

The Impact of Social Interactionism on Australia's National Rugby League Retention Rates

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ABSTRACT

Understanding factors that motivate players to continue participation in sport can foster long-term participation and positive retention rates. The aim of this research was to determine the extent to which a player's decision to not return to Australia's National Rugby League (NRL) in 2017, was influenced by four experiences, which are *player, coaching, social* and *club*. This article draws upon social interactionism as a theoretical perspective to interpret meaning from the data and investigates sports' social processes and their impacts on and from human interaction. A quantitative approach was employed to investigate patterns of associations from 2310 participants (junior (ages 10 – 18), $n = 1804$ / senior (ages 19 – above), $n = 506$). Patterns were demonstrated by identifying specific Means (M) and percentages (%) across each of the four experiences and groups (junior and senior). Participants demonstrated significant (M , %), uniformed responses, concerning the four experiences and their influence on individual retention motivations. Data from this research have identified that there was a substantial number of players (40%, $n = 917$) who consistently indicated that their main reason/s, for not returning in 2017, was due to a 'negative experience' (21%, $n = 496$) or 'injury / fear of injury' (18%, $n = 421$). It is envisaged that findings and subsequent recommendations from this study, will inform future NRL's player development framework and strategies aimed at addressing and improving player retention rates.

Key words: sport retention, social interactionism, rugby league, sport

INTRODUCTION

Australian sport in the early 21st century is a consumer-driven industry and highly competitive. Therefore, individual sporting organisations need to be strategic, with the ability to draw on rich data and theory to inform future policies, decisions and practices. Sporting organisations need to have a clear vision and mission statement that are measurable, logical and ultimately achievable (Hajkowicz, 2013). Australia's National Rugby League (NRL) has a vision to become, "The Greatest Game of All". To this end, the NRL has a three-pillared approach to improving the game and fulfilling its vision, mission and key priority.

National Rugby League registration statistics (2017) indicated that the number of total players were 170,947 and that approximately 50,000 players did not return in 2017. Specifically, the NRL has noted that a key challenge is to reverse a two percent national decline in total male participation, with the particular problems in keeping the 13 to 18-year-old age groups. These national statistics

are reflective of historically similar international trends, whereby it is indicated that one-third of participants between 10 and 18 years of age withdraw from sport programmes every year (Australian Sports Commission (ASC), 2017; Kelley & Carchia, 2013). One of the key issues for the NRL is to reduce this decline and work to assure that all players (junior and senior) have positive, rather than negative experiences in the game of rugby league (RL), thereby reducing the dropout rate and sustaining long-term participation. It is envisaged, that by exploring and improving players' experiences, the NRL will be better positioned to create informed future strategies to reverse a declining national sporting participation trend.

Literature concerning retention rates in sport have indicated a number of important phases that need to be considered in an attempt to improve players' experiences. It is identified that strategic sporting organisational plans (concerning retention rates) need to recognise that there are three decisive phases which go to improving players' experiences, with these being: 1) recruitment, 2) transition and 3) retention (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Talpey, 91 Croucher, Bani, A. & Finch, 2017; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). Whilst this study is concerned with 'retention rates', it is acknowledged that player recruitment and transitional phases are integral in the retention process. Specific attention to the three phases is outlined below.

a) Player Recruitment

Recruitment requires the assistance of significant others, as well as the proliferation of many smaller, local-level RL club / school / community programs (an example of these community programs are presented in Appendix 1) committed to sustain and maintain current positive player satisfaction levels, whilst implementing initiatives that heighten avenues for recruiting new player prospects. In its simplest form, recruitment is the manner by which a RL club enlists new members and players, ensuring a large participant base (grassroots). Once the member or player has been introduced to RL's club subculture, the processes by which individuals are retained or lost is initiated.

b) Player Transition

Transition requires that RL programs (both at a club and organisational level) allow players to relocate and socialise into new levels of involvement (e.g., novice to elite, coaching, refereeing, manager, and executive positions) (Côté & Hancock, 2016). Internal RL programs must be designed to optimize individual members' and players' ambitions, promote commitment, and sustain and communicate potential transitional pathways throughout the RL landscape.

c) Player Retention

Retention is mediated by the player's motivation and the ways the player is socialized into the game and RL's individual club subcultures (Côté & Hancock, 2016). Retention will be dependent on the commitment a RL player develops to the club's subculture and/or to the organization. Commitment refers to the level of engagement with the game and/or club. Specifically, in relation to this research, improving retention rates requires a concerted multifaceted approach and will focus on a number of important

player motivational elements (Côté, & Hancock, 2016; Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008), with these intrinsically linked to the four experiences. Such aforementioned literature, goes to support and legitimise the selection of the four experiences for this study (i.e. player, coach, social and club) and are further recognised by the NRL as important elements for addressing future retention rates. Green (2005) gives specific attention to these four experiences, by recognising that they are necessary elements to understand in an attempt to improve retention rates throughout sporting organisations. The four experiences that go to underpin this research and are supported by the literature, are represented as:

1. **Player** - *Individual characteristics*—related to age, gender, intrinsic/extrinsic and life transitional phases,
2. **Coaching** - *Performance factors*—coaching, training, playing experience,
3. **Social** - *Social identity*—prestige and social status,
4. **Club** - *Social setting*—socialisation, setting, and characteristics.

Given that ‘retention’ is an important aspect of the strategic plan and development of the NRL, this research is concerned with investigating Australia’s RL retention trends across junior and senior cohorts (2016 - 2017), with specific attention directed towards understanding patterns of associations between retention trends and the aforementioned player motivational elements. To assist in such a research undertaking, the motivational elements are identified and enveloped into four key player experiences, which are *player, coaching, social* and *club*.

