of their younger brothers. The views of younger brothers or sisters of any age tended to carry little or no weight. There was only one partial exception to this pattern, described by NCAA Rookie Marvin. While as in other cases, his sister’s views on the relative merits of the OHL and NCAA were of no consequence, her existence was an influence. As he explained,

the only thing that I thought was that maybe the OHL cause, you know, as an older brother, you kinda want to protect your sister and if you live closer to home [shrugs]. But that would have been the only thing. I think she kinda liked the whole school [NCAA university] thing as well.

Save for this example, sisters seemed to exert no influence whatsoever.

Parents

It is argued that parents can and often do, exert a considerable influence on their children’s decisions (Moschis, 1987; Wells & Prensky, 1996; Wilson & Cote, 2002), including brand perceptions. Amongst the interviewees, the influential role of parents seemed to be more readily acknowledged than was the influence of agents, coaches, teachers, friends, and siblings, although there was still a divergence of views. Almost a third of all respondents believed that their parents were not influential in shaping their perceptions of the OHL, with this view being held by a greater proportion of OHL Rookies than it was by any other sub-sample. In fact, there was almost unanimity amongst this group (OHL Rookies) that their parents had exerted no influence, but it is
not clear whether there would be a reason (other than chance) for this difference.

However, what was also clear was that almost all of the interviewees (OHL Rookies included) had actively discussed their hockey future with one or both parents. Indeed, it would have been surprising if they had not. Moschis (1987) argues that, “communication with family members, both overt and cognitive, plays an important role in shaping consumer learning” (p. 75). Therefore, it may be possible that while respondents may believe their parents had “no influence” on their perception of the OHL, an influence may still have existed. Draft Eligible consumer Krandell may be an example of this latent influence when he states that, “every now and then, like, they kind of ask me questions, kind of like these, but they basically say ‘wherever you want to go you gotta push yourself and do it’.” Affiliated consumer Buzz explained, “it’s pretty much up to me, what I want to do; he [father] just provides me with as much information for my decision.” OHL Rookie Paul explained, “I think my Dad likes the OHL cause it’s a little bit closer...like we’re pretty new to this I guess...but you know, I guess, either way they’re supportive of me, what I wanted to do, so they told me it’s up to me pretty much.”

Affiliated consumer Craig explained,

he never explained anything because he supported what I wanted, but I’m sure if it came down to it he wanted NCAA too, like that’s what he would want for me just because of the education, but he never came out and explained ‘I’d rather you go here’. He supported what I wanted, and he gave me the pros and cons, but deep down I know he wanted me to go NCAA.

OHL Rookie Barry explained,

my parents have always just left hockey in my hands. If I didn’t want to go to practice I didn’t have to. If I wanted to quit hockey, if I wanted to quit right now, my Dad would be like ‘OK’. It’s just my choice...He wanted me to go here for

\[4\] Of interest, “closer” is noted in this particular case because Paul was playing for an OHL team very close to home however as noted, should Paul be traded there is no guarantee that he will remain “closer.”

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sure. He didn’t pressure me, or anything, but this is where he wanted me to be. NCAA, I mentioned it to him, he just sort of laughed.

In the majority of cases where respondents reported their parents having no influence, they were still aware of their parents’ preference and that knowledge may have been an unacknowledged factor. In Barry’s case, it may be difficult to understand how a father “laughing” at the suggestion he pursue a scholarship in the United States might not have some sort of influence on a 15 year-old making a significant life decision.

Most of those interviewed and the majority in subgroups other than the OHL Rookies, offered the view that parents did have an influence in both shaping perceptions of the OHL and influencing their consumption decision. It seemed that fathers were far more likely to exert an influence than were mothers, but that does not mean the latter were without influence. For example, Morris explained:

... it’s kind of funny, my Dad would have liked it either way, if I had gone OHL or if I had gone to the NCAA, but I think my Mom really had a problem with me moving away early ... I think it was a big deal for my Mom. She really wanted me to go the college [NCAA university] route, but for my Dad, I don’t think he would have minded either way.

Some other participants also highlighted their mothers’ concern over their sons leaving home at a relatively young age perhaps coupled with misgivings about their sons’ education during their time with the OHL. For example, Bruce, an NCAA Rookie, explained:

Well, my Mom was kinda fixed on me going NCAA. She didn’t really want me going to the OHL. Well, she’s a school teacher, so she kind of pushed the academic [sic] view on me, and my Dad was kind of indifferent, as in, just for me to make the best decision.

NCAA Rookie Cory recounted a similar story as captured in the following dialogue:
Cory: My Mom is a school teacher so she was kind of like, all education, education. She supported me with hockey, but she was always like, education, pushing education – so I thought, not to make her happy, but you know, maybe Mom does know what she’s talking about. Yeah, it pushes you.

CC: And your Dad?
Cory: Yeah, he wants me to, he just wants me to do well in whatever I do, you know. If I went on to the ‘O’ it wouldn’t have bothered him.

It may or may not be significant that both of these mothers who clearly preferred the NCAA on educational grounds were themselves school teachers. No other parents amongst the sample participants were school teachers so it is impossible to know if this is just a coincidence or a deeper trend amongst school teacher-parents with elite hockey-playing children. Very commonly, other respondents who claimed their parents (more often fathers) had given them advice on the future were also dubious of the academic aspect of playing in the OHL. For example, Draft Eligible consumer Rich explained:

my Dad, he kind of, had a verbal agreement with Wisconsin State but he decided to take the OHL route and he explained he regrets it so. And he tells me all the time, you should go the NCAA route, if you get a scholarship offer don’t turn it down 'cause you’ll regret it.

NCAA Rookie Kevin too explained that his father was keen to emphasize the importance of education.

Kevin: He’s always been, not hard on me but he’s always really made sure I knew that, like, college [university] is a big thing. School [university], like whether I was gonna go to the OHL or not, he always wanted me to be in school [university] so yeah, he was a big influence on that.

CC: And your mom?
Kevin: My mom’s kinda the typical mom, you know like ‘Whatever makes my boy happy’ type-thing and wishes - you know, but education is big for her too.

NCAA Rookie Bill had a very similar response:

Bill: Yeah, he [father] influenced my decision. He was always pro NCAA, he always drove home education and things like that.

CC: And your Mom?
Bill: Yeah, not so much, but she definitely thought the education was a big part of it as well.

NCAA Rookie Sully, when recounting why his parents were such advocates of the NCAA, explained that “they always kind of pushed education. Well, I wouldn’t say pushed but emphasized education was important, and would help me later on.”

Talking of his father, Draft Eligible consumer Kramer explained, “he’s probably influenced me the most…my Dad wants me to get my education paid for so NCAA is where he wants me to go.” Draft Eligible consumer Kris explained, “I think generally by what he’s seen with [brother] he’d probably prefer to see us go the college route.”

Affiliated consumer Malone who recounted his father’s influence explained, “he definitely wants me to go NCAA because of the schooling and he doesn’t want me to be there, like in the OHL, and be around for four years and come back as an ‘overager’ and not do anything with my life.” In some instances, the more extended family also offered views. Affiliated consumer Blair spoke of his uncle as a fatherly influence.

He says the OHL was the route to go 20 years ago, but now you have an equal amount of NHL’ers coming from both and you get a degree this way and the other way you have to go back to school afterwards so, he leans towards the NCAA after going through it.

There were then, a number of responses that clearly indicated that in the minds of the parents of these talented young players, the educational benefits of the NCAA far outweighed those on offer through the OHL and, subsequently, the CIS. It is impossible, without further research, to know why these parents held the views that they did.

However, that fact that they held these views and that these views were influential in
shaping perceptions of the OHL and on the decision-making processes of player-consumers, has clear implications for the OHL.

A smaller proportion of respondents who acknowledged their parents’ influence reported that their parents favoured the OHL option, although this was never based upon educational considerations. Some of these parents based their opinions on the belief that a superior level of hockey was to be found in the OHL; some others seemed keen their sons “followed in footsteps.” In relation to parental influence Draft Eligible consumer Jeremy explained:

Jeremy: He played for [OHL team] and [OHL team] and had a couple of walk-ons4 with Edmonton and Calgary and it just didn’t pan out or anything like that. 
CC: He have any thoughts: NCAA versus Junior?
Jeremy: I really. I think he really wants me to go CHL kinda. But, I think that’s more family influence, cause you just grow up you played there and stuff like that, and, I don’t think he’s ever known too much about NCAA or anything like that so, that’s why.

Later, Jeremy went on to state, “I think my Dad’s probably the biggest influence, I mean he played there, I kind of want to do the same sort of thing like that.” The desire to follow in his father’s footsteps appeared to be a powerful influence on Jeremy’s view of the OHL brand. Other player-consumers also highlighted their fathers’ positive view of the OHL. Draft Eligible consumer Eric explained, “my Dad actually does influence me; he’d rather me go to the OHL.” Affiliated consumer Jake explained, “well, my father’s more towards more the OHL, he sees it as a ‘pro route’, like that’s the way he looks at it for me.” Jake’s father still clearly sees the OHL in its traditional role as the “supplier” for the NHL. OHL Rookie Shane also acknowledged the influence he received from his parents.

4 A “walk-on” is a try-out. A player is invited to “audition” even though they had not been drafted by a particular team.
I think they did, they just wanted what was best for me ... having been drafted to [OHL team] being so close to home having a great coaching staff, we all just decided, I took everyone’s input in and just made the best decision for me which was to come here.

It may or may not be revealing that amongst those participants who claimed their parents had little or no influence on their decision, more of them favoured the OHL option, whereas those who acknowledged parental influence were more likely to favor the NCAA. Overall, the greater number of parents who expressed an opinion seemed to favour the NCAA and tended to do so on educational grounds.

Conceptual Framework Developed

Before a summary of this chapter is completed a conceptual framework, derived as a consequence of the data generation and analyses that emerged from this research, is presented (see Figure 6.1). The framework is based upon the comments and views of the junior-aged players that have been communicated in the preceding three chapters. Specifically, the data allowed for development of the shaded dimension of the conceptual framework.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the influence of the media and a range of individuals on player-consumers’ perceptions of the OHL. The media and particularly television, gave respondents a high level of awareness of the OHL, an awareness that provides the Major Junior league with a competitive advantage - currently. However, capitalizing upon that initial advantage in terms of the choices made by player-consumers seems to be something of an increasing challenge faced by league managers.
Figure 6.1: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Brand Equity of the OHL from the Player Perspective.

