

**Revisiting Team Identification: A New Conceptualization**

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Clarity of purpose/objectives/timeliness

For more than twenty years, sport management scholars have endeavored to conceptualize and measure how an individual becomes a fan of a sport team. Team identification is central to this process. Over the years, scholars have conducted team identification research using various scales with numerous latent dimensions. However, researchers have failed to empirically validate multidimensional accounts of the team identification construct. As a result, scholars are unable to clearly differentiate between lowly and highly identified sport fans.

In the sections that follow, an argument is presented for a more parsimonious conceptualization of team identification. This approach is premised upon a reconsideration of the construct's foundational theories and an examination of the more recent theoretical advancements and empirical findings. An improved conceptualization will permit the development of more reliable and valid team identification measures as well as enhance the ability to identify the drivers and consequences of a fan's identification with a team.

Relevance/significance of the topic to sport management

Understanding team identification is important due to its perceived mediating role in sport consumer behavior models. In these models, team identification is considered to be driven by three forms of antecedents, including (1) psychological (e.g., affiliation, belonging and inclusion), (2) environmental (e.g., socialization and media exposure), and (3) team-related (organizational characteristics, team performance, and player attributes) factors (Wann, 2006; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). The consequences include (1) behavioral (e.g., fan aggression), (2) affective (e.g., emotional responses to the team's performance), and (3) psychological (e.g., the effect of team performance on the psychological well-being of a fan) factors (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2001). In addition to behavioral consequences, team identification also influences (1) game attendance, (2) team-related merchandise purchase, and (3) fan's word of mouth behavior related to the team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Madrigal, 1995; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). Team identification is clearly a central mechanism mediating the exchange between these variables. Therefore, the use of reliable and valid dimensions and measures is important for sport managers and practitioners in their efforts to identify relationships between sport consumers and their team.

Review of relevant literature

Team identification is defined as the extent to which a fan is psychologically connected to a team and feels a sense of belonging to its fan community (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Two distinct concepts are evident within this definition: (1) a connection to the team and (2) a connection to others who support the team. Therefore, the dimensionality of team identification should reflect either an individual's connection to the team or to others who support the team. This distinction is important. Many team identification scales measure both concepts simultaneously, and as a result, validity issues are pervasive (Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011a; Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011b). Just as the social sciences distinguish between psychology and social psychology, sport scholars should differentiate team identification from one's identification with members of a team's fan community. Therefore, it is presently argued that until well-defined and empirically validated dimensions of team identification are identified, scholars should avoid conflating team identification with an individual's identification with others who support the team.

Another issue confronting scholars involves the underlying theories of team identification, which primarily derive from social identity theory. According to Tajfel (1978), one's social identity is "that part of an individual's self-

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concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). Based on this definition, three dimensions underlie social identity, including (1) a cognitive dimension (i.e., knowledge of membership in a social group), (2) an evaluative dimension (i.e., value attached to group membership), and (3) an affective component (i.e., emotional significance of group membership). When comparing team identification to social identity, the latter focuses entirely on membership in the group, while team identification also includes an individual's connection to the team. Many scholars ignore the related concept of self-categorization which occurs when individuals compares themselves to other members and attributes of the group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Self-categorization is based on (1) psychological comparisons and (2) behavioral comparisons. Thus, when social identity and self-categorization are combined, five salient dimensions appear: (1) cognitive, (2) evaluative, (3) affective, (4) self-categorization (psychological), and (5) behavioral. These five dimensions also appear in previous identification conceptual frameworks (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

### Quality of theoretical/conceptual framework

The most oft-cited identity/identification conceptual framework is that of Ashmore et al. (2004). The authors identify seven common elements of group identification: (1) self-categorization (i.e., placing oneself in a social category, perceived fit as a member, and certainty of self-identification), (2) evaluation (i.e., public and private favorability and judgments of the group), (3) importance (i.e., explicit and implicit importance of the group identity to the individual), (4) attachment and sense of interdependence (i.e., mutual fate, affective commitment, and interconnection of self and others), (5) social embeddedness (i.e., manifestation of the identity in an individual's life and personal relationships), (6) behavioral involvement (i.e., engagement in activities that indicate group involvement), and (7) content and meaning (i.e., self-attributed characteristics, group ideology, and knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the story that explains the individual's membership). While recent research utilizes this framework as justification for the inclusion of certain dimensions, the conceptualization of team identification dimensions has reflected both an individual's connection to the team and to others who support the team (Heere & James, 2007). The combination of these concepts in different dimensions has not led to the development of reliable and valid team identification measures.

When scholars examine research conducted on how to conceptualize and measure team identification in sport (Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011a) and non-sport settings (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Stoner, Perrewe, & Hofacker, 2011), five dimensions frequently appear: cognitive (i.e., content and meaning), evaluative (i.e., public/private regard), affective (i.e., importance, attachment and sense of interdependence), behavioral (i.e., involvement), and self-categorization. The next step in developing reliable and valid team identification dimensions and measures is an explicit focus on either one's connection to a team or one's relationships to others who support the team.

### Discussion/implications/future directions

Previous sport research has not provided empirical evidence of reliable and valid team identification dimensions. As a result, researchers must examine a more parsimonious and consistent set of team identification dimensions before engaging in comprehensive examinations of every conceivable dimension. The use of cognitive, evaluative, affective, behavioral and self-categorization dimensions is an appropriate place to begin improving our understanding and conceptualization of team identification due to the lack of empirical support for currently used dimensions.