The Role of Team Identity and Sport Fan Motives in the Development of Team Loyalty

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Understanding why people become interested in following and consuming sports is a complex undertaking. First, there are numerous motives why sport spectators follow and consume sport (e.g., entertainment, vicarious achievement). Some motives are more salient than others in directing and shaping sport consumption behavior. Second, sport spectators vary in their degree of fanship ranging from mere spectators to loyal fans. It is unknown which factors or combination thereof account for the difference in fanship behavior. Third, there are several factors that mediate and moderate the relationship between sport consumption motives and behavior. For example, the involvement and team identification constructs have been purported to link motivation antecedents to sport consumption behaviors such as game attendance (Funk & James, 2004; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004).

Researchers in sociology, social psychology, marketing, and sport management have used different theoretical models (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Attitude Theory) to further our understanding of sport spectator and fan behavior (e.g., Funk & Pastore, 2000, Heere & James, 2007). In 2004, Funk & James proposed a research paradigm that explained the mediational role of team identification in the development of attitude importance consequences (i.e., Fan Attitude Network (FAN) model). At the time a sport-specific scale intended to assess the various facets of team identification was nonexistent. It was not until recently (2007) that Heere & James developed a sport-specific, multi-dimensional scale of team identity (Team*ID scale) based on Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe’s (2004) work on collective identity. In a later theoretical paper, Heere & James (2007) proposed that the newly developed Team*ID scale be used to test the assumption that team identity mediates the relationship of external group identities and team loyalty. The purpose of this study was to test the proposition that team identity mediates the relationship between sport fan motives and team loyalty. Secondly, this investigation sought to uncover whether selected personal and social-situational factors have a moderating role in the relationships among sport fan motives, team identity, and team loyalty.

Fans of two Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL) teams – the Philadelphia KiXX and the Milwaukee Wave were surveyed using convenience sampling. The Sport Interest Inventory (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002) was used to measure the motives of KiXX and Wave fans. Team identity was assessed in this investigation using the Team*ID scale developed by Heere & James (2007). The TEAM*ID scale is six-dimensional construct of team identity. The Team*ID scale is the only sport specific instrument intended to assess the multi-dimensionality of team identity. Behavioral loyalty reflects several sport consumer behavior related measures. These measures include (a) frequency of game attendance, media consumption, and team merchandise, (b) proportion, (c) duration, (d) intensity of use, purchase, and/or participation associated with a sport’s team, and (e) probability of brand use overtime (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004). All five measures of behavioral loyalty were incorporated in this investigation. Several socio-situational, demographic, and personal variables were hypothesized to moderate the relationship between team identity antecedents and its related consequences. Social situation factors included: (a) peer group acceptance, (b) product delivery, (c) tradition, (d) team success, and (e) wholesome environment. Factors one through four were taken from Gladden & Funk’s (2002) Team Association Model (TAS). All four variables have been used in several different studies (e.g., Funk & James, 2006; Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002) and have shown good internal consistency measures. The personal moderators included the demographic variables of gender, age, ethnic background, marital status, income and education level. Each survey item was presented in random order in a seven-point response format ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. Structural Equation Modeling was used to test how the proposed theoretical model fit the sample data. A two-step approach, first described by James, Mulaik, and Brett (1982), was used. This two-step approach is preferred over one-step modeling approach where both the measurement and structural methods are modeled simultaneously. It is so because it prevents interpretational confounding and makes it easier to locate the source of misspecification in the case of a poorly fitted model (Kline, 2005). First, a likelihood ratio test was used to examine whether the chi-square differences between the two nested models (i.e., full and restricted) were statistically significant at the p<.05 level. This procedure was conducted to evaluate mediating effects of team identity. Second, a test for structural invariance was used testing a baseline unconstrained model against constrained models across different conditions. This second test was conducted to evaluate the moderating effects of selected demographic and team endearing variables (e.g., men versus women, high versus low scores in team success) onto the relation between motives of sport fans and team identity and between team identity and team loyalty.

Four hundred and seventy six Wave and KIIXX fans completed the survey for a response rate of 46%. The results of the tests of mediation show that there is sufficient evidence to support the mediational role of team identity in the relation between sport fan motives and team loyalty. The strongest piece of evidence comes from the finding that there was no statistically significant improvement (p = .49) in the restricted model when compared to the unrestricted model. The results for the tests of moderation showed partial support for the moderating roles of selected demographic and socio-situational variables in the relation between

London, ON
June 1 – 4, 2011

Page 179
sport fan motives and team identity and between team identity and team loyalty. Results showed that there was statistically significant effect \((p < .05)\) of age, marital status, and income on the structural path between sport fan motives and team identity. Product delivery had a statistically significant effect on the structural path between team identity and team loyalty.

The most important finding of this study was the mediating role of team identity in the relation between sport fan motives and team loyalty. The mediating role of team identity in the development of team loyalty had been proposed on theoretical grounds by other sport management researchers (e.g., Funk & James, 2004; Heere & James, 2007). This theoretical proposition had not been empirically tested, however. The results of this study confirm the suspicions of sport management researchers and help to solidify the role of team identity in the development of team loyalty. Another significant finding of this study was that income and tradition moderated the relation between sport fan motives and team identity and that age as well as product delivery moderated the relation between team identity and team loyalty. The finding that income and tradition moderated the relation between sport fan motives and team identity seems to suggest that fans with a household income less than $79,000 and fans who are more aware of the Wave/KiXX traditions identify more strongly with the Wave/KiXX. By the same token, the relation between team identity and team loyalty is likely to be stronger in Wave/KiXX fans who are below 44 years of age and believe that the Wave/KiXX organization can satisfy their needs for entertainment. From a practical perspective, creating sport fan loyalty and identity profiles based on their motives for sport consumption may prove very fruitful for sport marketers. Sport consumer profiles based solely on socio-demographic parameters are limited in scope in that not all consumers within a specific demographic have the same wants and needs. An alternative approach is to segment sport fans based on their motives for sport consumption and their level of team identity and loyalty. Thus, sport marketers could develop promotional and advertising campaigns targeted specifically to a given segment of sport fans with the same motivations for sport consumption and with similar levels of team identity and loyalty.