League-Related Antecedents
- League Awareness
  1. General awareness
  2. Historical awareness
  3. Organizational or team awareness
- Priority Draft
  1. Age drafted
  2. Pre-draft communications
  3. Team ownership of players' rights
- Associations of OHL Culture
  1. Players' physiques
  2. Style of play
  3. Connections to the NHL
- Skills Development
  1. Development in a commercial enterprise
  2. Hockey development
  3. Personal development
- Education
  1. Associations and stereotypes
  2. Perceptions of the CIS
  3. Financial reasons

Market-Related Antecedents
- Politics
- Hometown
- CIS
- NCAA
  1. Awareness
  2. Style
  3. Atmosphere
  4. Development
  5. Education

Socializing Agent Antecedents
- Media
  1. Television
- Hockey people
  1. Agents
  2. Coaches
- Friends and Family
  1. Teachers
  2. Peer groups
  3. Siblings
  4. Parents

Brand Equity
Awareness
Perceived Quality
Associations
Loyalty
Other Assets

Consequences of Brand Equity

Market Perception
Any influence exerted by players’ agents seems to be modest, but where it exists, more often than not it is a positive influence for the OHL. Their influence may be at modest levels at least in part because some respondents felt that agents can act in their own, rather than their clients’ interests. Minor hockey coaches are seen to be extremely influential for some but for others, coaches were seen to simply help reaffirm players’ own decisions – with the latter view more common. It was less likely, than with player agents that coaches were seen to be acting from self-interest in the advice they offered to players, but some participants perceived ulterior motives.

Friends and family are, generally, the most significant groups of socializing agents in terms of the influence they seem to exert upon potential players’ perceptions of the OHL and their developmental decisions. Peers, both those who played hockey themselves and others, exert some degree of influence on player-consumers. Non-hockey-playing peers are far more likely to advocate the OHL as a route for development, perhaps stemming from their knowledge of NHL players who had arrived via that league. For them, the thought that a friend could play in the NHL may override any other considerations. Unsurprisingly perhaps, peers who played representative hockey themselves were far more likely to advocate their own preferred (or chosen) option.

Siblings, with the exception of older, hockey playing brothers, are not seen as a significant influence on perceptions of the OHL for player-consumers. These older brothers can be extremely influential in shaping perceptions of the league. It seems that once the talent from a family is secured any further talent that family produces (i.e., younger brothers) is likely to choose the same option. The significant exception to this
theory was NCAA Rookie James who saw first hand the problems his older brother experienced moving away from home to play in the OHL. In contrast, the opinions of sisters, younger brothers, and older brothers whose interests lay elsewhere, were routinely discounted.

It is not unexpected that parents, overall, seemed to have more influence than any other group of individuals. Where participants acknowledge that influence, it is more often fathers who offer advice on the future, though mothers too have some influence. Where parental opinions were revealed, the majority of parents saw the NCAA as the better option for their son and almost all of them did so on the basis that they believed the educational package on offer there was superior. Where respondents believed their parents had little or no influence on their decisions, more of them favoured the OHL. Given that the majority of respondents acknowledged their parents’ influence, parental views on the quality of education on offer through the OHL is a potential problem for league managers.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Carter and Rovell (2003) note that, “branding is critically important to businesses, both large and small, because it contributes to business success” (p. 208). Although branding is more than “just” a marketing function the interplay between brand building and marketing is apparent. Recognizing that the branding process begins prior to a consumption decision and continues long after the prospect has made this initial consumption decision (Davis & Dunn, 2002), it is necessary to utilize marketing initiatives to build a “powerful brand.” In turn, a powerful brand will serve to maintain and enhance marketing efforts. Clearly, therefore, a greater understanding of player-consumers’ perceptions of the OHL is important for managers of the OHL and would enhance their ability to attract the very best prospective players to the league. Gladden et al. (2001) recognize the need for managers to ascertain all they can about their consumers and prospective consumers. Keller (1998) too believes that the strongest brands will excel by “better understanding the needs, wants, and desires of consumers” (p. 633). The purpose of this research study is to produce such a “better understanding.” Gladden et al. (1998) describe brand perception as “the product of antecedents, established equity, and consequences of established equity” (p. 5). Therefore, those perceptions can and often do change over time and it is the task of those managing the brand to position it to it’s best advantage in the minds of potential consumers – here, player-consumers. Promoting positive marketplace perceptions and managing negative associations in order to increase brand equity achieves this. In this regard the interpretation of an organization’s positioning can be aided through the utilization of perceptual maps (Shank, 2002). Figure
7.1 shows a two-dimensional perceptual map of the OHL's brand equity and the influences on that equity, as interpreted through this research study of player-consumers. To interpret this perceptual map, for example, the level of hockey played immediately and the connection to the NHL are core strengths that positively influence OHL brand equity. Compared with these elements, the risk of "being cut" by a team is seen as a weakness of the OHL brand and a negative influence on the league's brand equity.

There are a number of examples where brands have been turned around through enhancement of brand equity. Davis and Dunn (2002) note adidas, IBM, Continental Airlines, and Apple computers as some of the most notable "turnaround" brand stories who "had the right leaders, the right plan, and the right brand strategy" (Davis & Dunn, 2002, p. 23). The right brand strategy would almost certainly have been achieved through a clear understanding of the consumers' "wants" from the brand. As Gladden et al. (1998) note, "understanding which antecedents produce the desired consequences will allow enhancements to be made that will augment brand equity through feedback loops" (p. 15). Similarly, understanding which antecedents produce undesirable consequences will allow managers the opportunity to address these concerns to avoid reducing equity through the same feedback loops. Ultimately, it is well to remember that both positive and negative change in brand equity is possible.

Before considering the conclusions, recommendations, and implications of wider research derived from this study, care must be taken when considering the transferability of findings. Obviously, no two player-consumers' experience with respect to the OHL, or indeed their 'world views' will be identical in every respect. Player-consumers will
Figure 7.1: Perceptual Map of the Influences on OHL Brand Equity

**Positive Influence on OHL Brand Equity**

- Highest level
- Connection to NHL
- Hockey development
- Coaches
- Former players
- Number of games

**Perceived OHL Weakness**

- Atmosphere
- Personal development
- Style of play
- Safety net
- Facilities
- Players' physiques
- Hockey focus

**Perceived OHL Strength**

- Perception of aptitude
- Understanding packages
- Travel
- Trades
- Commitment to Education
- Age kids move away
- Perceptions of the CIS

**Negative Influence on OHL Brand Equity**
come to this point in their lives with a personal biography that has at least some unique aspects. That explained, there are many similarities to be found in the way these player-consumers (or sub groups of them) viewed some antecedents of the OHL brand and there were even some majority views. While the chances of the sample used here being representative of player-consumers more generally cannot be estimated, however, I have no reason to believe these participants were systematically atypical of other junior-aged players considering their hockey future. Some participants recognized that there would be many other player-consumers in a similar situation, considering similar things and being faced with similar choices as did Lacousiere (1993). Draft Eligible consumer Sam felt: “It’s a really good topic cause it’s one that happens every day. Like, people think of it everyday. People have to deal with it.” By “people”, Sam was referring to the elite junior-aged hockey players in Ontario facing the same decision.

Given the purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of perceptions of the OHL brand from the player-consumer perspective, each of the antecedents utilized to achieve this enhanced understanding can be related to at least one of the five dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, proprietary assets, or brand loyalty, thus comprising the brand equity of the OHL. By managing the OHL brand to meet the needs of player-consumers, league managers can increase the likelihood of positive brand equity, and subsequently, positive marketplace perceptions. Their goal, therefore, is to control how the brand is delivered and attempt to influence positively perceptions people or organizations have of the OHL brand.

Brand management is a process that tries to take control over everything a brand does and says, and the way in which it is perceived. There is a need, therefore, to influence the perceptions of various target audiences to ensure that people see what you want them to see with respect to your brand (Temporal, 2002, p. xiii).
As a consequence, the primary focus of this concluding chapter will be on the league related antecedents, since those are the elements most amenable to management action and promotion. There is, though, one important exception that will also be considered in this chapter. In Chapter four the case was made that because of a close working relationship, Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) was a de facto extension of the OHL brand. Because of that connection this chapter will also consider how the influence of the CIS on the OHL brand should be managed.

Temporal (2002) feels that every manager should ask "one important question: What business is my brand in?" (p. 16). For example, he posits that Revlon is not a cosmetics business but a "hope" business; Nike is not an apparel business but a personal achievement business; Johnny Walker does not sell drinks, it sells the fashion of drinking whiskey (Temporal, 2002). Using a similar logic, it can be argued that since the vast majority of players drafted in the OHL will never enjoy a career in the NHL (Parcels, 1999; MacGregor, 2002), the league is as much about developing young men as it is about developing professional hockey players.

With this in mind, in this chapter, two major themes, amenable to management actions, which were most influential in shaping player-consumers' perceptions of the OHL will be considered. The first theme to be considered will be called elements of the league and includes awareness of the OHL, history and traditions of the OHL, the OHL Priority Draft, organizations in the OHL, style of play in the OHL, and development in the OHL. The second major theme that emerged is called education and will include considerations of perceptions of education in the OHL, awareness of financial packages, and the CIS. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations for enhancing the
brand equity of the OHL, a consideration of extended research implications derived from
this particular study, and suggestions for future research.

Elements of the League

Awareness of the OHL

“The equity of a brand is partly measured by the awareness which it evokes”
(Kapferer, 1992, p. 88) and the OHL certainly enjoys a significant level of recognition
amongst young hockey players in Ontario. Exposure to the league from a young age,
through media coverage and perhaps attendance at OHL games, promotes the
establishment of a relationship between those who will become prospective players and
the brand. This early relationship can be a powerful tool in the marketing arsenal for
OHL league managers as researchers have noted a trend towards initiating the branding
process by targeting young consumers (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Sakany, 2006) with
the goal of establishing brand loyalty amongst pre-teen consumers or “tweens”
(Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). However, the challenge for OHL managers is to translate
brand awareness, garnered from early interactions with the brand, into a desire for players
to want to consume the OHL product in the future as “the strongest brands are managed
not for general awareness, but for strategic awareness” (Aaker, 1996, p. 16). With respect
to a more strategic form of awareness, the perceptions of the history and traditions of the
OHL are worthy of further consideration.