To ensure that RL remains highly competitive and attractive, there are two simple questions to address.

1. What influences players to remain in the game, and
2. What influences players to leave the game?

Once the above questions are understood, the NRL will be in a better and more informed position to tailor strategies to support and address future participation trends.

Australia’s sport development

Sport development is “a process whereby effective opportunities, processes, systems, and structures are set up to enable people, in all or particular groups and areas, to take part in sport and recreation, or to improve their performance to whatever level they desire” (Eady, 1993; Talpey, Croucher, Bani, & Finch, 2017). More specifically, sport development systems have two main objectives: (a) to increase the number of participants actively engaged in sport, and (b) to enhance the quality of performances in sport. Accordingly, the Australian Sporting Commission (ASC) has outlined a number of important ambitions for sport development and participation in Australia (ASC, 2017). The ASC branded from 2 August 2018 as Sport Australia, is the Australian Government’s statutory agency responsible for distributing funds and providing strategic guidance and leadership for sporting activity in Australia. At the national level, the ASC (2017) aims to see more Australians, particularly youth, participating more broadly in sport. National Sporting Organisations (NSO), such as the NRL, are encouraged to promote and achieve continual and sustained membership growth, resulting in positive and sustained retention rates.

The ASC (2017) encourage sporting bodies to develop and implement effective organisational qualities, that is, (a) well-

governed, (b) strategic, (c) embracing of commercial opportunities, (d) adopting new technologies, (e) delivering user-friendly sports and (f) inclusive of age, gender and ethnicity. The ASC currently recognises more than 90 sports in Australia, each vying for their share of participants, funding and infrastructure allocation (ASC, 2017). This statistic is not taking into consideration the innumerable other leisure pursuits outside of sport (i.e. non-competitive fitness activities). Importantly, Australian sporting organisations that fail to recognise or accept the changing dynamics concerning retention rates in sport, risk losing relevance and ground to other sports and leisure activities (ASC, 2016).

Guided by the current sporting literature and discourse concerning retention rates (ASC, 2017; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Talpey, Croucher, Bani, & Finch, 2017), the NRL’s player development framework acknowledges that there is a need to investigate and understand more about the complex interrelationships and interactions that exist between the four identified experiences (i.e., *player, coaching, social* and *club*) and how they ultimately impact on player retention rates. From this identified need and the recent NRL declining junior participation trends, it is a strategic aim of this research to provide data that will go to further inform the future practices associated with the NRL’s three major initiatives:

Unite – more players across ages, segments and markets.

Excite – more fans watching and engaging.

Inspire – be the most inspirational game.

Understanding the nexus between ‘socialisation’ and ‘motivation’ for increased sport participation and retention rates

Research concerning motivations for why players return or leave a sport is difficult to characterize, with previous research approaches used to investigate and collect data so as to explore the phenomenon divided (Côté & Hancock, 2016). It is further noted, that the concept itself, used to describe socialization out of sport, has been confusing. References have been made to retention rates as being dropping out, alienation, attrition, disengagement, desocialisation, withdrawal, nonparticipation, burnout, transitions, retirement, and involuntary retirement (i.e., being “cut” or denied access to participation opportunities) (Talpey et al., 2017). In any case, and specific to this study, clarity will be given to such questions by investigating how the social system of the game and culture impacts and is interrelated to the four player experiences and associated motivational factors: (a) *Player* - Individual characteristics—related to age, gender, intrinsic/extrinsic and life transitional phases, (b) *Coaching* - Performance factors—coaching experience, (c) *Social* - Social identity—prestige and social status, and (d) *Club* - Social setting - socialisation, setting, and characteristics. Understanding experiences that motivate players to continue participation in sport can help key stakeholders cultivate an environment that fosters long-term participation and positive retention rates (Talpey et al., 2017).

Based on the purpose of this research, ‘motivation’ is defined as the reasons (experiences) people give to explain why they do or don’t continue to participate in a sport (Kellett & Warner, 2011). It has also been identified, that ‘motivation’ arises from links they derive from the experiences (*player, coaching, social* and *club*) between the characteristics of the individual (age, gender, and

life transitions), performance factors (coaching and playing), the social identity (prestige, status, fitness level), and the social setting in which they participate (club characteristics, sense of community, and socialisation) (Kellest & Warner, 2011). Measuring a player's individual motivation levels requires attention given to determining a player's link to the social interactions which describes how people react toward things, events and experiences based on what they think that particular situation or experience means to them.

Retention levels are intrinsically connected to 'motivation' and have a number of questions which refers to each player's choice to continue with a club. In terms of the multiple motives for player participation and retention trends, it is suggested that RL programs focus on fun, social interaction, fitness, skill development, and play, particularly when those programs are targeted at Junior RL grassroots level (Visek et al., 2015). Interestingly, in the same study, children cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organized sport and its absence as the number one reason for youth sport attrition. Therefore, to be competitive and successful in the current climate, the NRL needs to be agile in meeting customer demand and implement programs that cater to a range of markets rather than to just one subdivision of the environment. This suggests the need for a range of programs, and more importantly, a range of approaches and implementations. It is argued that modified sport programs (e.g., non-competitive, child-centred programs) can reach parents who would otherwise choose not to return or register their child into RL.

