Mediating Effect of Sport Team Representativeness within the Relationship between Social Identification and Team Identification

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In the last decade, numerous studies have been undertaken to understand sport consumer attitudes and behaviors. These studies pointed out those fans with strong psychological attachments to a team would continue to support their team regardless of circumstance (Funk & James, 2006; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Wann & Baranscombe, 1990). Team identification, a type of psychological attachment, has been considered one of the most important factors in understanding sport fan behavior as the construct influences almost every aspect of the sport fan-ship (i.e., the cognitive, affective, conative domains and actual behaviors; Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2006; Melnick & Wann, 2004; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). Despite the research interest that has been given to the term, relatively little is known about the precursors to the construct (Dimmock & Gucciardi, 2008). Therefore, it is of crucial importance to try to investigate the antecedents of team identification.

Social identity theory has been used to explain the team identification phenomenon (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Investigating a relationship between team identification and social identity theory has been an issue for some time. Wann (1997) stated that team identification is a specific form of social identification that reflects a fan's psychological connection to a team. Thus, the antecedents of team identification should be found in relation to social identity theory.

Social identification has been used as an explanation for a variety of inter and intra group behaviors (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). The term social identification evidences discordance in the conceptual definition and operational definition across studies (Jackson & Smith, 1999). A majority of research on social identity theory has examined social identity as a uni-dimensional construct (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005). Recently, however, numerous studies in social science claim that social identification is a multi-dimensional construct (e.g., Cameron, 2004; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999).

While the multidimensionality of social identity is indeed appropriate and useful, it needs to be tested along the methodological variation (Dimmock, & Gucciardi, 2008). Moreover, a multidimensional model of social identity has not yet been subjected to testing along with other social factors such as team identification.

Within the relationship between social identification and team identification, it is crucial that people of a certain group acknowledge a given sport team as their extension of in-group membership or as their group's representative. As the sport team becomes the representative or acquires said representativeness, it is likely that the group members would display higher levels of in-group bias toward the team (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998; Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino & Sacchi, 2002; Lindeman, 1997). The sense of in-group bias would enable the in-group members (i.e., the sport fan), to support the team under any circumstances.

The present article has three primary goals: (1) to evaluate a multidimensional model of social identification using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis, (2) to demonstrate the relationship between social identification (in this article the regional identification) and sport team identification and (3) to demonstrate the mediating effect of team representativeness between team identification and social identification.

The researchers obtained a total of 600 samples from two different cities (i.e., Che-Ju Province and Kwang-Ju City) in South Korea. Only 524 useful cases were included in the data analyses. The measurement tools included three scales: Team Identification (Trail & James, 2001; 3 items), Regional Identification (group self-esteem, commitment, and categorization; Ellemers et al, 1999 revised; 9 items), and representativeness of a sport team (Rhee, 2008; 3 items). Cronbach's alphas ranged from .82 to .86, which represents good reliability of the measures. A CFA for the measurement model yielded a satisfactory fit, x²=251.1(d.f=80,p<.001), SRMR=.05, CFI=.96, NNFI=.95, RMSEA=.06. For the test of the hypotheses, the authors used a general-specific model. It is a structural equation modeling
method, which provides an alternative approach to hierarchical models used to explain the structure of highly related but distinct constructs. This is useful because general-specific models specify a general construct accounting for the commonality of the individual constructs and explicitly define domain specific constructs representing a unique portion of individual constructs.

In the current study, there is one general factor (regional identification) and three domain specific factors. These three factors are group self-esteem, group commitment, and group categorization.

The general-specific model yielded good fit for the data (x² = 227.6(df = 76, p < .001), SRMR = .046, CFI = .96, NNFI = .95, and RMSEA = .062). All factor loadings for the general factor and factor loadings on domain specific factors were significant. Factor loading for the general factor loadings ranged from .59 to .76 and factor loadings for the domain specific factors ranged from .27 to 62. Path coefficients from the exogenous factors to Team Identification, the path from general regional identification (γ = .18, S.E. = .09, p < .05), Group Self-Esteem (γ = .25, S.E. = .12, p < .001), Group Commitment (γ = .07, S.E. = .11, p < .05), Group Categorization (γ = .35, S.E. = .09, p < .05). The mediation effect of Representativeness is shown with the indirect path coefficient from Regional Identification to Representativeness (γ = .36, S.E. = .08, p < .001), and Representativeness to Team Identification (γ = .37, S.E. = .04, p < .001), which displayed a rather strong effect of the mediator.

The examination of path coefficients supported the hypothesized relationship among the research constructs. Specifically, regional identification significantly influences team identification. In detail, among the three domain specific factors of regional identification, group self-esteem, group commitment, and group categorization, had a positive effect on team identification. However, it was displayed that among domain specific factors group commitment had relatively low influence than other factors. Lastly, the representativeness had a strong mediating effect on the relationship between social identification and team identification. Specifically, the coefficient for regional identification dropped significantly when the mediator is introduced.

The primary goal of this investigation was to: (1) to evaluate a multidimensional model of social identification using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis; (2) to demonstrate the relationship between social identification (in this article the regional identification) and sport team identification,(3) to demonstrate the mediating effect of team representativeness between the team identification and social identification. From the study, it is possible to say that multidimensionality of social identification was validated. Secondly, results from this study provide evidence that the regional identity, a form of social identity, works as an antecedent of team identification. The region in this study could easily transform to other aspects of social identity: a school, city, state, and nation etc. Lastly, the mediation effect on the relationship between regional identification and team identification had rather strong mediation effect. This shows the importance of how people's perception of a team could affect their team identification toward a sports team. In other words, having a close relationship with the people of sport team's location is indeed very important. The current outcome might work as a direct rationale for sport team to engage in a Corporate Social Responsibility act, and/or building a strong community relation. Further theoretical and practical implications and future research directions will be presented.