History and Traditions of the OHL

Currently, player-consumers associate the OHL with those NHL stars who
developed their skills playing in one of Canada’s Major Junior leagues. However, the
reality of the situation is that very few of those who play in the OHL will make the
transition to professional hockey in the NHL (Parcels, 1999; MacGregor, 2002). Given that fact, other avenues of development, and other forms of success enjoyed by former OHL players could be promoted more actively. Presently, “success” in this league is almost exclusively defined as progression to the senior professional ranks. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to assess the numbers involved, it is certain that at least some former OHL players will have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, and/or business executives, possibly in greater numbers than go on to play in the NHL. Many more too will have graduated from Canadian universities, with the help of financial packages acquired through playing in the OHL. Perhaps then, more emphasis could be placed on other forms of success achieved by former OHL players and this may alter the perception of the league as something of a “make or break” road to professional hockey.

OHL Priority Draft

The annual Priority Draft exists as a means to distribute playing talent amongst the teams in the OHL. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to assess the effectiveness of such a function, an understanding of those factors related to the Draft that influence perceptions of the league, is of some value, including communication, and ownership.

Communication. Some players questioned the integrity of some of those working in the OHL as a result of their communications with managers and/or scouts from particular teams, prior to the Priority Draft. Some player’s felt they were “lied to” after “promises” made in these communications did not materialize. Clearly, it is impossible to know exactly what transpired during private conversations between individual players and team representatives however, it is also clear that at least some ill-will developed as a
result of these interactions. In an ideal world team officials might be prevented from speculating on a player's possible/promised Draft. However, the reality is that scouts and team managers will continue to try and influence particular players prior to the Priority Draft. At the very least though, team officials should be encouraged to exercise more care in these communications since there have been occasions where they have inadvertently alienated those they most wished to attract.

Ownership. The most significant factor related to the Draft for many potential players is the fact that once drafted, that team owns the rights to that player and most draftees have little or no choice in where they will play their hockey. For a number of participants this was problematic. A number of the NCAA Rookies felt that the ability to choose where to play Major Junior hockey would have been significant for them when assessing developmental options. Should they have been able to exercise a choice, at least four NCAA Rookies would be playing in the OHL, instead of the NCAA. A compromise between abolishing the Draft and maintaining its current format might be a significant reduction in the number of players drafted each year. In the year of research 12 rounds of the Priority Draft were conducted (not including the European draft), clearly, there is an abundance of players stockpiled in each team's system: organizations own more players than could feasibly play for the team. If more "free agents" existed (achieved through less draft rounds) there would be more players able to explore their options with any of the 20 teams in the OHL versus a drafted player assessing whether to play in the Sault (or any particular team that had obtained an individual's rights) or go to the NCAA;

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45 A round is comprised of each team selecting a player's rights thus there are twenty picks per round.
46 Each year a European Draft is conducted that allows teams to select non-North American players.
the decision would become whether to play in the OHL or the NCAA, a much broader option.

Organizations in the OHL

To some extent, perceived quality of individual organizations, including the physical quality of the playing areas and the atmosphere to be found there, contribute to the brand equity of the OHL. From the players’ perspective, a quality facility can remove some hesitations about spending four years with a team; a poor facility is, as one might expect, much less appealing. Much of the marketing literature concerns strategies for enhancing the consumption experience of paying spectators in order to achieve higher attendance (Spoelstra, 2001). For example, Mullin et al. (2000) highlight Major League Baseball’s “most effective promotions” (p. 208). However, it is clear that successful promotion will also enhance the playing experience and thus player-consumers’ perceptions of the league. It was clear from the data that players want to play in a stadium that is full of people; noisy, vociferous fans generate an atmosphere that also improves their experience of the game. Playing at a stadium where the management had been successful in generating spectator interest was an appealing prospect for many player-consumers. It is clear that where management has been less successful in this regard, efforts need to be amplified to make the venue more attractive for spectators and (prospective) players alike.

Style of Play in the OHL

The dominant view of play in the OHL is that “bigger is better.” This was the majority view of player-consumers across all sample groups, and this view is supported by observation every year in the Priority Draft where, as a rule, it is larger rather than
smaller individuals who are drafted. This apparent preference for players with more of a physical presence follows the trend seen in the NHL where average player size has increased steadily in the past thirty years (Berkowitz, 2006; Montgomery, Pearsall, & Turcotte, 2001; Wennberg & Tator, 2003). There is little doubt that the more structured style of play in the OHL (compared to a faster, more free-flowing style to be found in the NCAA where there are many physically smaller players) and the OHL teams’ preference for physically larger players are connected. However, the nature of that interdependency need not detain us here, for the underlying reason for the style of play in the OHL appears to be that it mirrors the style of hockey found in the NHL. Play in the OHL also mirrors the style in the NHL in that it is a more violent game (both within and technically outside the rules) than that found in the NCAA. While no participant reported that they felt intimidated by the prospect of regularly having to defend themselves through fighting in the OHL, this could be an issue for some players. While this aspect of life in the OHL concerns players’ physical security on the ice, there were other aspects of personal security which also played a part in many player-consumers’ decisions.

Development in the OHL

The first of these other factors refers to the fact that via the Priority Draft, playing in the OHL involved moving away from the family home for most.

Moving Away. The concern with moving away from home at a young age was voiced by a number of player-consumers. Feeling prepared to make a significant “life” decision at 16 years of age was difficult for some. The prospect of the next stage of a hockey career taking them to a new location far from the family home at that age proved, or was proving, to be an insurmountable barrier for some.
Being “Cut.” Security, in terms of maintaining a place in an OHL team was an issue that commanded a lot of thought for some player-consumers. The fear of being “cut” from their Major Junior teams was the worst case scenario for many. Although the idea that they could be traded to another team was not particularly welcomed, the prospect of being “cut” was a cause for real concern. If released by their team (particularly in the early part of their planned time there), that had real and unfortunate financial consequences. The prospect of an NCAA hockey scholarship would no longer be available to them and they would have little in the way of a financial package from their OHL team to enable them to attend a Canadian university.

Skills Development. The OHL was generally well respected amongst player-consumers as a place where players develop their hockey skills. It was seen as the better option to develop those skills valued in the NHL, for those talented enough to make the transition and was still seen as the highest level hockey available to teenagers for those who were not. Maintaining the level of play in the OHL, by attracting the best teenagers in Ontario to play in the league, should preserve this association as some of those would certainly progress to the NHL. While this association will remain beneficial for the league’s brand equity, as we shall see, managing the other side of this coin where the league is perceived as a “hockey first” or even a “hockey only”, versus a more balanced approach of scholastics and athletics perceived in the NCAA, route for development is an issue for league managers.

Education

The second major theme to emerge from the data relates to education for players joining the OHL. Educational considerations included perceptions of the type of
education players received while playing in the OHL, awareness of the financial packages available for subsequent university education and the CIS itself.

Perceptions of Education in the OHL

There was a clear feeling amongst respondents that the OHL is a league where hockey takes priority over continuing school education. It was not seen as a league where players took their academic education very seriously and often, as a result, it was not the preferred choice of player-consumers who did. This may be difficult to overcome since “consumers may be overly influenced by a previous image of poor quality. Because of this, they may not believe new claims, or they may not be willing to take the time to verify them” (Aaker, 1996, p. 20). In this case the “image of poor quality” relates to the attitude towards education. Knowledge of, or beliefs about the arduous travel schedules involved, the minimal commitment to schooling, and a predominant focus on hockey have yet to be overcome. With a significant amount of attention given to education in our society and the continuing influence of socializing agents, the OHL needs to promote the educational opportunities available to players in the OHL and indicate that these opportunities are treated seriously. Overall, “when perceived quality improves, so generally do other elements of customers’ perception of the brand” (Aaker, 1996, p. 19).

Clearly, improving the perceptions of the quality of the education on offer to players in the OHL could help improve perceptions of other elements of the league’s brand equity.

Awareness of Financial Packages

There is clearly a strong level of general awareness that players in the OHL receive some financial support from their Junior team should they subsequently decide (and qualify) to attend a Canadian university. However, the value of educational financial
packages varies across the league. The packages offered will vary from team to team, they will vary depending in which round a player is drafted and, one suspects, vary according to the skill of the player or his agent in negotiations. The lack of standardized packages creates a degree of confusion in the minds of at least some player-consumers who are not really sure what might be available to them should they go to the OHL. Affiliated consumer Craig summed up that view when he explained he was “...not aware specifically, of certain ones [education packages], but I mean, I know that you get an education package.”

The CIS

The CIS and OHL are closely connected to the point where the CIS can be considered an extension of the OHL brand. This is unfortunate since the widespread perceptions of the CIS are largely negative and are thus detrimental to OHL brand equity. The CIS is seen as being an inferior league to both the OHL and NCAA. It is viewed as a league peopled by “has beens” and “never made its.” However, it is also the league in which the Canadian universities attended by those with Major Junior education packages compete. While de facto connections exist, perhaps a more formal and strategically orientated working alliance might be beneficial for both the OHL and the CIS. "An Alliance is a philosophical partnership with other appropriate brands to enhance, leverage, and maximize an organization’s total brand equity” (Knapp, 2000, p. 186).

Carter and Rovell (2003) recognize that “mutually beneficial partnerships” (p. 131) can be powerful in brand management. For example, sharing of facilities, annual exhibition games between the junior and university squads, all-star competitions between the leagues, cross-promotions for ticket sales, and even integrating sponsorship packages
could provide synergies for the two leagues. It would also increase the exposure of the
CIS where those who have direct experience of it, report the standard of hockey played
there is actually very good. A formalized link between the OHL and the CIS could be
valuable from a player-consumer’s perspective. Rather than considering the CIS as a
“retirement home” for their playing career as they wait for an inevitable end, greater
exposure to the merits of the league could enhance the brand equity of the OHL and the
CIS could be seen as more of an extension of the Major Junior league. This may also
improve the appeal of the OHL to those player-consumers who recognize the importance
of education at the same time as they pursue hockey aspirations. It is noteworthy that
players have graduated to the NHL from the CIS including current NHL players Steve
Rucchin, Cory Cross, and P.J. Stock. Lachowetz (2000) argues that regional sport
alliances such as these will emerge more often in Metropolitan areas. The synergies of
such an alliance to retain playing talent in Canada is obviously beneficial to both the
OHL and CIS for, if a player decides to pursue a scholarship in the NCAA, neither league
will benefit from the services of that individual. Clearly, working together to offer
premium quality hockey development, coupled with access to education at a Canadian
university in an integrated offering would enhance the strategic competitive advantage of
the OHL and increase brand equity.