The need to cater appropriately to different market segments is well understood in marketing, but the implications of benefit segmentation for sport program planning and implementation have been inadequately examined. Indeed, one source of player retention problems might be the failure to offer a sufficient assortment of program variations to cater to a diverse and changing array of participant motivations (Kellest & Warner, 2011). This 'attraction process', as set out by Sotiriadou and colleagues (2008) who advocate that the funds, programs and strategic direction offered by Australia's sporting organisations need to focus on increasing mass participation and place an emphasis on junior development and retention to create a sustainable, future orientated, grassroots approach.

Theoretical basis of claim and approach

There are a number of theoretical approaches and models that go to underpin research concerning sport in society. With this in mind, the overarching theoretical lens derives from a Social Interactionist Theory (SIT) (Carter & Fuller, 2015). "A social interactionist theory is a perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create and maintain society through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions" (Carter et al., 2015, p. 1.). When positioned to investigate sporting cultures, the SIT approach focuses on how people experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures. Broadly, using SIT as a theoretical lens in sport, identifies how individuals develop and maintain identities as players in RL, how players give meaning to the game and the characteristics of RL's subcultures, change sports to match the perspectives and identities of those who play them. Of particular importance and relevance to this study, is the

premise that such an approach, allows for the interpretation of how players are socialised into the game, through the game and out of game. When positioned to investigate sporting cultures, the SIT approach focuses on how players experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures. In relation to the NRL and retention rates, this approach will be used to give meaning to how individuals experience the game of RL in Australia and how specific and individual experiences impact on player retention rates. By employing a quantitative method to collect data, this research will shed light onto the processes and reasons associated with why RL players become involved, stay involved, and what are the multidimensional experiences that impact on (positively or negatively) and determine players' short and long-term involvement, engagement and the transitional pathways. More specifically, this research approach will reference two frameworks, to give interpretation to data and provide a foundation to give meaning and understanding to the phenomenon under investigation. Such theories and models are elaborated on in the ensuing sections and are identified as: the Pyramid Model (PM) and the SIT.

PM approach and integrity to improving retention rates in RL

The PM of sport development assumes that a broad base of participation is required to produce players willing and able to progress to sequentially higher levels of competition (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2018). In order to obtain this base of competition, players must first be recruited (or sponsored) into RL. Therefore, for the NRL to cater to multiple motives and market segments, there is a requirement for programs that promote school / community engagement (see Appendix A). Program design must provide recruits with opportunities to learn about and to come to value both social and task rewards associated with participation. This includes opportunities to undertake new and significant roles, as well as training in goal planning. In order to enhance the articulation between task and social benefits of participation, 'social support systems' need to be designed into the program, with mere provision of programs being inadequate. Sport programs are social systems with their own internal dynamics, they are embedded in a broader system of social relations (Green, 2005). Adequate program design and implementation require meticulous planning and continuous evaluation of the internal social system, as well as its articulation with the wider social fabric within which it is embedded (Carter et al., 2015).

Closely linked to the PM and SIT, and further impacting on player retention rates, is the ASC's promotion of 'integrity'. As part of RL's general player development approach, there is a need to continue practices that reflect internal integrity to the highest quality, being honest and genuine in its dealings, championing good sportsmanship, providing a safe and inclusive environment for all involved. Such an ethos will go towards sustaining and heightening community confidence, trust and support behind them. Integrity in sport can lead to: increased participation, loyalty of members, the attraction of new members and players who want to be associated with a healthy, successful brand (ASC, 2017). Activities and behaviours that define sport as lacking integrity include: creating an unfair advantage or the manipulation of

results through performance enhancing drugs, match fixing or tanking (ASC, 2017). Anti-social behaviours demonstrated by parents, spectators, coaches and players are also a significant integrity issue for sport. Such behaviours may include bullying, harassment, discrimination and child abuse. The integrity of a sport will be judged by its participants, spectators, sponsors and the general public (ASC, 2017). The survival of a sport therefore relies on ensuring that, “the sport is the same on the outside as it is on the inside and remains true to its values, principles and rules” (ASC, 2017, p. 5).

Although the research literature suggests the broad outlines required for such planning and considerations (Green, 2005), added research is needed, particularly to identify the benefits players perceive in association with RL. These benefits are associated with how players come to value particular benefits (and not others), how and why those values change, and how levels of ‘integrity’ impact on player retention rates. Of importance, is that RL programs must be designed to optimize player recruitment, sustain player transitions and promote player commitment, which will ultimately impact on player retention rates (Carter et al., 2015; Côté et al., 2016). The findings and subsequent recommendations outlined in this research, suggests that each RL club and team should examine their own individual situation, so as to better understand and identify their positions related to: (a) specific player experiences, (b) retention motivations, rates and associated trends, (c) barriers to progression and transition, and (d) opportunities to identify and create ‘smooth’ pathways for players at differing junctions, abilities and interest levels. Such strategies will assist RL clubs to create an increased awareness of the issues of retaining players (junior and senior) and motivate clubs to think of possible short and long-term strategies and solutions.

The aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which a player’s (N = 2310) decision (retention motivations) to not return to RL in 2017, was influenced by four main experiences (i.e., *player, coaching, social and club*). A quantitative study design was employed to investigate possible associations. Findings from this study could provide a comprehensive ‘snapshot’ of the current RL landscape, linking junior (n = 1804) and senior (n = 506) players’ experiences to 2017 retention rates.

METHOD

This study received ethical approval from Griffith University Ethics Committee before any data collection began. It was deemed that due to participants’ data being de-identified, this research was exempt from a full ethics review.

