To succeed in the competitive sports and entertainment industry, sports leagues must attract high-quality athletes and entertain consumers (Leed et al., 2018). One strategy is to build a unique and favorable employer brand. The literature suggests that employer branding positively influences not only employee recruitment and retention but also consumers’ purchase decisions and loyalty (Anselmsson et al., 2016). Such effects should be especially strong in the sports industry because league-player relationships attract considerable public attention (McLeod & Hawzen, 2019). However, little is known about how sports leagues’ employer branding influences consumers’ perceptions about the league. Accordingly, we conduct an experimental study to examine consumer responses to a sport league’s employer branding.

According to psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995), organizations make promises to employees, which turn into psychological contracts. In this process, outsiders (e.g., consumers) play important roles in determining (a) whether psychological contracts exist, (b) what their terms are, and (c) whether contracts have been upheld (Rousseau, 1995). Based on this theoretical background, we propose that consumers form positive and supportive attitudes toward a sports league if it makes and keeps employment promises to players. Specifically, consumers focus on explicit commitments made by employers rather than implicit ones because they have little access to insider information (Rousseau, 1995). Thus, employer branding focused on instrumental attributes (e.g., salary, training facility) would more effectively induce positive consumer responses than employer branding focused on symbolic attributes (e.g., organizational personality, pride). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: A sports league’s employer branding has positive effects on consumers’ attitudes and behavioral intentions.

H2: Instrumental employer branding has greater effects on consumers’ attitudes and behavioral intentions than symbolic employer branding.

To test the hypotheses, we will conduct an online experiment using Amazon Mechanical Turk (N = 100), employing a one-factor, three-level, between-subjects design. Participants will read an introductory scenario about a fictitious professional sports league, the Professional Lacrosse Association (PLA), and be randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions (i.e., control, instrumental, or symbolic) to read a news article about the PLA. The control condition does not include any employer branding information. In the instrumental condition, the PLA promises to provide its players with advanced training facilities and training programs. In the symbolic condition, the PLA promises to provide the players with a sense of pride in being part of a prestigious lacrosse organization. After reading the experimental scenarios, the participants will indicate their attitudes toward the PLA (MacKenzie & Lutz 1989) and behavioral intentions (Yoshida & James, 2010). After data collection, we will examine the mean differences in dependent variables among the three experimental conditions.

The results will demonstrate whether leagues need to be aware of how consumers interpret employment practices. The relative importance of instrumental and symbolic branding will provide precise implications to guide branding. Lastly, the psychological contract approach provides a new theoretical lens for examining sport consumers’ behavior.