Reducing the perception of OHL school packages as a “safety net”, to be used if
all else fails, will serve to widen the appeal of the OHL and improve its reputation with
regard to educational opportunities, with consequent positive changes in OHL brand
equity.
Recommendations

There are three major themes that emerge from analysis of the data and, in each case, OHL management should consider action that would improve the brand equity of the league amongst player-consumers. Potential management actions on each of these themes might be termed operational initiatives, marketing initiatives, and educational initiatives. Each of these potential courses of action would affect at least one of the three antecedents – league, market, and socializing agents (see Figure 3.1) – that contribute to the brand equity of the OHL.

Operational Initiatives

Management should consider abandoning the annual Priority Draft, thereby making all junior-aged players in Ontario “free agents” and offering them the ability to choose where to play hockey and develop as individuals. The counter arguments concerning the notional spread of new talent throughout the league need consideration but as a minimum, management should consider a significant reduction in the number of rounds in the Priority Draft. This would allow a greater proportion of potential players to explore their options with any of the 20 OHL teams. This would enhance the appeal of the OHL to talented young players as their current inability (for most) to exercise any choice in the Priority Draft was an element of the OHL brand that caused much disquiet amongst the overall sample.

Second, if the Draft is to remain, OHL management should consider the introduction of a code of practice to govern the pre-Draft communications between team representatives and potential player-consumers. While a regulatory framework would be extremely difficult if not impossible to police, coaches and others should be made aware
of the significant damage inappropriate communications can inflict on the league brand. Specifically, discontinuing the practice of speculating on draft positions in pre-draft communications with player-consumers would avoid the creation of impressions that create negative brand equity when “promises” fail to materialize.

Third, management may seek to work more actively with government agencies, specifically municipalities to provide support for new and/or refurbished arenas. Economic Impact Analyses demonstrating the tangible and other benefits of teams to their communities would be useful in this regard. Adherence to minimum arena and facility specifications should be a requirement for all member teams in the OHL. By having more homogenous arena specifications the negative brand equity certain teams have because of their inferior facilities would be removed; this is especially pertinent if the Priority Draft remains a part of the OHL brand.

Fourth, the issue of travel when playing in the OHL needs attention. A perception of arduous, demanding ‘road trips’ exists amongst most player-consumer groups. The negative effect this commitment – to travel if playing in the OHL - may have on educational pursuits is cause for concern for a number of individuals when considering developmental options. While the number of games played in the Major Junior league is viewed positively for the OHL brand, the regular travel needed to play those games is not. Perhaps, a further concentration of regional games is needed to alleviate the need to travel extensive distances to play.

While recognizing that hockey is a contact sport, that fighting will never be completely eliminated and that some sections of the crowd might find it exciting, efforts should be made to reduce the incidence of violence outside the rules. A reduction in the
levels of this kind of violence and stricter enforcement of rules that prohibit slower
players from impeding faster players would allow smaller players to flourish in the
league. Given the recent changes in the style of play in the NHL, to a faster more skillful
brand of hockey, it would seem intuitive for the OHL to mirror these changes thereby
making the league more attractive to a wider range of talented players and so help
maintain - and even improve - the high level of hockey played there and further enhance
its reputation as a springboard to the NHL.

Marketing Initiatives

Managers need to maintain the so-called “top-of-mind” awareness amongst young
hockey players in Ontario. They should continue to support community initiatives such as
elementary school visits, community outreach programs, media relations projects, and
continued alliance with a national television network. Each initiative is important to
maintain the strong level of brand awareness the OHL currently has. Managing that
awareness to promote positive brand equity is the challenge for OHL managers. Two
areas to address player-consumers’ perceptions about the OHL brand include promoting
the OHL games and working with the CIS.

By attracting more fans, and more interactive fans, the atmosphere at games is
enhanced. This makes for a heightened experience for fans and players alike. While many
teams in the OHL are well supported some receive much less local support. While
specific franchises may experience particular geography or demographics, there is scope
to share “best (marketing) practice” across all franchises in the OHL. While on the ice
teams are fierce rivals, stadia full of excitable fans wherever teams play would benefit all
individual organizations and the league in general.
Work needs to be done to address the brand equity of the CIS. Given the close associations between the OHL and the CIS, the latter has become a *de facto* extension of the former in the minds of player-consumers and its current image is “unfortunate”. The primary responsibility here falls to those who administer the CIS, but as things stand negative perceptions of the CIS correspondingly affect the brand equity of the OHL. Where possible OHL management should encourage efforts to enhance the Canadian university hockey brand and consider ways in which the OHL could assist in the transformation of this negative association with their own brand.

Educational Initiatives

League managers should seek to bring to the attention of potential player-consumers the large number of former Major Junior players who have established “successful” alternative careers after playing hockey in the league. The *tradition* of developing players who move to the professional ranks in hockey is well established. In addition to that, however, the league needs to promote the fact that many ex-players go on to considerable success in other fields. A successful effort in this regard would reduce the perception of the OHL as a kind of “make or break” option where the post-playing alternatives are professional hockey or little else. Young players need to be aware that a successful career outside hockey can be theirs *via* playing in the OHL and through the educational packages on offer there. Such an effort would also involve promotion of the educational packages on offer and promotion of the importance given to a player’s schooling while playing Major Junior hockey.

These messages would be easier to communicate to potential player-consumers if educational packages were standardized across the league, or at least there was a
minimum standard across the league. This would mean that particular, highly regarded players might be able to negotiate enhanced packages in addition to this "guaranteed" level. Such packages could be paid for by individual teams but registered with and administered by the league. This would force coaches and general managers to consider very carefully whom they sign to play for their team given that they would be obligated to offer a "guaranteed" school package, but would remove an element of "risk" perceived by player-consumers as an association of the OHL brand.

Summary

This interpretive analysis of player-consumers' perceptions of the OHL sought to achieve greater understanding of the brand equity of the OHL into its constituent elements, specifically from the player-consumer perspective. On the basis of this some major areas where future management could usefully try and improve the OHL brand have been identified. Aaker (1996) notes, "a brand is a strategic asset that is key to long term performance and should be so managed" (Aaker, 1996, p. vii). As such, the research makes a contribution to the sport marketing and brand management literature in some important ways. First, the traditional interpretation of "sport consumers" - fans, participants, and corporate sponsors purchasing a product or service - is expanded to include particularly valued potential employees as consumers assessing different career options. Second, much of what was learned from the research adds to the current understanding of the creation and development of organizational brand equity: that brands exist only in the consumers' mind. Third, the findings highlighted an increased level of brand equity, from the player-consumer perspective, for organizations that were able to attract fans. Traditionally, the promotional marketing focus has been on creating a
strong consumer experience for paying customers; however, it is evident that player-
consumers also benefit from full stadia and vociferous fan support. In one other important
respect the consumption decision examined in this study is different from many others.
This is a “one off” consumption decision where the possibility of “repeat business” does
not exist. That does not mean the idea of brand loyalty has no relevance for former OHL
players; these individuals tend to become socializing agents as parents, coaches or an
advisor to a young player.

Of course there will be some aspects of individual decision-making processes that
will be unique to that individual. It is also the case that the chances of the overall sample
interviewed here being representative of the research universe from which it was drawn
cannot be estimated. That explained, I have no reason to believe that these interviewees
or the opinions they expressed are systematically atypical of other junior age players in
Ontario. As such, these data may provide OHL managers with useful information to
assess their current offerings and, at least, consider addressing some of the issues that
were perceived to detract from the league’s brand equity. Aaker (1996) uses a metaphor
of a ship facing battle to describe the brand management process. The brand manager is
the ship’s captain and must be aware of the course that the ship is on. Competitors
correspond to enemy ships; knowing their direction and strengths is important to achieve
strategic and tactical success. Perceptions of consumers are like the winds: it is important
to know their direction, strength, and possible changes. Metaphorically, therefore, the
purpose of this study was aimed at achieving a better understanding of the winds,
specifically, player-consumers’ perceptions of the OHL.
Extended Research Implications

Before concluding this chapter with an indication of proposed research initiatives to be embarked upon in the future, the significance of this research study to a wider audience will be considered. By considering players as 'consumers' who are influenced by organizational brand associations when making a purchase decision, the parameters of traditional consumers, as influenced by a brand, is expanded. The implications for such an expansion are multifold. First, the range of organizations who might benefit from such an expansion in considering the influence of their brand might include: universities attracting students (and departments within the university subsequently attracting students who are interested in a specific institution; even lecturers attracting students within the department to select their elective courses), universities attracting faculty, churches attracting clergy, churches attracting parishioners, charitable organizations attracting volunteers, doctors attracting patients, and all businesses attracting employees. In fact, taken one step further, entire industry coalitions may consider enhancing their brand equity through strategic branding initiatives. For example, the automotive industry could re-brand the profession of automobile sales. There exists, at least anecdotally, a negative perception towards retailers of previously owned cars to the point where the profession is used as a descriptor of an unsavory individual: "a used-car salesman." The insurance industry could likewise benefit from a similar branding initiative.

Second, by considering employees/volunteers/students as consumers the role of the brand manager will evolve. The specific focus of brand building as a marketing construct – to drive sales – will be augmented to include a greater level of importance in legal, human resources, and operations departments.
Finally, this greater level of importance given to the brand will lead to a greatly increased level of research on brands, branding, and brand equity. As previously discussed, the concept of 'brand' as a key business component is in its infancy. Recognizing that the literature on this topic has increased exponentially in the past decade there is certainly a lot more to be done.

Directions for Future Research

Brand Equity of other Major Junior Leagues in Canada

The OHL is only one of three Major Junior hockey leagues in Canada. It may be that there are differences, as well as similarities, in perceptions held by player-consumers of leagues across the country. Such information would be useful for those who manage those leagues.