Survey design and construction

A quantitative research method was employed to investigate possible patterns of associations, between players’ experiences (2016) and reasons for not returning to the game in 2017. By combining quantitative methods of inquiry [Mean (M), %], the study investigated the extent to which the four experiences (*player, coaching, social and club*) impacted on a player’s decision to return to the game of RL in 2017. Descriptive statistics were drawn from measuring questions pertaining to participants’ age, gender, and postcode (socio-economic status – SES), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) identification, home situation, education / employment status, and previous player experience

(e.g., years of experience playing RL) and level of competition. As a guiding framework and to add reliability to the measurement instrument, a number of previously validated scales were utilised and modified for this research. The questions for this research were framed with reference to the SIT, with particular attention directed towards understanding how society impacts sport and vice versa. The survey instrument used in this study was designed and approved in consultation with all independent key stakeholders and RL’s individual State governing bodies [i.e., New South Wales Rugby League (NSW), New South Wales Country Rugby League (NSWC) and Queensland Rugby League (QLD)].

Questions throughout the survey were constructed with the intent to address the research aim, that is, ‘to understand why individual players (juniors and seniors) chose not to return to play in the 2017 RL season’. Specifically, investigations were aimed at determining to what level 2016 players’ experiences (linked to: *player coaching, social and club*) impacted on their retention motivations to not return to play in 2017. Each of the four player experiences had a number of questions, resulting in detailed participant profiling. An initial pilot test (N = 25) was undertaken of the survey to ensure questions were understood and that participants could understand survey requirements.

As a guiding framework and to add reliability to the measurement instrument, a number of scales were utilised for this research. The questions for this research were framed with reference to the SIT. The identified theory provided legitimacy as to the design and development of the survey questions in relation to investigating retention rates and motivations to return to the game in 2017. Furthermore, survey questions supported quantitative responses, with the primary research questions designed to achieve the stated research aim. Research questions were aimed at answering:

1. What retention motivations influence a junior or senior player to not return to play in the NRL? (e.g. - *Which was the main reason (select only one) for you not returning to rugby league in 2017?*). The selection of items, that participants had to choose from, are identified as being, (a) I had a negative experience, (b) injury, fear of injury, (c) retired / lost interest in playing, (d) relocation, (e) joined another sporting club, (f) fees too high, (g) other commitments (work, school, university), (h) I couldn’t play with friends, (i) I didn’t obtain the level I wanted, (j) I felt overwhelmed – ‘burnt out’ and (k) Other (please explain).

2. To what level does a player’s experiences (linked to: *player, coaching, social and club*) associate with positive or negative retention rates? (e.g. - *Please indicate how influential various aspects of the experiences listed below were in your decision not to return to rugby league in 2017 by rating each statement from strongly disagree to strongly agree*).

Under each of the four experiences (player, coach, club and socialisation), a number of specific questions were asked to determine the impact such items have on a player’s experience. A set of question items are indicated below for the ‘player experience’ (see Table 1). A 5-point Likert scale for agreement was used (i.e., Strongly disagree = 1, Neutral = 3, to Strongly agree = 5). Participants were required to rank each item by identifying their level of agreement for each item – ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Such an approach allowed for a more detailed and descriptive analysis of the data across the four experiences.

Table 1. *Player Experience*

During the 2016 season, please indicate how influential various aspects of the playing experience listed below were by rating each statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
game scheduling / draw was fair					
games were safely conducted					
training sessions were safely conducted					
games were fun and enjoyable					
training sessions were fun and enjoyable					
results were pleasing					
rewards / incentives for me personally (e.g., support, prestige, playing career)					
playing times were convenient					

Participant sample and recruitment

The sample was drawn from across both junior (n = 1804) and senior (n = 506) players who did not return to play RL at club level in 2017 (from the 2016 session). Junior players are the age between 10-18, while seniors are older than 18 years of age. Players are not confined to only being a 'student', but were drawn and recruited from the community and joined individual RL club affiliations. These clubs, compete in regular weekend RL games against one another, progressing each year to a Grand Final. Initial sampling was done by combining participants numbers, resulting in a cumulative participation recruitment number of 2310. The combined numbers were then separated to include individual reports for junior and senior groups, with further separate reports for each of the identified State governing bodies. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the NRL's Participation Strategy and Project Manager, as well as from the Coaching and Education Programs Coordinators (QLD). An email invitation, containing a direct hyperlink to the survey instrument, was circulated to the membership list of those players (juniors and seniors) who did not return to play RL 2017. Junior players were categorised as being under the age of 19 at time of survey. Parental assistance was encouraged to help junior players complete the survey.

Data collection

Data collection took place over a five-week period, beginning in August 2017 and extending to early September 2017. A number of follow up email reminders were sent during this five week period. Data were gathered using a web-based approach on the Survey Monkey platform. Participants were asked to respond to a number of single closed questions. Each question was self-reflecting and required to indicate their personal level of agreement (e.g., *Strongly disagree* = 1, *Neutral* = 3 to *Strongly agree* = 5). The approach, to data collection, was aimed at understanding player's personal experiences associated with the four key experiences (*player, coaching, social* and *club*) and how influential these were in their decision to not return to the game in 2017. From such a process a specific player and retention profiling was made possible.

Questions were designed to measure a player's experiences and the level of influence the four experiences had on their decisions to not return to the game in 2017. An example of this question type was presented as being: *please indicate how influential the various socialisation aspects listed below were to your family's (player's) decision not to return in 2017.*

Furthermore, questions were developed to investigate specific topics / issues associated with the four experiences. These are outlined below:

- *Player*—support, fun and enjoyment, game scheduling / fairness of draw,
- *Coaching*—the coach / coaching team and appropriate knowledge about the game (rules, positioning & tactics), fairness of player selection process, rewards / incentives for the player,
- *Socialization*—team spirit and belonging, valued
- *Club*—general organisation and support of players, communication.

