

The Activation and Development of Psychological Connections to New Sport Teams

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Marketing

Friday, May 31, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 410)**

Abstract 2013-088

8:30 AM

The process of sport fandom begins when an individual learns that a team exists. From this point, stronger psychological connections between the individual and the team may be developed should a perception that the team can satisfy varying needs and wants emerge (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). However, not all individuals who are aware of teams become supporters, nor do those who become supporters display homogenous levels of fanaticism. Given the increasing competitiveness within the sport marketplace, developing a better understanding of how to attract and develop fans becomes vital to team survival and sustainability, especially in the case of new sport teams (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002).

Funk and James' (2001; 2006) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) represents a widely used conceptual framework mapping progression from team awareness through to the zenith of psychological connection, allegiance. The PCM posits that individuals learn about teams through socialization agents with such knowledge leading to higher levels of connection when the team satisfies certain wants and needs. This developmental perspective is supported by exploratory research on existing and new team fans which illustrates the importance of team identity in forming the psychological connection (de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009; Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2011; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). Research also suggests strong connections to a new team may be formed without direct personal experiences and motives for purchasing season tickets differ between weak, moderate, and high psychological connection groups (James et al., 2002).

Such previous research provides important contributions to understanding fan development. However, this research has neglected the role of the individual as an active agent in the developmental process from a managerial perspective. Specifically, little is known as to how individuals engage with team implemented strategies designed to build a connection with a new team. Hence, the objective of this research is to generate a better understanding of how new teams activate and engage the psychological connection of their fans through a co-developmental process. Thus, the following research questions were developed:

RQ 1 – How are psychological connections with new sport teams activated?

RQ 2 – How are psychological connections with new sport teams developed?

Qualitative data were gathered from fans of a new Australian Football League (AFL) team. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the middle of the team's second season. Respondents were asked "What was it about [club name] that made you become a fan?" to address RQ1. Additionally, interviewees were asked "How would you describe your current support of [club name] in relation to how your support was when you first became a fan?" along with "What made you increase your support towards [club name]?" where appropriate to address RQ2. Additional probing questions were asked where appropriate in order to gather rich data. All data were downloaded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVIVO 9. Data analysis consisted of a three-step coding process which identified the key factors present in participant responses. The researcher allowed new factors to emerge, whilst also considering factors previously established in the literature (Creswell, 2009).

In respect to RQ1, four major factors were uncovered. These factors suggested psychological connection activation was based on; 1) Being a part of something new; 2) Leveraging an existing interest in the sport; 3) Interacting with and developing social connections; and 4) Using the team to enhance leisure and lifestyle experiences. In respect to RQ2, three major factors were identified. Participants reported their psychological connection with the team strengthening based on; 1) Positive experiences with the team and the organization as a whole; 2) Experiencing memorable team moments; and 3) Feelings that the team appreciates fans and makes positive community contributions.

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

Findings confirm and extend current theorizations in relation to new team support. Psychological connection activation themes suggest individuals are motivated to support new teams due to; the novelty factor (James et al., 2002), a pre-existing interest in the sport (Lock et al., 2011), existing and future socialization opportunities (Funk & James, 2006), and perceptions of lifestyle and leisure benefits (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004). In respect to findings related to psychological connection development, individuals were found to develop their connections based on; positive direct experiences on and off the field, and a sense of appreciation and ownership. Overall, results provide support that co-development may be an effective strategy for new teams who wish to activate and engage psychologically connected fans.

This research offers theoretical contributions to knowledge surrounding how psychological connections with new teams are activated and developed. Activation is largely based on an individual's environmental surrounds, whereas development is based on club actions and key experiential moments. Thus, whilst fans can develop strong attachments to teams without direct experience (James et al., 2002), it is unlikely strong connections can be developed (nor maintained) without meaningful personal experiences. Critically, findings suggest new teams can effectively activate and develop psychological connections with their fans by adopting a co-developmental perspective whereby fans help to shape the identity of the club.

Findings contribute to understanding fan development and consequently inform managerial and marketing decision making. To activate support, new teams should promote the team as being a unique opportunity to engage with the sport and others. Teams should also highlight seminal team moments in marketing materials and place an emphasis on being accessible and attentive to fan needs. Embracing dynamic communication channels (e.g., Facebook) may be particularly effective in this regard. Overall, new teams should strive to make fans feel involved in all decision making processes to ensure a sense of team ownership is developed and fostered.