Team Identification’s Impact on Social Networks of Students at the NCAA Division II and III Levels
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Intercollegiate athletics play a major role in shaping the social culture on a college campus in the United States (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2000), yet the value of this impact is still highly contested (Sperber, 2000). For instance, while team identification of college students enhances their perceived sense of community (Clopton, 2008), questions regarding the value orientation of such a community and the actual benefits derived from this community remain as this team identification has also been found to detract from students’ grade point average (Clopton, 2009). Still, the ability of athletics on a college campus to impact overall community and social networks among fans exists in accordance with the findings of previous research on sports fans, community, and social capital (e.g., Palmer & Thompson, 2007). While athletics on a college campus serves as a significant element in the construction of community, a dearth of literature exists analyzing the directional impact of athletics upon the overall university community. Therefore, the intent of this research was to explore the relationship between the team identity of college students, its relationship with social networks on campus (i.e., social capital), and the extent to which these social networks are aligned with the overall mission of higher education. That is, to what extent does team identity contribute to student social capital beyond, and in relation to, the contribution of one’s overall university identity. Additionally, the current study utilized students from the NCAA Division II and III levels of athletics. There, intercollegiate athletics exist within a different culture than that of the Division I level and a paucity of research exists exploring the unique blend of athletics and academics at these levels.

Social capital is generally defined by the quality of an individual’s social networks, which are largely constructed upon the foundation of trust and norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). Social capital is further disaggregated into action-specific levels of bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is that which describes those relationships built within homogeneous networks and constructed of tightly-knit feelings of trust and security. Such social capital is described by Putnam as what is necessary to help us “get by” (Putnam, 2000) when confronted with difficult times or adversity. It is often this core value that contributes most to the extent of the “bond” of bonding social capital. The essential element to bridging social capital, conversely, is its ability to form across heterogeneous networks of individuals within a specific community and even beyond. These social networks are “bridged” across gender, race, socioeconomic class, etc. Bridging social capital is also embodied by a broader sense of trust within a community, such as social trust (Cox & Caldwell, 2000). It is also through these diverse relationships that an individual is able to “get ahead” (Putnam, 2000), for bridging social capital can be parlayed into other forms of capital such as financial capital (Leonard, 2004) or human capital (Putnam, 2000).

The sport-social capital connection lies within the purview of the Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model, or TISPH Model (Wann, 2006). This model, also constructed within the social identity framework (e.g., Tajfel, 1978), predicts that team identification improves social psychological well-being by increasing social connections for fans. Wann’s model divides the path to team identification into two paths: (a) Enduring social connections based upon chronic social connection where individuals identify with a local team in a local environment and (b) Temporary social connections where an individual identifies with a team not in local environment and is unable to parlay this group identification into many of these social psychological benefits. For the current study, Wann’s enduring social connections were assumed due to the local environment (college campuses) and local teams to which identification is measured (university’s sports teams) and the quality of social psychological outcome (social capital). This model was based upon past team identification literature which has shown the many communal benefits of identifying with sports teams, including perceived quality of life and sense of unity (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and a belief in the trustworthiness of others (Wann & Polk, 2007).

Heere and James (2007) further explored the existence of sport fan communities and some of their various intricacies. It is here that the community of sports fans was connected with various social networks of larger communities which, it is deducted, established a potential network of transference of social capital from sport in the community to fans identifying with those sports teams within the community. Wann’s (2006) TISPH Model played out through the power of communities of fans in generating social capital (Palmer & Thompson, 2007), where many aspects of bonding and bridging social capital were uncovered amongst supporters of an Australian football club. Similarly, aforementioned individuals who identify highly with particular sports teams have also shown a connection with a belief in the trustworthiness of others (Wann & Polk, 2007).
To explore this connection at the NCAA Divisions II and III, data were collected from undergraduate students randomly-selected online from 50 colleges and universities at the NCAA Division II and III levels. Surveys were distributed online to 1,782 students. A total of 713 undergraduate students responded for an overall response rate of 40.0%. Afterwards, a total of 136 responses were removed from the study for incomplete responses or not fitting within the demographic limitations of the study, for an overall usable response rate of 32.4%. Aside from the demographic control variables, team identification was ascertained by the Sport Spectatorship Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), university identification was assessed through the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), and social capital was constructed from adapting the two bonding and bridging subscales of the Internet Social Capital Scales (Williams, 2006). All instruments had been established in previous literature as reliable and valid. To explore the relationship between team identity and social capital, three multiple hierarchical regression analyses were constructed for the dependent variables of bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and total social capital. With step one including the demographical variables of the students and step two utilizing college-related variables, including university identity; team identity was entered into the final step of each analysis as the predictor variable. In opposition to previous findings at the NCAA Division I level where team identity contributed to social capital (Clopton & Finch, 2010), students at the Division II and III levels showed no connection between team identity and social capital. This held true for both subscales of bonding and bridging social capital, as well. For each, though, university identity was the main contributor to bonding social capital ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), bridging social capital ($\beta = .43, p < .001$), and total social capital ($\beta = .43, p < .001$).

These results suggest that – not surprisingly – a distinctly different athletics culture exists between Divisions II and III and Division I of the NCAA. Though – and somewhat surprisingly – Wann’s TISPH Model did not apply to athletics here as team identity showed no connection to social capital. While athletics is funded at a fraction of the levels in the Division I level, a significant amount of time and resources are invested at these levels and are justified by their contribution to the university’s overall mission. For those students not participating as athletes, indirect participation through team identification is one of the few avenues through which benefits of the presence of athletics can manifest itself. These findings suggest that this relationship needs to be revisited by policy makers at the Division II and III levels. Empirically, researchers need to devote more efforts into exploring the extent to which team identification is parlayed into academic or social benefits within the overall college experience.