Brand Equity of the NCAA

As the NCAA provides the primary form of competition for attracting playing talent to the OHL and almost throughout this study it provides the implicit comparison. A study of the brand equity of the NCAA in its own right, would be a valuable addition to knowledge.

Brand Equity of the CIS

Given the nature of the close connection between the CIS and Major Junior leagues, a more detailed examination of the brand equity of that league, using the framework developed here, may also provide useful data. It may indeed help those managing that brand.
Applying the Model to Free Agency in Professional Sport

In North America, where the Draft system is standard practice for young players entering the professional ranks, free agency grants players their first opportunity to choose where to ply their trade. Often, conventional wisdom posits that players adopt a mentality similar to that of character Rod Tidwell, in the Hollywood movie Jerry McGuire, where the attitude is, “Show Me the Money”; however, other factors such as coaching, opportunity for a championship, city, facility, friends and teammates could sway a player’s decision (Flemming, 2006). With the NHL and its Players Association having recently reached terms on a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) that includes a salary cap47, these other factors are going to become more important in securing players in the future. It would be interesting to ascertain what influences on the team’s brand equity were important from a free agent’s (another form of player-consumer) perspective. Dallas Mavericks owner, Mark Cuban, recognized the value of a positive brand image for recruiting free agents when he placed the finest quality towels in the visiting teams’ locker rooms. “They’ll remember how well they were treated as a visitor to Dallas,” he explained (Spoelstra, 2001).

