Connecting Sport Team to Community: Exploring the Role of Pride in Place, “Make Them Proud”

Young Do Kim, The Florida State University
Joshua Newman (Advisor), The Florida State University
Yu-Kyoun Kim (Advisor), The Florida State University

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Team identification, as conceived across a variety of constructs, has captured the attention of many sport researchers over the past two decades (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Most research regarding team identification has sought to predict a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences for becoming team fans; looking specifically at self-esteem, commitment, satisfaction, brand associations, and sponsorship reactions. Moreover, several studies have developed the psychometric scales to measure team identification constructs. Surprisingly, however, prior studies in that area have focused primarily on standardized influences (e.g., the impact on field performance or socializing agents). In fact, there has been little research examining the factors influencing the formation of team identity and neglecting an investigation from the perspective of multiple directions (e.g., potential mediating or moderating effects) (Kolbe & James, 2000). The relationship between emotional and symbolic significance of the place/community where a sport team is affiliated and the emotional hometown connection individuals made with the team have been largely overlooked issues. One area that warrants further investigation for sport marketing researchers is the relationship between communities and local sport teams. Through a social psychological perspective, for example, it is reasonable to expect that an individual’s emotional connection with a team could be enhanced by a sense of community in which the team represents (Heere & James, 2007).

With that being said, there are two interrelated phenomena that frame this analysis; each contributing to, or a factor of, the individual’s sense of community as it relates to team identification; each drives the following research questions: First, why and how do people become fans of a recently-relocated professional sports franchise (e.g., Oklahoma City Thunder or the most recent Winnipeg Jets)? Secondly, in what ways does sport-based pride in place, defined as “people’s affiliation with a hometown team due to its ability to represent that city” (Gladden & Funk, 2003, p. 60), influence team identification (or vice versa), to the effect that some teams (i.e., the Chicago Cubs, who have not won the World Series since 1908, a longer championship drought than any other American professional sport teams) are enthusiastically supported in spite of mediocre performance on the field? (Bristow & Sebastian, 2001; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998)

In this presentation, relevant theory and research are brought together to formulate of a conceptual model exploring how individuals’ sense of community, particularly amongst those with a heightened pride in the place/community, influences, and is influenced by, team identity. In particular, two main relationships are conceptualized: (a) a sense of community will influence residents to identify with, and form an attachment to, a local sport team; (b) the relationship between a sense of community and an affiliated team will be strengthened by the pride in place. Three key theoretical constructs, each of which accounts for the important role of pride in place between individuals and communities, will inform this model. These constructs are “topophilia” as conceptualized by Tuan (1974), the role of “the social identity” and “self-categorization” theories by Tajfel (1978) and Turner (1984) respectively, and the concept of “a perceived fit” proposed by Heere and James (2007).

Topophilia is “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (Tuan, 1974, p. 4). This theory explains how individuals learn across time from their multifarious social and personal experiences, affectively bonding/attaching the individual to a certain place (e.g., where we were born and grown up). The concept of topophilia described by Tuan has been taken up by sport scholars to examine the positive sentiment/feeling that many sports fans have for their hometown or region (e.g., the love of that place; Bale, 1996). Building on this literature, the proposed research model seeks a more processual understanding of the extent to which the sense of community among residents will result in a greater sense of identity with a hometown team. Working from a sport marketing perspective, preliminary research by Kolbe and James (2000) has found a strong emotional attachment or interaction can be further solidified when fans make a connection between home city and its affiliated team; and cursory investigations
have suggested that these relations will have the strongest long-term effects (Sutton, McDonald, & Milne, 1997). However, Kolbe and James (2000) suggested the relationship between a home city and an affiliated team needs to be investigated from the perspective of multiple directions in order to understand its effects more accurately. In other words, there should be a multi-factorial analysis that may explicitly strengthen our understandings of the relationship between a community and a hometown team—what we might describe as a community's sporting topophilia.

This contention is supported by Heere and James’ (2007) notion of a perceived fit. The conception of the perceived fit assumes that other types of group identities (e.g., geographic) tend to influence a team identity when the team's symbolic characteristics, such as its city name, fan rituals, or stadium longevity interconnects the relationship between two different concepts of identities. Hence, the perceived fit, a central element, is a key role reinforcing the relationship between two different concepts. In this conceptual model, therefore, pride in place is expected to play a critical role in impacting the relationship between a place/community and an affiliated team. There are three aspects that may help individuals to enhance their feeling of pride through a contribution of their favorite team to the community: (a) Based on the social identity and self-categorization theories, individuals are perceived to believe their favorite hometown teams, not like the opponent teams, help their community to be prestigious and elevate their city to a more positive image (Gladden & Funk, 2003). Decrop and Derbaix (2010) argued that “regulation of pride is closely related to the maintenance of self-esteem” (p. 587). Thus, this perception of emotional and symbolic sense of pride in their community may eventually increase individuals' community self-esteem (e.g., I'm a Texan) through favorable attitudes toward “our territory” here versus “their territory” there; (b) Many economic impact and stadium financing studies agree with the notion that sport facilities of a hometown team serve as major sources for conveying civic pride by generating the bond between the team and its city (Anderson & Stone, 1981). Thus, stadiums possessing aesthetic qualities, historical values, or eco-friendly features “allows fans to feel a sense of pride in their team’s arena and provide them with a tangible component of their identification” (Wann, 2006, p. 336); (c) a sense of pride can be generated from the team’s history or the nostalgia of major achievement in the past (Decrop & Derbaix).

Central to this paper is how and why a sense of community contributes to, or reinforces, emotional connections individuals make with an affiliated team. The proposed conceptual framework suggests pride in place, symbolized and represented by its hometown team, is expected to play a critical role in strengthening the relationship between a sense of community and its affiliated team. Pride in place can be generated by three potential aspects including individuals' psychological categorizing process, team related venue or symbolic characteristics, and history or tradition of the team. Sport managers should understand the influences leading to building strong team identification and the important mechanism strengthening the relationship between two distinctive identities. It eventually leads to strong team loyalty amongst local fans (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002).