Love, Hate or Blah: Exploring Perceptions of a ‘Semi-Pro’ Sport Organization’s Values, Characteristics, and Practices

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This paper utilizes a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) to explore how perceptions of a sports organization’s practices and values lead to cognitive responses such as: identification (positive), cognitive apathy (neutral) and disidentification (negative). Previous work has demonstrated that individuals define their place in society through the social groups with which they overtly associate (Tajfel, 1981). Others have extended this idea to argue that people also define who they are by what they are not. Therefore individuals will actively identify with groups that match their self-definition and disidentify from groups that are incongruent with their own values and beliefs (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). When the projected image of a social group is either irrelevant to an individual, or lacks the resonance to activate association with (identification) or disassociation from a group (disidentification), cognitive apathy represents the third potential cognitive response (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

While existing literature shows the benefits of highly identified fans to sporting teams and organizations (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), cognitive apathy and disidentification may potentially diversify understanding of reasons for team-related behaviors or non-behaviors, such as attendance. Recent qualitative work developed the Awareness Spectrum (Lock & Filo, 2011) as a conceptual tool to develop the base level of the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001, 2006). The Awareness Spectrum provides an explanation of non-attendance among those individuals who are aware of a sport team, but have not developed a preference for that team. Accordingly, the spectrum represents a complementary extension to constraints literature (e.g., Trail et al., 2008). Lock and Filo (2011) demonstrated that non-attendees can hold an array of cognitive responses toward a team ranging from apathetic but generally positive to disidentified and negative. These cognitive responses can be based upon an individual’s perceptions of club characteristics such as team practices and team community values, as well as an individual’s existing values and beliefs. The qualitative findings provide a basis to frame how positive, neutral, and negative perceptions of club characteristics along with individual values and beliefs could be explored to understand identification, cognitive apathy, and disidentification, respectively. Consequently, this paper aims to provide a quantitative assessment of identification, cognitive apathy, and disidentification along with an examination of the perceptions of club characteristics that underlie these cognitive responses.

An online questionnaire was distributed to explore the perceptions and cognitive responses of active soccer participants (i.e., players, coaches, volunteers, parents, referees and administrators) (N=390) toward a community based semi-professional soccer team in their locality. The questionnaire included six items (5-point Likert scale) to measure identification [3] and disidentification [3] (cf. Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001), two single-item measures (10-point Likert scale): 1) overall organizational perception and 2) likelihood of future attendance; and three items to assess existing values and beliefs. Additionally, four items to measure perceptions of club community values and three for perceptions of club practices were developed by the research team based off previous qualitative inquiry (Lock & Filo, 2011). All scale items were analyzed using an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), with Maximum Likelihood Extraction and orthogonal rotation to establish each construct as distinct. Following the EFA, Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test for between-group differences based on: club practices, club community values, and existing values and beliefs.

Data analysis supported the structure of the identification and disidentification measures with all statements loading >.70 and combining to explain 84% of the total variance. Composite mean scores representing identification and disidentification were created then recoded into a high (=> 3.01) or low (<= 3.00) group. Cases rating low on disidentification and identification were classified as cognitively apathetic (cf. Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). This
partitioning led to a breakdown of: 46 identified, 358 apathetic and 1 disidentified. Due to the lack of disidentified respondents, the single item measure of overall organizational perception was then recoded into negative (1-3, N=42), neutral (4-7, N=248) and positive (8-10, N=115) overall perception groups for use as the independent variable in the MANOVA testing. A second EFA was conducted to establish that values and beliefs, club community values, and club practices could be considered distinct. A three factor solution explaining 74% of total variance was supported with all statements loading >.50 onto one of the three factors. The items for each of the four factors were then recoded developing composite mean scores to be tested as dependent variables in the MANOVA. Significant differences were observed for club practices, p < .001, club community values, p < .001, and existing values and beliefs, p < .001. Finally, the three overall organizational perception groups were tested against future attendance likelihood using a univariate ANOVA, which showed that negative perceivers were less likely (M = 4.19) than neutral perceivers (M = 6.33), p < .001 to attend games in the future. Meanwhile, negative (M = 4.19) and neutral perceivers (M = 6.33) were significantly less likely than positive perceivers (M = 8.34), p < .001 to attend games in the future.

This study provides three main contributions. First, this study has provided empirical support for the qualitative arguments presented in the Awareness Spectrum (Lock & Filo, 2011). Participants with a negative perception of the organization were shown to perceive the organization as performing significantly worse on specific dimensions, as well as possessing existing values and beliefs, which were significantly more salient in their perceptual processes than neutral or positive perceivers. Second, this study highlights the potential benefits of considering broader cross-sections of markets to understand identification, cognitive apathy, and disidentification, as well as the perceptions that drive these outcomes. Third, through the testing of an existing measure of identification and disidentification, this study revealed a lack of participants in the disidentification group, despite the scale demonstrating acceptable statistical properties when subjected to EFA. This could be attributed to a lack of practical application in the sport context; a lack of face validity requiring modification to elicit disidentified participants; or the sample lacking sufficient cognitive motivation to disassociate despite a negative overall perception. The semi-professional context investigated may be a significant factor in this finding. Future work is required to extrapolate the extent of negative cognitive responses in relation to sport teams – aside from rivalry (e.g., Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). Within this agenda is a grounded program for sport organizations to access information on what they are perceived to do well, or poorly. This, in turn, provides a grounded basis to leverage more positive states of Awareness by improving practices, modifying key organization values [which are salient in the formation of negative perceptions] and communicating core characteristics, which may be misunderstood in the marketplace.