The validity and reliability of the data collection instrument (questionnaire) was increased by including a number of statistical measures, these being: (a) Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\lambda = p < 0.05$) and (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = > 0.800) identified with Bartlett's test of sphericity indicating that there were significant relationships amongst items ($p = 0.05$), and that the data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), (b) Cronbach's Alpha procedure was to provide evidence for the Internal Consistency ($\alpha > 0.700$ acceptable) and (c) p -values indicated statistically significant associations ($p < 0.05$). The validity and reliability of the analysis is assessed in terms of the simplicity of the solution (the extent to which items load at values = or $> .30$ (on no more than one factor or component) and intelligibility (the extent to which the observed solution makes conceptual sense). Cronbach's Alpha provides an estimate of the reliability of individual factors. It assesses the extent to which a group of items converge on the latent variable that they express. Values of .80 or above are considered sufficient (Creswell, 2008). All measures were in expectable range. Such measures maintained a consistency of results, ensuring the same responses each time the test was completed (reliability) and the extent to which a concept was accurately measured (validity) (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017).

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (PASW20). Data preparation involved the development of one SPSS file to incorporate all responses from the final survey undertaken. The initial data analysis used frequencies to provide a profile of respondents by personal variables (demographics). The mean (M) was calculated using SPSS to allow comparison across groups. Statistical mean was used to measure of central tendency of each question, providing patterns of associations. Means were only used as a ranking of items for the identified player and negative experiences. The general approach to rating scale analysis was to consider the relative level of agreement, regardless of level of RL, for sets of items related to a particular aspect of a player experience, that is, positive and negative aspects of the coaching experience, the club experience, the player experience and the

socialisation experience. Significance was reported by identifying p values ($p < 0.05$) and was used to further explore associations between the four player experiences (linked to: *player, coaching, social* and *club*) and groups (i.e. junior vs senior). Patterns were discerned from calculating the mean value for each item. Such an approach to data analysis, identified the main negative agreement levels and patterns, associated with each of the four experiences (*players, coaching, social* and *club*) across both the junior and senior players.

RESULTS

This research examines the relative level of agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree), for sets of items related to a number of particular aspects of a player’s experiences. These are (a) positive and negative aspects of the coaching, player, club and socialisation experiences and (b) why they did not return (retention motivations) to the game in 2017. Consideration was given to a specific number of subscales / variables, which were: age group (i.e., junior vs. senior), SES, gender, and ATSI identities. These subsets / variables were measured as to the level of their independent influence on the two aforementioned aspects of a player’s experience in 2016. Only significant patterns of associations were demonstrated by identifying specific means (*M*) and % across each of the four experiences. Participants demonstrated significant uniformed responses (i.e., *M* and %), concerning the four experiences and their influence on individual retention motivations. Means (*M*) were also provided to give ranking of each item based on the central tendency, indicating where the data seemed to cluster around. Means are only used as a ranking of items for the identified player and negative experiences. To give further context to the rankings, data were extracted from participants’ levels of agreement (agree to strongly agree) for each item and represented in %. Such an approach provides a detailed ranking of participants’ top main reason/s associated with, (a) their general experiences in 2016 and (b) why they did not return (retention) to the game in 2017.

Overall, participants generally demonstrated similar responses, concerning the four experiences and retention motivations. However, evidence from this research has identified that there was a substantial number of players (40%, $n = 917 / 2310$) who consistently indicated that their main reason/s, for not returning in 2017, was due to ‘a negative experience’ or ‘injury / fear of injury’. These responses slightly differed in priority depending on the player’s group (junior vs senior). Junior players ($n = 1804$) and senior players ($n = 506$) indicated three main reasons for not returning in 2017 (Table 2 and 3).

Table 2. Three main reasons influencing junior RL players to not return ($n = 1804$)

Reasons	Number (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
negative experience	451	25
injury, fear of injury	270	15
losing interest in playing	234	13

Table 3. Three main reasons influencing senior RL players to not return ($n = 506$)

Reasons	Number (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
injury, fear of injury	151	30
other commitments	85	17
negative experience	45	9

It was further identified, that participants agreed most strongly on two main negative experiences (Table 4). Significantly, players across both groups, were mostly similar in their responses concerning these two and other identified negative retention motivations, that is ‘*player selection was not fair and equitable*’ ‘*contribution not valued*’.

Table 4. Top Three Main Negative Experiences for Juniors and Seniors

Cohort	Experiences	Number (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Junior ($n = 1804$)	player selection was not fair and equitable	396	22
	contribution not valued	318	18
	low levels of fun and enjoyment	314	17
Senior ($n = 506$)	player selection was not fair and equitable	89	18
	limited support	80	16
	contribution not valued	75	15

There were a number of common negative experiences. Refer to Tables 4 and 5 for the top three reasons that influenced both junior and senior RL player’s decisions to not return in 2017. Negative experiences were predominately uniformed across the three governing RL bodies (i.e. NSW, NSWC and QLD). As presented in Tables 5 and 6, on average, the top three common negative experiences were predominately uniformed across the three governing RL bodies.

