Supporting the Nation: An Examination of the Manifestations and Effects of National Identity on National Supporter Groups

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Marketing Abstract 2010-104
June 4, 2010 11:10 AM 25-minute oral presentation (White IBIS)

With the increasing trend of globalization, some authors have suggested that nations are in decline (Held, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1990; Wong & Trumper, 2002), whereas others have suggested that nations and, by extension, national identity play a significant role in modern social life (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003). The globalization of sport is evidenced by players, coaches, and management from different countries interacting in national and international leagues and competition. Despite the geographic distribution, players are generally expected to return to represent their nation in key international tournaments such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup (Rowe, 2003). Mega events such as these encourage the celebration and display of national identity (Tomlinson & Young, 2006), including through singing and chanting national anthems and songs like that seen in domestic competition (Armstrong & Young, 2000). While support for a national team has traditionally been spontaneous and extemporized (outside of the world of European or South American soccer), the formation of supporter groups based on national identity to support a team at home and abroad is becoming increasingly common (Parry & Malcolm, 2004). Such groups have been characterized as patriotic, chauvinistic (Parry & Malcolm, 2004), gregarious, fun loving, and friendly (Giulianotti, 1994). However, we know little about how these national supporter groups construct and celebrate the manifestations and effects of a shared national identity. An understanding of national supporter groups can assist those involved in the marketing and management of international sporting events in providing a positive experience that encourages repeat patronage. Further, this information can be used to counteract the negative effects of national sporting competition such as hooliganism and violence between supporters from different nations.

This research examined how supporter groups of two countries (United States of America and Australia) construct and celebrate the group’s identity. Specifically, this research focused on Sam’s Army and The Outlaws, two separate groups designed to support the US National Soccer Team, and The Fanatics, an Australian supporter group designed to support Australian national sport teams and players. Data were collected through a content analysis of the groups’ websites, interviews with key informants, and participant observation. Data were transcribed and entered into the N*Vivo qualitative software program. The authors independently coded the transcripts and then conferred to compare, contrast, and develop codes and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Just as the media positions showdowns between various countries using stereotypes, shared sporting and military history, nostalgia, and even myths (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003; Rowe, 2003), the supporter groups embrace these same elements and use irony and self-deprecation to construct and celebrate the group’s identity. National identity is a fluid construct (cf., Kersting, 2007), and thus the groups adapt and redefine themselves based on current world events, often making specific reference to the opposing nations’ circumstances. Fans’ behavior changes in response to external influences, such as the opponent, game location, or timing of the event, which may suggest the altering of relevant dividing traits between the national groups. Such occurrences serve as illustrations of subfactors, in addition to national identity, that may be relevant for these group.

It has been suggested that a shared interest in the sport is crucial to the group formation and shared identity of the Barmy Army (Parry & Malcolm, 2004), a national supporter group; however, our data suggest that an interest in the sport is not a necessary condition of group participation as some fans may have minimal interest in or knowledge of the sport upon joining the group. Both at home and abroad, the groups personalize their viewing spaces with banners, and formalized ritual, whether that is in a packed stadium, or in a pub to watch a live game on television. For these groups, sport spectating is about celebrating national identity and patriotism in the company of others (Boden & Molotoch, 1994; Weed, 2007) which includes interacting with fans from other nations.

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