The Greenest Sport Fans: The Relationship Between Fan Identity and Motivation Toward the Environment

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Recently sport organizations have begun to implement environmentally friendly programs, including in-stadium recycling, offsetting carbon emissions, and incorporating environmentally responsible procurement standards (King, 2008; McCullough & Cunningham, in press). In a 2010, ProGreenSports surveyed collegiate athletic departments and professional sport organizations to gauge their commitment and attitudes towards environmental initiatives. The researchers reported that 52% and 59% of collegiate athletic departments and professional sport organizations, respectively, responded that environmental initiatives were a “high” or “very high” priority to the organization. Likewise, 44% of college athletic departments and 70% of professional sport organizations believe that environmental initiatives would increase loyalty among fans. Despite findings such as these and the explosion of environmental practices in society-at-large, few sport organizations that have implemented green initiatives that go beyond visible programs (e.g., recycling receptacles). To date, sport organizations have failed to incorporate organizational wide programs that reduce the organization’s environmental impact. As such, it is reasonable to question the values of the organization and their commitment to and attitudes toward environmental initiatives.

According to Hess and Warren (2008), social initiatives reveal a great deal about the moral values of an organization and its members, and in turn, an organization’s core values dictate how it responds to the various pressures to engage in social initiatives. Thus, a great deal of insight about an organization as a whole can be gained from the social initiatives that an organization adopts and the manner by which they are implemented, as they are indicative of the internal and external meanings associated with the organization. Simply put, they can describe the dynamic relationship between an organization’s culture, identity, and image. This is consistent with Hatch and Schultz’s (2002) descriptions of an organization’s identity as the expression of its culture (i.e., assumptions, beliefs, and values) and an organization’s image as the expression of its identity to others. These relationships are particularly relevant to the context of sport, as (a) cultures of sport organizations have become increasingly transparent (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007) and (b) it has been suggested that the identity of a sport organization and a fan’s identity are indivisible (Parent & Foreman, 2007).

The social categorization framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987) puts forth that individuals classify themselves and others into various social categories as a way to maintain and enhance one’s personal and social self-evaluations. Indeed, a great deal of research has adopted this perspective when investigating the powerful relationship between sport and to find that fans who highly identify with a sport team comprise an in-group and are more likely than their lower identifying counterparts to possess higher levels of group-based self-esteem, have more faith in their team’s capabilities, and maintain their identification when losses occur (see Platow et al., 1999). Additionally, they are also likely to evaluate other highly identified fans more favorably than fans who do not identify highly and are also more likely to view the sponsors of their team more positively than are lower-identified fans (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Lastly, Sartore and Walker (in press) recently demonstrated that highly identified fans are also more likely to support and promote a sport organization’s socially responsible behaviors. Further, and consistent with Hatch and Schultz’s (2002) model, it was theorized that fans did so as a way to preserve their own identity by enhancing the organization’s image.

Researchers (Blake, 1999; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Stern, Deitz, & Karlof, 1993) have tried to close the gap between positive attitudes towards the environment and the lack of behavior to protect it, commonly referred to as the value-action gap (Blake). This research demonstrates that there is a need to understand individual's motivations for protecting the environment. The purpose of this inquiry was to extrapolate these findings to the realm of organized sport by incorporating the notion of identity. The nature of the sport industry is unique in that it heavily relies on its customers to decrease the environmental impact due to the consumption of their product. Because of this organizations need to understand the environmental behaviors of their customers (i.e. fans). By understanding the motivations of individuals to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors, we suggest that sport organizations can organizations focus the development and promotion of these programs to optimize fan participation – ultimately decreasing the organization’s environmental impact. Consistent with this rationale, we sought to investigate the extent to which fan identification in the intercollegiate sport setting predicted the motivation to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors.

We hypothesized that as fans who highly identified with sport would feel more compelled to help sport organization s meet the social pressures to be “green” more so than fans who were not as highly identified. Data were collected from undergraduate students (N = 128) enrolled in physical activity classes at a southwestern university in the United States. Participants were asked...
to complete a survey with scales measuring their sport team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and their motivation towards the environment (Pelletier, et al., 1998). To examine our hypothesis we performed an ANOVA to examine if fan identification predicts environmental motivation. Results of the analysis indicated that the significant main effects for fan identification $F (1, 84) = 1.42, p = .011$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, significantly predict environmental motivation.

Our results suggest that the pressures to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors are reaching various audiences, including sport fans. These findings are consistent with previous literature examining participation in outdoor recreational activities and behaviors (e.g., camping, hunting, fishing) and environmental concern (Dunlap & Heffernan, 1975). Our findings suggest that sport organizations need to provide the vehicle for their fans to participate in environmentally friendly behaviors. These behaviors should go beyond simple recycling programs to tap into the motivations toward the environment of sport fans. Through these programs sport organizations can increase the identification of their fans and decrease the environmental impact by the help of their fans.

While relatively small in number, some sport organizations have embraced the “green” movement such that environmental issues have become engrained in their respective cultures (King, 2008). Thus, sport organizations that possess values consistent with, and/or attractive to, their external constituents have the potential to reap the corresponding rewards. With regard to green initiatives, organizational rewards may be external and take the form of a(n): enhanced organizational image and reputation, perceptions of goodwill, competitive advantage, reduction in spending, and increased fan association (Esty & Winston, 2006; Graci & Dodds, 2008; King, 2008; McCullough & Cunningham, 2010), or internal and positively alter an organization’s identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). To the extent that sport organizational identity and fan identity are linked, our findings suggest that sport organizations can capitalize on this relationship to do profound good. Thus, the most notable reward could transcend the organization to meet the needs of the primary beneficiary of its actions – the environment.