Table 5. Common Main Negative Experiences for not Returning in 2017 (juniors – NSW, NSWC, QLD)

		NSW	NSWC	QLD	
Four experiences	COACH	player selection	player selection	player selection	
		competitiveness too high	rewards and incentives	fun and enjoyment	
		rewards and incentives	fun and enjoyment	rewards and incentives	
		CLUB	communication with players	general organisation	general organisation
			general organisation	communication with players	communication with players
			professionalism	professionalism	professionalism
	PLAYER	fun and enjoyment	fun and enjoyment	support	
		player safety	travel	fun and enjoyment	
		limited support	general atmosphere	general atmosphere	
	SOCIAL	contribution not valued	contribution not valued	contribution not valued	
		team spirit	team spirit	team spirit	
		support	support	support	

Note: The ranking is based on mean (M) for each item (each of the experiences have an average M of >4.00 in agreement level and are listed in order of the top 3 negative agreements). The above experiences (retention motivations) should be read as negative in context or low levels. For example, where it indicates ‘player selection’, it should be taken in the context of ‘unfair player selection’ or ‘poor general organisation’, unless otherwise stated.

Table 6. Common Main Reason for not Returning in 2017 (senior – NSW, NSWC, QLD)

		NSW	NSWC	QLD	
Four experiences	COACH	player selection	rewards and incentives	player selection	
		rewards and incentives	player selection	rewards and incentives	
		communication with players	comp too low	communication with players	
		CLUB	communication with players	player payment	player payment
			rewards and incentives	commitment to training	general organisation
			professionalism	professionalism	professionalism

PLAYER	support	support	support
	game travel	general atmosphere	safety
	safety	fun and enjoyment	game travel
SOCIAL	contribution valued	contribution valued	contribution valued
	support	social gatherings	team spirit
	team spirit	team spirit	social gathering

Note: The ranking is based on mean (M) for each item (each of the experiences have an average M of > 4.00 in agreement level and are listed in order of the top 3 negative agreements). The above experiences (retention motivations) should be read as negative in context or low levels. For example, where it indicates ‘player selection’, it should be taken in the context of ‘unfair player selection’ or ‘poor general organisation’, unless otherwise stated.

Six main patterns which have emerged from the combined data (junior + senior, N = 2310) are indicated below. Significance were recorded at the $p < 0.05$ level, as being:

1. Senior RL players were more positive than junior RL players about aspects of the four experiences.
2. Junior RL players were more negative than senior RL players about aspects of the four experiences.
3. Male RL players were more negative than female RL players about aspects of the four experiences.
4. Players with more years of RL experience were more negative than others in relation to aspects of the coaching, player and club.
5. Players with more years of RL experience were more positive than others in relation to aspects of the socialisation experience.
6. Socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnicity of players did not significantly impact on the four experiences.

DISCUSSION

Internationally and nationally, research has focused on player development and participation through sport with an emphasis on the social objectives achieved through physical activity (Nichols, 2004). Others have examined the development of sport and its applications to elite athlete development (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). The resulting efforts have provided significant insight but have been ad hoc, inasmuch as sport development has so far lacked a theoretical framework (Coakley, 2004). This lack of (empirically based) theory has also impeded the progress of sport development research. With this in mind, the aim of this research was to determine the extent to which a player’s (N = 2310) decision (retention motivations) to not return to RL in 2017, was influenced by four main experiences, which are *player*, *coaching*, *club* and *socialisation*. Findings from this study provides a comprehensive ‘snapshot’ of the current RL landscape, linking junior ($n = 1804$) and senior ($n = 506$) players’ experiences in 2016 to explain retention rates in 2017. A summary of results and potential recommendations are presented in this project, with the aim to draw attention to the important patterns of associations between the four measurable experiences and players’ retention motivations.

It has been identified that a player’s retention motivations arise from links (or interactions) associated with the four experiences (as seen in Tables 4 and 5) and various social interactions and intrinsic

/ extrinsic motivations. Specifically, it has been identified that the individual characteristics of the player (e.g., junior vs senior, division – NSW, NSWC, QLD etc.), the social identity they derive from the game (e.g., prestige, status, rewards), and the social setting in which they act (e.g., socialisation, club organizational characteristics, sense of community and team spirit) impact on the four experiences and ultimately, impact on retention rates. It has been identified that there are significant patterns of associations exhibiting uniformities, across the four experiences and the level of influence these have had on a player's decision to not return in 2017.

It is recognised that at the highest level, there is a need for the NRL to understand to what extent experiences contribute to whether or not the player remains an active member of the game. In addition, at a more discrete level, there is a need to broaden RL's understanding of the interrelated issues that shape its landscape, by differentiating between populations studied (i.e., junior vs senior, gender / ethnic / SES differences, and years of RL experience), and the fluctuating life demands of RL players (e.g., junior and senior life transitional phases). Whilst improving player recruitment and supporting various transitional stages, throughout the RL landscape is considered paramount, there is an additional need to explore aspects of player retention rates, by way of identifying why players fail to continue their involvement and what may entice them to develop a long-term commitment to the game (retention motivations). To assist in such research approach and goal, this study employed a quantitative approach to examine junior and senior RL players' retention rates and motivations during 2016–2017. It aimed to investigate the factors contributing to initial and sustained engagement with the RL, as well as the reasons why players disengage with the game.

A number of important findings and subsequent recommendations have emerged from the data, which are directly related to a player's age, stage of development and life transitional phases. Findings from the research suggest that there are a number of critical points and identified player experiences where disengagement with RL occurs. This research has raised two critical questions, (a) Is Australia witnessing a shift away from RL (especially with juniors) in terms of retention rates? and (b) Will this have an impact on the way in which the game is perceived as being an integral part of its national identity throughout the 21st century?