47 A salary cap places a limit on the amount of money teams can spend on player salaries.
## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANT SAMPLE AND CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sub-Sample</th>
<th>Participant Characteristics/Profile</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>A first-round OHL draftee, Barry is totally focused on playing hockey for a living. Average height (6’0) but a large physique. Likes the hitting in the OHL game and the need to be an “all round” hockey player. Feels scholastics take a back seat in the OHL but is willing to make that sacrifice. Vocal in his disdain for the media. Exceptionally gregarious.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>A quiet individual who is committed to playing hockey professionally. Very contemplative and thoughtful. Never gave much serious thought to the NCAA route but does enjoy school. Dean lives in a city near to the team he was drafted by; Dean’s parents are able to come and see all his games.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Mike is an average sized young man (6’0) who has no problem with moving away from home to pursue his hockey development at a relatively young age noting that he was “ready to get going.” Mike grew up in a small city that he was pleased to get away from. Mike seems aware of the stereotypes of Major Junior players being less academically inclined than those individuals that pursue a scholarship in the NCAA.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seymour</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Seymour is a tall (6’3) you man who has a slight build. Having grown up in a suburb of Toronto Seymour knew players who pursued both the OHL and NCAA developmental path. A considerable influence on brand perceptions relates to scholastics – Seymour likes the OHL for its focus on hockey rather than education. Seymour feels the “OHL plays smarter” while “NCAA are smarter.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>A large young man who enjoys the fact he is living with his Dad while playing in the OHL. Mitch is focused on developing in the Major Junior league after his school grades and SAT marks were not high enough to grant him consideration in the NCAA. Mitch grew up in a small city and enjoyed success at other sports before focusing on hockey as his “sport of choice.”</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>An “un-drafted” player who was discovered at a Tier II tryout near the arena of the OHL team he now represents. Although his home is close by Paul choose to live with a billet family. A lean individual, Paul recognizes his lack of size but acknowledges that trainers in the OHL can help him get bigger. Until this year he had always wanted to go the NCAA route.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russ</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>A gifted player who is often selected to provincial and national teams. Not a physically imposing person but Russ is very tall. Russ has been committed to hockey for years moving away from the small town where his family lives at the age of fourteen to pursue a higher level of hockey. Russ notes that he is “big on school” and therefore is grateful to have been drafted by a team in the south thereby reducing time spent traveling.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>As a goalie the “style” in the OHL is of little concern to Tim. However, he acknowledges that a significant number of NHL goalies have developed their skills in the CHL and that was a significant factor in his decision-making. Tim’s brother was also a hockey player who had decided to play in the NCAA.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gus</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Gus grew up in a small city that is within two hours of his OHL team so his parents are able to come to many of his games. Gus was interested in the NCAA route but was signed mid-way through the previous season because the Major Junior team was short of players, thereby removing the NCAA option.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Shane is an extremely large young man. He recognizes that his physical attributes lend themselves to the Major Junior style of hockey. An extremely confident individual. Shane is from a very wealthy family; he attended private school prior to pursuing his OHL career. Shane was frustrated playing against the “smaller” players in previous years.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lou</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Recognizing the close link, developmentally, between the OHL and NHL is a draw for Lou. Lou is keen on the particular organization that drafted him noting that he would have looked at the NCAA option in more detail had another OHL team claimed his rights. Lou feels education is important and his overt commitment to schooling, he feels, may have hurt his draft position as OHL managers avoided selecting him, fearing he would choose the NCAA developmental route. Lou notes he is not the “tallest guy in the world” but adds that at “200 lbs” he is not small, either.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Harry is from a small town and the thought of leaving home to pursue his OHL career made him wonder, “if I can do this.” Having moved he enjoys the three-hour ‘buffer’ he has between home and his Major Junior base. However, he was “not hoping to go to Sudbury or Sault” as he “dreaded going that far.” Initially Harry considered a scholarship but he “just didn’t have the marks.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wally</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Wally is one of the smaller players interviewed however the rough part of the game did not deter him. Wally is from a rural town where NCAA scouts are “never seen” and Major Junior is the path generally taken by players with talent to pursue one option or the other.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buck</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Buck recognizes the physical nature of the Major Junior game and states that this appeals to him even though he is not a very large young man. Buck considered the NCAA but was really committed to the OHL route; however, if a team “up north” drafted him he would have had to “weigh the pros and cons”. Buck likes being close to home.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>OHL Rookie</td>
<td>Peter is a large young man who is playing in the OHL to pursue “the dream.” The ability to secure a school package is paramount for Peter because “anything can happen in hockey.” While playing in the CIS would mean his “hockey aspirations are over” he likes having the security of the OHL school package. Peter is content to be a ‘decent’ student preferring to achieve acceptable marks and focus his energies on playing hockey.</td>
<td>Working/Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cory</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Cory, at six feet and 190 pounds, is about the average size of participants interviewed. He is from a small town in rural northern Ontario where hockey is “pretty special.” Cory was hesitant about leaving home at 16 years old to play in the OHL and felt staying in Tier II and living at home would be better developmentally. Cory drew on experiences of friends who had already wrestled with this brand decision and he was influenced, negatively, by a friend from the OHL who he described as being “raked over the coals.” His mother is a schoolteacher and this, he feels, undoubtedly had an affect on his brand preference.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Kevin is a tall and lean individual from a small town in rural northern Ontario. His father was a significant influence on him promoting the educational aspects of the NCAA. Also, a friend who had played in the OHL and was playing professionally, levied a strong influence describing Kevin as “lucky” to be playing NCAA hockey. Kevin describes school and hockey as being equally important in his life.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>James is a tall (6’2”) but lean individual (180 lbs) who views the OHL as a business, first and foremost. Having witnessed the struggles his older brother endured while playing in the OHL James’ decision to pursue the NCAA developmental path was made early. James views the OHL as a hockey-first enterprise where significant travel hampers scholastic development.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie Bill is smaller than the average participant at 5’10 and 185 lbs. Bill notes his size (or lack thereof) as a reason for choosing the NCAA route. Bill applauds the OHL as a great route to develop, quickly, for the professional ranks. However, the age which players must choose to pursue this path and the “risks” to one’s education are concerns; Bill’s parents “drove home” education. Experiences of friends who had been “cut” from the OHL helped shape his brand perception. Bill’s own experience attending a CIS game also shaped his view of the OHL and the educational route associated with it, as the attendance at a CIS game was exceptionally unimpressive.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marvin</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Marvin was raised in a very affluent neighborhood where his parents highlighted the need to be educated. Growing up the awareness of the OHL was significant and he wanted to play in the league. When he was older he learned of the NCAA and elements of that brand became compelling for him, including the atmosphere in college arenas. The Draft was an issue for Marvin as was the idea of playing in the CIS where the game’s “just not funded enough.”</td>
<td>Comfortable/Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>An average size (5’11, 190lbs), Matt noted size as an issue in the OHL saying he was even smaller in his draft year and, in his opinion, this likely hurt his draft position. Pre-draft communications with OHL scouts led him to expectations that were not fulfilled and ultimately hurt his perception of the OHL brand. Similarly, Matt’s experience at his first training camp, specifically with the head coach, also negatively influenced his views.</td>
<td>Working/Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>A smaller individual, however, size is less of an issue at Bruce’s chosen position. Issues surrounding the Priority Draft including communications with OHL representatives about his projected draft status and potential repercussions to his chances of making “representative” teams factored into his brand perceptions. Ultimately, the security and education – his Mom is a schoolteacher - found in the NCAA were powerful brand associations for the college route.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morris</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Morris is a private school educated individual who was raised in an affluent neighborhood. The atmosphere in the NCAA was an influence on Morris after his minor-hockey team visited a US college when he was 14. Negative elements of the NCAA route, including a perceived bias by “representative” team selectors for OHL players and waiting two years to play in the NCAA were significant brand influences. Also, the Draft, which did not allow Morris to choose an OHL team, hurt that brand.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>One of the smallest participants Carter felt the age that a player left home to pursue their OHL career was too young. Trades in the OHL also were cause for concern in his brand assessment. His view of the CIS was very limited when he was assessing brand options but he has since realized the CIS is a good hockey league.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Oscar is one of the largest participants interviewed. He was keen on developing in the OHL but the Priority Draft presented a roadblock for Oscar, as he wouldn’t report to the team that selected his rights. This prompted him to look at alternatives and the education offered in the NCAA, along with high-level hockey, proved attractive.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sully</td>
<td>NCAA Rookie</td>
<td>Sully views the OHL as a business. The issue of trades and how these might affect a player’s development off the ice concern him. His parents highlighted the importance of education and this affected his brand perceptions.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stuart</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Stuart is a smaller participant who viewed the OHL as a league suited for large players. Stuart also is influenced by historical stereotypes of the OHL as a league where less academically inclined individuals might pursue their development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>One of the largest participants in the study Jake recognizes his style is more suited to the OHL noting, &quot;I ain't no finesse player.&quot; His father's influence is evident as he sees the OHL as the pro-route, the path he would prefer for his son. Elements of the Draft have caused some bitterness towards the OHL brand – pre-draft communications affecting perceptions - but Jake is focused on playing in the Major Junior league.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Jerry recognizes the OHL as the highest level a player his age can play and thus that is his preference. Also, the link to the NHL and &quot;the dream&quot; is compelling for the OHL brand. The age that players have to move away to pursue this path is a concern however this does seem to be an overarching influence on his brand perception.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marc</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>A &quot;small&quot; to &quot;average&quot; sized participant (5'10), Marc is wary of being &quot;cut&quot; in the OHL and then having his education negatively affected. Major Junior players, he feels, are focused on hockey rather than schooling. Marc feels big players dominate the OHL Draft and this negatively influences his perceptions of the brand.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Kelly is a tall yet very lean individual. Perhaps his slight frame is influencing his preference towards the NCAA and away from the OHL where he feels a player's size is important. Moving away from the small town where he grew up at 16 is also a significant influence on his brand perceptions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malone</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Malone is a confident young man who, currently, has a negative perception of the OHL brand. Specifically, the fact the Draft limited his ability to play for a team of his choice shaped this view. If he could have selected a team to play for he would definitely play Major Junior hockey. His father is now influencing him towards the NCAA and it appears negative associations surrounding education, the CIS, and “representative” team bias has now become an issue.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blair</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Blair is a slight but tall individual who has a family connection to the NHL – his uncle played in the league. Blair’s views of the OHL are positive in terms of the hockey development but less encouraging with respect to education. Travel demands are viewed negatively and seen as a detriment to potential scholastic success. A very strong student, Blair is leaning towards the NCAA, primarily for the educational aspects of that developmental path.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hap</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>His parents and their emphasis on schooling influence hap. The private school he attends also nurtures these feelings. Hap’s emphasis on schooling causes him to see the OHL brand negatively due to the travel schedule and a perceived lack of focus on education. The style of play in the NCAA is viewed positively for Hap although at 6’1 200lbs Hap could certainly “fit” in the OHL style.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buzz</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>The thought of leaving home at 15 was a significant concern for Buzz. As a young man Buzz feels that the OHL can be “tough on kids.” Buzz acknowledges that the OHL is a league with very skilled players, although “rookies”, he feels, may be challenged. The lack of security where a player can be “cut” is a significant influence on Buzz’s brand perceptions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>At six feet tall and 190 lbs, Steve is an &quot;average&quot; size. His preference for a fast paced game with an emphasis on skill has him leaning towards the NCAA. Steve lives in a wealthy area of a large city in Ontario and attends a private school. The fact his coach is pro-NCAA also has some influence on his brand preference.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Pat is a large young man standing 6'2 and 210 lbs. His penchant for the physical nature in the OHL has him leaning towards this developmental path. He notes that he was actually surprised to get drafted and is excited about playing in the OHL. Pat does not place a significant premium on education and is looking forward to “focusing on hockey” in the OHL.</td>
<td>Working/Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kermit</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Kermit is one of the taller participants (6'3) but is “only 200 lbs.” He describes himself as a physical player and is looking to further develop in the OHL. The draft didn’t “scare” him because he was prepared to get drafted by “the Sault or Sudbury” so when another team selected his rights it was a positive.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Darwin is “average” sized standing at six feet and weighing 190 lbs. Darwin puts very little emphasis on education and this provides a significant influence on his brand preference.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levin</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Awareness of the OHL is a significant brand influence for young players, according to Levin. However, with a family connection to the OHL Levin’s view “inside” the league is that it is primarily a business. The level of play in the OHL is seen as strong and the “mystique” around players developing from the OHL to the NHL is seen as a positive brand influence. At 5'10 Levin is not “large” but he feels he could play in the OHL or the NCAA.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Craig’s smaller stature (5’9) and style of play (fast/finesse) have him leaning towards the NCAA. Family is a significant influence on Craig’s brand perceptions. The thought of moving from home at 16 to pursue a Major Junior career was “a burden” for Craig.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>A small player (5’8) who plays near his rural hometown. Kris feels the media gives the OHL a distinct advantage in terms of awareness over the NCAA; however, a negative influence for the Major Junior brand is the media’s penchant for highlighting the “darker side” of hockey. His family, specifically his Dad and brother, largely influence Kris’ brand preference. The latter is looking at NCAA universities and will likely play the 2004/2005 season in the United States.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Karl is an average size individual playing Tier II junior in his rural hometown. The awareness that the OHL has in Ontario certainly influences his brand perceptions. Karl views the OHL largely as a league for larger and less skilled players than those who pursue the NCAA path. Karl wants to play in the OHL if he is drafted high.</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Perry is a goalie and thus the style of game is less of a factor on his brand perceptions. However, the fact that many goalies have progressed to the NHL from the Major Junior leagues is an influence. Perry views the CIS as a good “safety-net” but his endorsement of the league is wholly unenthusiastic.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Jeremy is the smallest participant in all the sub-samples. Although he acknowledges the physical nature of the Major Junior game, the OHL is his preferred brand path. His dad is a significant influence on his perceptions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Sam views the emphasis on size in the OHL negatively. Although an “average” size (5’11”) Sam feels OHL managers adhere to the “bigger is better” philosophy. Sam has heard players can be treated like “pieces of meat” in the OHL but this hasn’t entirely dissuaded him from the Major Junior league. Education is important and as an individual schooled at a private high school in a city in Ontario, scholastics are important for Sam.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drake</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Drake is a smaller player standing 5’9” however he notes he is still young and growing. The age players are drafted negatively influences Drake’s view of the OHL as does the educational opportunities from the Major Junior developmental path. Educated at a private school Drake puts a premium on schooling. The idea of going to university in Canada and playing in the CIS is not viewed favourably but would be acceptable in the absence of more compelling alternatives.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Growing up in a small Ontario city beside the US border Lucas has been exposed to both NCAA and OHL teams, although the coverage on the NCAA is not of any substance. Lucas likes the fact the OHL has developed school packages for its players although he does not really associate education and the OHL where he feels players are “completely focusing on hockey.” Although a smaller individual Lucas’ position makes player size a relative non-issue.</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Sub-Sample</td>
<td>Participant Characteristics/Profile</td>
<td>Family Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krandell</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Krandell is a quiet and shy young man who lives in a small Ontario city. Krandell is intrigued by the NCAA because of the stories he has heard about the atmosphere at US college games (his cousin attends a US university). However, currently, Krandell's focus is on the Draft and, hopefully, pursuing a career in the OHL. He is concerned about the Draft and the idea that he may have to move &quot;really far away.&quot; Krandell is a smaller player standing 5'8.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Max is aware of the talent level necessary to play in the OHL. He would like to get drafted but more for self-esteem purposes, as he really wants to play in the NCAA. Education is important to Max and he is not sure the OHL is the best route for this. The lack of significant scholarships in Canada is an issue for Max. His coaches are all very pro-NCAA, which has an influence on Max's brand perceptions.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Larry is a very highly regarded player appearing on all the pre-draft lists as a significant talent. For Larry the age a player has to leave home to pursue an OHL career is a negative influence on the OHL brand. He feels the league is a business and the players are a &quot;commodity&quot; in that business. Larry is leaning towards the NCAA but still has aspirations for a career in the NHL. School is important to Larry and he wonders how OHL players can achieve strong grades given their time commitments to their OHL team. Larry appears to rely heavily on his family and their opinions weigh heavily on how his brand perceptions are formed.</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Sub-Sample</td>
<td>Participant Characteristics/Profile</td>
<td>Family Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Rich describes himself as a late developer so the fact he is on the OHL draft list is something of an achievement for him in itself. However, Rich is leaning towards the NCAA developmental route for reasons that include security, less travel and education. Rich’s Dad played hockey and encourages Rich to take the NCAA path. At six feet tall (and “still growing”) Rich feels he could fit in the OHL style though.</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Eric is the most reserved participant in the entire sample. At 5’10 and very lean Eric acknowledges he is more “finesse than grit”, however, Eric would like to continue his development in the OHL “to go as far as I can in hockey.” The link between the OHL and developing players for the NHL is an overarching influence for Eric. His father is also keen on the Major Junior developmental path.</td>
<td>Working/Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kramer</td>
<td>Draft Eligible</td>
<td>Kramer is very influenced by his Dad who was a referee in a professional league. Kramer’s Dad is keen on education and this is transferred to his son. A vital brand influence is having Kramer’s education paid for. If Kramer can achieve a strong school package in the OHL this is where he will go, although he notes that the CIS is “not what I’ve been focusing on.” Also, Kramer was not entirely clear about how the school packages in the OHL worked. As a smaller player Kramer is bothered by the fact that the “OHL is mostly looking for big players.”</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX B

PLAYER-CONSUMER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory Comments

- Rationale for the Study
- Utilization of the Data – increase understanding of OHL brand equity and illuminate how this is affecting player decision-making processes
- Information on perceptions of hockey and life
- Issues of Confidentiality – aggregating data
- Reasons for utilizing tape recording device
- Overview of discussion topics
- Informed Consent Secured

Introductory Questions

What comes to mind when you think of the OHL?

- Introduce concept of Brand Equity
- Promote understanding of both POSITIVE and NEGATIVE perceptions of the brand

League Related Questions

What do you know about the history of the Ontario Hockey League?

Probe: Tradition of League
    History of the League

How do you think the League is managed?

Probe: Any news items that have shaped this perception
    Does draft concern you at all?
    Would you play for any team that drafted you?

What do you “get out” of hockey?

Probe: Excitement issues
    Atmosphere in arenas
    Violence, fighting, style of play
What are your thoughts on former players from OHL?

**Probe:** Former players as role models
   'Greats' through the system
   Is size an issue?

Any thoughts on the coaches in the OHL?

**Probe:** Methods, style, reputation
   Level of coaches
   Can coach help to overcome challenges and develop strengths (suit player)

Do/Did the playing facilities influence your perceptions of the league at all?

What do you think about your development in the OHL?

**Probe:** Personal growth
   Moving away from home
   Hockey specific

What do you think of with respect to academics in the OHL?