A possible underlining reason for fluctuating retention rates could be in relation to the increasing popularity of other sporting codes which are potentially proving a significant barrier in the retention of players in the RL – this could especially be the case for many junior (grassroots) players who have indicated that 'player selection', 'contribution not valued' and 'fear of injury' cause them to look elsewhere for sport involvement. This research and its findings acknowledge that sports and the discourses that constitute them, have become one of the more influential narratives in twenty first century culture. Specifically, this research was concerned with giving meaning to and understanding the multifaceted experiences and influences that contribute to the phenomenon under investigation, that is RL's retention motivations.

Of particular note, this research and its findings, mirror other similar research concerning player retention motivations in sport. To a large extent, the lack of positive experiences associated

with sport can explain the exodus from organized sport at such a critical juncture in childhood (Bailey, Hillman, Arent, & Petitpas, 2013). Specific findings from this research, and similarities to past investigations, exist around a number of common motivational elements as to why players terminate active participation in a sport. These commonalities being due to (a) negative experience/s and (b) injury (Coakley, 2004). Furthermore, it is understood that when players end their active participation in one sport, they often initiate participation in another – one that is more or less competitive (Coakley, 2004). Such findings and statements give further interpretation to the patterns of associations identified in this research, especially between groups (junior vs senior).

Limitations

The study had a few identified limitations, with these primarily being associated with the recruitment of participants, with only 2310 completed surveys obtained. However, this was seen to be a substantial representative sample for discerning patterns of associations across the groups. Despite having 2310 participants, a larger cross section of participants may have given a more in-depth data representation. However, this is only speculative and given the high level of data patterning demonstrated from the combined M and %, it can be concluded that associations between participants' experiences have been established and presented. Further thought to how to attract more participant numbers, especially throughout senior players, would benefit future research undertakings.

CONCLUSION

This study identified that a player's decision (retention motivations) to not return to RL in 2017, was strongly influenced by and associated with four main experiences: *player*, *coaching*, *social* and *club*. Findings from this study found significant (i.e., M, %) patterns of associations with experiences in 2016. More specifically, findings are supported by the identified theoretical basis of claim (SIT), identifying that a player's decision to not return to play RL (2017) is largely influenced and based on such retention motivations as fairness, social interaction, fun, being valued, a sense of belonging and differing intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The social interactionist theory (SIT) is an approach used to describe how people react toward things or events based on what they think that particular situation means to them. When positioned to investigate and interpret sporting cultures (i.e. NRL), the SIT approach focuses on how players experience sports. Of particular importance and relevance to this study, is the premise that such an approach, allows for the interpretation of how players are socialised into the game, through the game and out of game.

Due to the nature of this type of research (retention motivations) a player does not necessarily leave a game due to just one negative experience. It can be indicated that there are a number of negative experiences, with this research indicating the top main reasons why junior and senior players did not return to the game in 2017. The findings have identified the top three reasons and a number of key negative experiences specific to each groups' (junior and senior) experience/s in 2016. It can be concluded that these combinations consistently present themselves as key findings throughout this study.

Table 7. Recommendations for improving retention rates for NRL

EXPERIENCE	Theme	Findings	Recommendation
COACHING	<i>Fairness</i>	Participants noted highly their negative agreement levels associated with 'player selection being fair and equitable'.	Player selection needs uniformity across the clubs. Policy design and implementation at the club level need further investigation concerning the fair and equitable player selection — based on long term player development rather than short term game competition and results.
	<i>Rewards and Incentives</i>	There was a common lower level of agreement, associated with the coach's "rewards and incentives for players".	Investigate avenues that create incentives for players – design universal rewards and incentives for all players. These rewards will differ depending on age group (i.e. junior vs senior).
	<i>Fun Factor</i>	Data indicated a significant relationship between the 'fun factor' and junior retention motivations.	The difference between junior and senior RL players expressed needs concerning certain aspects of the game—one approach does not fit all. Junior training and competition need to be structured and delivered at levels that cater to all players' skill abilities, interests and physical maturation. Ensure that there is an added emphasis in junior training environments that are based on fun, engagement and inclusivity.
PLAYER	<i>Support</i>	Participants (esp. seniors) indicated a low level of perceived support for players. This was specifically indicated by senior players as a main issue. Player payment was seen as an important retention for senior players, associated with player and club experiences.	Recognise that the longer a player stays in the game (senior), the more likely the player will be less inclined to agree that there is a high level of player support, rewards offered and atmosphere is positive (more critical). A need to ensure that players' environments are new and innovative, rather than repetitive in delivery across the continuous year levels. Player support would be seen as offering monetary payments / incentives, insurance against injury, etc.
CLUB	<i>Communication</i>	There was a lower agreement across both junior and senior RL players concerning the level of 'player support', 'communication with players' and 'general organisation'.	It is recommended that clubs organise and implement a more committed approach to communication with players of all ages. It is envisaged that by implementing a more transparent and committed approach to 'communication', that other aspects of the club experience could be heightened. Better communication will further be seen as supporting players. More research will be required to determine what platform(s) would best serve communication requirements across differing groups and levels. Exploring digital tools for player communication would be advantageous.
	<i>Level of Competition</i>	Senior players indicated a more positive association with the competitiveness during games when compared to that of the junior players' experiences.	Ensure that junior games are conducted with appropriate age-related competitiveness. Strategic planning needs to be given to player weight rather than age competition. Design and implement modified games and rules to reduce competitive nature in game, especially for junior players. Offering a variety of intensity levels that are scaffolded in nature and complexity.
SOCIALISATION	<i>Building Social Identity – Contribution not valued</i>	There is strong agreement across both junior and senior RL players concerning the socialisation experience of looking forward to game days, looking forward to training. However, participants rated 'least highly in agreement concerning that they felt their 'contribution was valued' and that there was enough 'team / social gatherings' organised outside game'. Data suggests that players feel that the 'team spirit' is lacking in many occasions and that there were not enough social gatherings outside of games. Given that players join sporting clubs for a myriad of reasons (identity, personal gratification, social/career player), it would be advantageous for clubs to invest more in acknowledging individual player / group achievements and creating a more club/team spirit around social gatherings.	At the club level, there is a need to establish various approaches to heightening team spirit and socialisation throughout the differing junior and senior groups—one approach does not fit all. A need to invest in designing strategies which assist junior players' team and clubs to implement tailored programs to address youth engagement. Marketing of junior RL involvement needs to design to emphasise a sense of 'belonging', team work and participation, rather than competition for elite players.
	<i>Utilising Experienced Players</i>	Players with more years of experience (junior and senior) were more likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly across the majority of variables.	A strategy could be to encourage long term members of clubs to become more involved in recruitment activities and organising social bonding and events outside of game time.

Implications and recommendations

The data sets reliably bring forth a number of key findings, presenting ‘patterns of associations’, thus, providing a platform for recommendations. As highlighted in Table 7, this research identifies eight points of concern and potential recommendations for improving retention rates.

Based on these findings, it would be reasonable to suggest that the NRL needs to invest in a more concentrated effort around aspects of the game, that are more focused on social engagement (social interactionism) and cater to individual motivations (especially in junior groups), rather than solely aimed at ensuring high level of competition and game results. The latter approach will not encourage or sustain player retention at the grassroots, nor, given the increased competitive market, ensure future player recruitment and growth into the 21st century.

It is anticipated that the results of this research will help to inform the future development of RL’s short and long-term strategic approach to improve players’ recruitment, transition and retention rates. Of importance, are findings from this research which will provide a map of the NRL’s retention rates as it currently stands and allow for the identification of the most appropriate ways to proceed in attempting to encourage the development of a nationwide action plan to address player retention rates. Findings from this study can be applied to identify and tailor practical measures that could be implemented to specifically address players’ experiences associated with: *coaching, club, player* and *socialisation* factors. In so doing, it would be possible to substantially reduce the rate of rejection of potential strategies, programs and policy implementation, and save resources from being wasted in areas where the data make it clear that a certain group would be unlikely to benefit. It would also identify which actions would be deemed more appropriate to undertake and would facilitate a greater awareness and confidence in individual stakeholders and ultimately allow for a more effective and efficient engagement with Australia’s junior and senior RL players.

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Appendix 1

NRL sporting schools' program
EARLY CHILD CARE

Munchkin League

<https://playnrl.com/munchkin-league>

Munchkin League is a new and exciting Early Childhood Development Program. The program is designed specifically for 3–5-year-olds, of all abilities and skills, and runs over eight 45-minute sessions. A philosophy of learning through play, promotes physical activity in a fun and interactive environment. Children are supported and encouraged by qualified Early Childhood educators. Munchkin League engages children in learning fine and gross motor skills, problem solving abilities and communication and teamwork. The program supports social and emotional growth and assists children to develop independence, self-confidence and self-awareness. Munchkin League provides an opportunity for children to learn to respect others, try something new and make lots of new friends.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Backyard League Foundation— Year 2

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/backyard-league-infants-program/>

The Backyard League, Foundation to Year 2 Program uses story based learning to assist young students to understand the skills and concepts of Rugby League. Students will meet the story's characters, Red, Bluey and their friends who will help children of all abilities gain a basic comprehension of Rugby League concepts. Lessons which follow on from the story component have been designed alongside a story that requires students to practice fundamental movement skills and active play through minor games. Students will learn to be aware of space and game boundaries, as well fair play and personal safety. The three-week program has been developed to provide non-contact, safe and age appropriate activities that provide an introduction to and understanding of Rugby League, which is delivered by fully qualified NRL Game Development Officers. In 2017, the NRL will be introducing a new book and activities which will follow on from the current foundation to year 2 program.

Backyard League Program— Year 3 – 6

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/backyard-league/>

NRL Backyard League is available to your school via the Australian Sport's Commission Sporting Schools program. The NRL Backyard League program can be delivered before/during/after school. There is also an option to request additional sessions through the online booking system. NRL Backyard League is one of the most affordable Sporting Schools options available and are delivered by qualified NRL staff so a quality experience is assured. When selecting NRL Backyard League to be delivered in your Sporting Schools program you will receive funding to support coach delivery costs, with Foundation to Year 2 students receiving a take home copy of the 1,2,3 Rugby League story book and a soft Steeden football*. Year 3–6 students receive a Steeden NRL football*.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

League Integrated Fundamentals Training (LIFT)

<https://sportingschools.gov.au/sports/national-rugby-league/schools/NRL-secondary-school735bookings>

The NRL League Integrated Fundamentals Training (LIFT) program has the intention of providing opportunities for our Junior High School students to participate in highly engaging and interesting physical movement patterns that promote an introductory understanding of physical literacy. Our program focuses on educating Australian teenagers about the importance of movement to enhance physical literacy.

TEACHER DELIVERED PROGRAM

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/playnrl-programs/>

The NRL offer a teacher delivered program as one of the package options when submitting a booking. A teacher delivered program can be an option in the case that an NRL Game Development Officer cannot deliver your program or the teacher is confident with the delivery of rugby league and would like to deliver the program at their school. This may be a particularly appealing option in those cases where the school have already had an NRL Game Development Officer at their school delivering Sporting Schools previously. ■