**Probe:** Do/did you know academic programs that are available to you?
   Thoughts on education - “safety net” or “progression”

**Market Related Questions**

How does the location of an OHL team influence your perception of the brand?

**Probe:** Is hockey more popular in some regions than others (rural/urban)
   Did the DRAFT bother you?
   Would you have gone to any team that drafted you?
   Did leaving home concern you? Do you feel ready to leave home?
   Would you LIKE to play in your hometown?

Does fan support influence your perception of the OHL?

**Probe:** Do you know highest drawing team? Lowest?
   Affected you?

What are your thoughts on competitive developmental paths?

**Probe:** What do you think of when the NCAA brand is mentioned?
   What is attractive (unattractive) about the NCAA offering? (style, development etc…)
   Did you consider this route?
Socializing Agent Questions

How hockey fits into your life?

How much time do/did you dedicate to hockey?

Does your family influence your perceptions of the OHL at all?

**Probe:** Parents play(ed) hockey? Interested in the game?
   - Her/his thoughts on OHL
   - Support for your playing hockey – at games etc… (occupation)
   - Feelings of you playing at this level – pride etc…
   - Siblings – played before, taken a “route”

Do your peers/friends speak to you about the OHL?

**Probe:** Views of the CHL/NCAA
   - View towards academics

How does your agent influence your perception of the OHL?

**Probe:** Do you have one?
   - Lead you a particular way?
   - Any views on the OHL?

What do your coaches say about the OHL?

**Probe:** Hockey history (played in CHL/NCAA?)
   - Any views?

How might the media influence your brand perceptions?

**Probe:** What do you watch on TV/read?
   - Does media portray hockey “like it really is”
   - Do you ever watch the CHL on TV?
   - Does TV coverage change league perception?

Supplemental Inquiry Questions

Is there anything more you would like to add to the discussion?
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*When I say the Canadian Hockey League, or the OHL in particular, what comes to mind?*

Honestly what comes to mind, I picture big guys, bigger players you know guys that played juniors and like to fight, you know, obviously each team has one or two real stars, one or two top lines and then there’s no depth after that just a lot of big donkeys that can’t really skate, that’s what I think of when I think of the OHL.

*OK, fair enough.*

[laughs]

*No, that’s good, that’s your thoughts. But say in terms of positive and negatives, are there any positives?*

It's a good league, a competitive league, and they draw a good fan base and stuff like that and it’s a big dream for kids to play in the OHL you know so I mean it’s; I think it’s a good league but there’s a lot of stuff I think about it.

*OK. I mean, did you ever have that dream to play in the OHL?*

Yeah. I did actually, when I was 14 or 15 I took the bantam draft and I got drafted and that’s all I wanted to do was play in the ‘O’ and then I started watching the games a lot more closely, I was getting you know older and better and thought this isn’t as good as I thought it was when I was 12 years old with a hockey jacket on watching it. Then I just went down to the college games and I thought the atmosphere was much better.
That's interesting. We'll come back to that issue of atmosphere in a second but for now do you know anything about the history of OHL?

Not a whole lot, I don't follow it that much. I don't know too much about it.

Do you know anything about the traditions in the league?

No. No I don't.

OK. That's good. How about, I know like obviously not having played there but do you have any opinions on how the league is managed?

I don't really know much to say about it, I don't really know.

OK, how about if I ask you about the draft. Any thoughts on that?

I thought when it was the bantam draft for me, it kind of picked apart teams like teams weren't as close like you play with the same guys growing up and then all of the sudden it's competition like you see scouts in the stands everyone starts being selfish and, like.

Like in terms to affect their rank?

Yeah, like the team, our team was a pretty good team we had 11 guys drafted actually, you know we had a really good team, but you know everyone wanted to go in the first round, they wanted to score all the goals and they were always looking in the stands to see where the scouts were and I think that it kinda takes away from kinda you know a good team atmosphere you know, people start getting selfish after that.

OK, so in terms of the draft, like where did you get drafted?

[Mentions round and team that he was drafted by. Of note, he was drafted quite high by one of the less desirable organizations in the OHL].
**OK. Did you ever consider going?**

Yeah, I did. I, like right after like obviously the first two rounds can play and the next years I went to camp for 48 hours and they offered me a pretty good contract and I just kinda talked it over with my parents and I found out I was gonna play one more year of junior and then I’d make a decision after that and hopefully I would get some attention from schools and then I just decided to not go that route.

**So at that stage you were still debating.**

I was debating it, like I didn't have any scholarship offered so I was kinda thinking well you know what I’ll just; I was a lot smaller like 165 and I wasn’t very thick and I wanted to play a year and develop my skills a little more and then just see what happens then.

**Sure. OK, that’s interesting. Any team you would have played for?**

I think if I had have been taken by Oshawa I would have played for the Generals cause I always watched that team when I was younger and I knew some players on the team and I knew the coach and I think if I had have gotten drafted by them I would have played.

**So, say if the draft didn’t exist, hypothetically, in a different world, if you could have chosen any team, would that have been something you might have pursued – gone with Oshawa?**

Yeah, that’s probably who I would have wanted to play with the most and I mean probably if I had have gotten drafted in the first two rounds I would have played for sure. If I got drafted in the first round or the second round which I was, I was projected to go
[states pre-draft ranking] by OHL central scouting which didn’t happen so I was pretty disappointed but I definitely would have went right away at that point, yeah.

*If taken by [drafting team] in 1st or 2nd round?*

Oh yeah. I would have played for sure.

*So, out of curiosity, what do you think the difference is between the 2nd round to 4th round?*

What’s the difference? Just the size I thought, if you look at the first two rounds drafted to the OHL back when I, I think there were two kids under six feet that got drafted in the first two rounds, that’s besides goalies, just the kids were just bigger and I was you now 5’8”, 170 at the time or something.

*And for you, slipping to the [draft round], for you to have gone could a better school package have enticed you to stay?*

Yeah, I mean I’m definitely concerned about my education I mean it would have been. Oshawa I know doesn’t have a lot of money but I mean somewhere like Plymouth or Guelph, well for a team that has a lot of money, they can get you pretty good school packages especially for first round draft picks, too.

Yeah, so that’s like I guess what I’m saying did your school package get affected by you falling outside your pre-draft ranking?

Well I had, see [team] offered me a pretty good, they said something like if I play for four years, every year I play there they’ll play for a year at Canadian university but that wasn’t even on paper that was more of a verbal and I know [team] doesn’t have a lot of money in that system so I really didn’t trust it.
Hum. That's interesting. OK, what do you get out of hockey?

What do I get out of hockey? I just, I love it. It's just fun and I enjoy it, it's a thrill. I just love playing the game like most players do and I'm getting an education out of it which is a bonus too.

Yeah it is. Good for you. Do past players influence your view of the OHL?

I know ya, I know a few, right I mean you look, they always send out in the mail the OHL yearbook to kids who are drafted and you look over the first overall picks in the last 30 years I mean guys like Jeff O'Neill you just go down the list and there's like stars you think well I don't hear too many guys from college are stars you know OHL equals NHL I used to think, so that definitely had an effect on what I wanted to do.

OK, so saying that, now you have chosen the NCAA route, do you still have pro aspirations?

Oh definitely, I mean if after four years I don't, I mean I definitely want to go play pro somewhere you know I mean like in the east coast league or Europe, I'd love to play in Europe, I mean obviously everyone wants to go to the NHL but you got to be realistic right, so I definitely want to play pro hockey after college.

Yeah, I think you'd enjoy it. How about, are you familiar with any coaches in OHL?

Yeah, I know a few like Brian Touray, and Burt Templeton who's actually passed away, I knew him, I know a few coaches ya.

Do they influence you – like the coaches in the league influence you at all?

Well I remember when I was at camp, [name], he was the head coach of [team], the guy was just I don't know so ignorant like just I don't know like, when I look at a good coach I look at a coach that kinda you know interacts with his players, and you
know talks to ya, like hey how ya doing I’m [name] you know, the guys just got the whistle on the neck 2 laps, and he’s just trying to get guys to fight, guys who are trying out for the team, you don’t be afraid to go out there and mix it up a little bit, you know trying to get guys to go, you know this guys an idiot that’s what I was thinking.

And at this stage you’re still in decision-mode?

Yeah, and like I’m thinking, cause I had heard from other players the OHL is just, cause I had friends who at that time wanted to get scholarships, well the OHL is all this fighting, there’s no skill, and I hear the head coach saying like go out there and mix things up you know to someone who was just drafted, I was like ya is he gonna be asking me to do that like am I gonna be on the 4th line, like tap on the shoulder every shift, hey go mix something up, like are you kidding me?

[Both laugh]

Yeah, that’s interesting. How about the playing facilities – do they influence you at all?

Yeah, I mean, you go to a game like [team] who get like you know 500 people there, or you can go somewhere like Kitchener who get like 8 or 9,000 right so I mean that definitely is kinda a draw back, I’ve always wanted to play in front of big crowds and like going to watch them play with 200 people in the stands is not that exciting.

Yeah, for sure. How about aside from the hockey element, more from personal growth.

Was moving away from home an issue?

I mean it, I wasn’t too worried about it, I thought that I was mature enough and I wasn’t to concerned about it, and they drafted pretty close to home and they told me if I wanted to they’d pay for, they would lease an apartment for me, drive back and forth and I could stay here at home and go to school here … [statements about the team].

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So if [local Major Junior team] drafted you for example, you could actually stay at home!

Ya definitely, I've always been told by a lot of friends and people who have done that that it's a great experience to move away from home and billet and you know, I thought I would have billeted no matter what if it was Oshawa or St. Mike's but so I wasn't too concerned about moving away.

You already mentioned the academic packages - Did you know about the academic packages that are available in the OHL?

Yeah, like there's some teams who will pay for, quite a few teams who if you're a first round draft pick and you're a top guy they'll pay for your 4 years of Canadian university, but that's after your done though, so you're a 21 overager then you go to starting to go to school and you're 21, 22 do you want to go to school when you're 21, you know and then ya I'll be 21 when I'm graduated and that's awesome, but I mean there's teams like St. Mikes that offered a friend of mine who went in the third round, they wanted him to sign the year I was gonna sign and he's at Merrimack now and they were saying to him they'll give him $5,000 a year for school, and I mean that's pretty close to some Canadian like you know full tuition, like what are they 7 or $8,000 now. Yeah, I mean it varies but something around six should get it done for you.

So I mean he got offered a pretty good package too, but it wasn't enough, and he's pretty much full ride at Merrimack now, so.
So that influenced you?

Yeah, it does for sure.

OK. So now I'm just going to ask some market-related questions. You've touched on this a bit but do you watch hockey on TV?

Definitely, yep.

And you said you watched some Junior games - Do you think the Sportsnet deal is good for the 'O'?

Oh yeah, I mean for sure, you see some games on SportsNet you know CHL games and it's a lot more fun to watch than if you watch it on Rogers and like those announcers are horrific - those guys are brutal but its not like a big SportsNet, you know the cameras are better the announcers are better and you know it makes it look a lot better too.

Does this influence you?

Nah, it's more just fun to watch.

OK, do you have any perceptions on the locations of teams, small town or city?

Like the teams for the draft?

Yeah, sure. What do you think about that?

If you look around there's a lot of teams that are kinda from small towns like up in the middle of, there's a lot of guys who could, like last year I was looking at the draft, even the first round their from little little towns like you know, Dublin Ontario just from small like you don't see a lot of guys from Toronto or you know Kitchener, their always from little small towns, I've noticed that actually.

OK. How about views on OHL teams and their locations?
Well, they’re all over the place. Some of them are way far away.

*How about fan support then, at different OHL arenas. Like, did the support at [team] influence you at all?*

No, well, it did influence me, negatively if anything. I mean there was no one there that went to the games so I mean it wasn’t the most exciting place to play.

*Right, and at the same time where you looking in the US?*

Yeah, I’d seen Michigan State, University of Michigan, I went to, I was at Mercyhurst, which wasn’t great for crowds, but I mean Michigan State and Michigan was pretty wild there.

*I bet. So, as an elite player you’ve got OHL – you were drafted – and then now you’re looking NCAA which is the only real competition for your services. You have to choose one way or the other, so when I say NCAA, what do you think of when you think of the NCAA?*

I just think, the first thing I think is fast, and the fans are unreal, you know the students and the bands playing I just, the atmosphere I just think is a lot better.

*And the style of play?*

When I think about it ya, the style. See, I was told that college is kind of a faster more skilled game and its not very physical but I mean I’m 18 playing against guys that are 23, 24 years old, like big big strong defensemen, and it’s just as physical maybe more physical than the OHL just not a lot of the extra like the fighting and the spears after the whistle and stuff like that so it’s definitely real fast and real physical, ya real physical cause all of the guys are like big, there’s a lot of big boys that play in that league, well men I mean they’re a lot older than I am.
Anything specifically influence you to make the choice to go NCAA?

Like just kinda, probably when I went down on my visit, when I went on my recruiting trip there, and I watched them practice right and their practice was just flow, the flow and the flow drills was like you know, you watch an OHL practice and all they do is “bag skate” but I was watching and I thought this was a good practice and the arena they had was like seats 12,000 it’s a huge place and I was like you know what, and I talked to all the guys and you know they are really nice to ya and they treat you like one of the guys like some of the vets in the ‘O’ you know how they can be. Then, like they are all really polite, ‘you come down here, you’re a real good player, you’ll fit in well here’ and I was like you know what, that’s it, I’m gonna go.

OK, so how about one last question on that. Do you find anything negative or unattractive about the NCAA route?

[thinks for a while] Maybe the cages, that’s about it, having to wear cages that’s the only thing I’d say.

OK, good. So, now we’re going to move onto Socializing agents and the things or people that might have influenced you personally on your perceptions. So, how does hockey fit into your life? Like in terms of the time dedicated to it.

How does it fit into my life, well I mean I’m 18, 19 hours a week hockey related stuff you know either I’m on the ice 2 hours a day plus working out after practice for hockey and so it’s a part of my everyday life, everyday routine it’s a big part of it for sure.
Do you play any other sports?

I used to play baseball, and I played quite a few high school sports but it wasn’t anything serious.

How about your family, did your Dad play hockey?

Yeah, my Dad played when he was younger.

Does he still have an interest in the game?

Oh, he loves the game ya he’s been down to every game this year, he always watches the games.

So he’s flexible with work to get away?

Well, he works as a manager in a bank so he works the usual work days, then he and my Mum can get down to the games cause they’re mostly weekends, right?

Did he influence your decision?

He was at first, he was kinda the same as I was, when I got drafted I wanted to play in the ‘O’ and he was yeah, the OHL, cause he wasn’t too educated and I wasn’t either on the NCAA, my mom was kinda like, well you know get your education take a year play junior see what happens, and I ended up waiting and it worked out so.

And, so both of them actually, maybe got you thinking.

Yeah, definitely.

And what are their feelings about you playing at this level?

I don’t know, I’d say they’re pretty proud I guess and pretty excited to watch me pursue my dream I guess.

Perfect. Do you have any siblings?

I got an older brother.
He influence your view of the ‘O’ at all?

Umm, no, not too much he just kinda, he was just actually looking at getting a scholarship for baseball too so he, you know he pushed me a little bit you know get to the gym you know but I think he knew I pretty much decided before he pushed me too much I knew what I was doing.

Did he play hockey?

Yeah, he played I mean he didn’t play, he played triple A but then he gave it up for baseball so he’s kind of out of the hockey thing.

OK, I mean you’ve mentioned a couple of things about friends; did they influence you on the OHL at all?

Yeah, like I have, there was about 5 of my real close buddies right, that all got drafted, I got picked the highest out of all my buddies but I mean they’re, 2 of them went to the OHL, one of them is 6’4” the other is 6’3”, big big strong kids, and we always talk and we always kind of argue back and forth about what’s better and I mean they kind of influenced me a little bit when they went there and weren’t playing and sitting out, they went the year I played in [Tier II], they went to the ‘O’, one played in Sudbury and one went to Saginaw, and they you know they were kind of treated like pieces of meat you know get out there and mix it up and a lot of penalty minutes and stuff and that kind of made me think I’m glad I didn’t do that, and that helps me out when I go and watch them play and they are sitting on the bench for a whole period so and they’re just as good as anyone else just cause they’re a first year guy you know pay your dues sit on the bench they don’t get a chance you know.
*Did they have any specific views on academics?*

Well, they both I think they were 12th and 7th round picks, they didn’t get a whole lot of money for school, but both of them weren’t great in school any ways, and I don’t know if their marks were good enough in high school to get a scholarship, so they were both kind of thinking like ‘hey well I got an opportunity here lets just take it and we’ll worry about it after’ and kind of that mind frame more than anything.

*Is this common in the league?*

I don’t know. I mean, I don’t think, like I think you’re not going to the ‘O’ for that.

*OK, interesting. How about an agent, do you have an agent, or a family advisor, as they’d be called?*

I did have an agent when I got drafted there, but you can’t have an agent, like I never signed anything officially but you know he helped me out a little bit here and there but when I decided to go to college you’re not allowed to have an agent anymore so I had to break that off.

*OK, so while you had, I mean while he was your agent or family advisor, whatever term you want to use, did he influence your view on the OHL?*

Oh he was total OHL, ‘you want to go to the NHL play in the O’, and I was kinda like well I want to play college hockey, and he was like oh no not a good idea not a good idea go to the ‘O’, oh ya he wants me to go to the ‘O’ and hope I get drafted second year and then go play pro so he can make money, he didn’t care about me at all he just wanted to make money.
Did this taint your view of all agents?

Pretty much, you could say what you want about them but it’s their job - they want to get paid right, no matter how caring they are they want to get paid.

How about your previous coach, did he influence your views at all?

Oh definitely, like there was times when I was in Wexford and I you know early in the year when I wasn’t getting a lot of school attention and I was leading the league in scoring at one point and I wasn’t I hadn’t talked to one school and I was kinda and the OHL the same guys that talked to me and I talked to him one time and I’m like ‘well coach you know I think I’m gonna go play in the ‘O’’ like he’s like ‘that’s not a good idea for you just keep sticking it out here things will work out, I guarantee it I guarantee it’, and then like two-weeks later schools were calling me you know putting options on the table and I told you you know just wait you’re a great player just kinda talked to me a lot and he’s a real good coach, very pro (NCAA) he’s just like what are you gonna do go play in the O for 3 years and then go to school when you’re 22 and then 25 you’re out and then what are you gonna do, so he’s like ‘go play, why not get a free education, better hockey, and then you’ll be 22 at the end of the year and if you don’t play pro you can get yourself a job you know and get started on life if not go play pro and you’ll have your degree and no one can take that away from you.’

Nice, good, you know, certainly there is something to be said for that. Would you consider staying in US when you’re finished playing?

You know, that’s a good question. I don’t know it depends what happens I guess, if I don’t play pro I might stay in the States just because I’m a business major, the money’s a lot better the jobs down here higher you know if the American dollar’s up you
know, so I say if I don't play pro I'd probably live in the States somewhere, I don't know if I'd live in [city where university is located] to say but I mean I'd definitely live in the States for the money factor cause there's a lot of money and business I think in the States.

**Anything else that influenced you coming this way instead of the OHL?**

I wasn't a big fan of the bus trips, the OHL bus trips you know, the weekend when you got to Sault St. Marie, Sudbury, and North Bay on a weekend and then have you gotta drive home on Sunday I don't know, I didn't really like that, some schools bus but we're so far south that we fly everywhere and it's, and I love the fact that we play the same team two nights in a row so you get a rivalry going and I find it's a lot more intense instead of playing one team one night and driving on the bus to the next game and the next game, I kinda like that you play the same team two nights in a row all week you have you play only on the weekend so you have all week to get focused you know look at the tapes and know who you're playing, and practice and change your systems to fit that team and I just find it's a lot more competitive I'd say.

**Sure. And OHL's geared more to pro schedule?**

Right, 58 games, that's a good point but I mean I would like to play more games we only play 30 games in a season, it is a short season but I don't know I would like to play 70 games in a season but I think its you know better the way it is right now, I wish maybe they could extend the schedule, maybe throw in a Thursday night game, so three games a weekend then maybe then get up to 42 games a year but I think its good the way it is.

**Good. OK. Is there anything else you want to add about the OHL brand?**

No, I think we covered it.


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