

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

Investigating the Role of Identification in Team Sport Organizations

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

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In the face of questions regarding sport as a unique context, sport management scholars have acknowledged the significance of establishing distinct areas of our discipline (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Slack, 1998). While areas such as marketing, finance, venues, and the overall social influence of sport have been suggested to indicate the distinct nature of the context (e.g., Gillentine & Crow, 2009), it is in the area of consumer behavior where sufficient empirical research has been done to make the strongest argument for distinctiveness (Todd & Kent, 2009). Phenomena such as decreased sensitivity to price and performance (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997) and elevated consumer expertise (Funk, 2008) are examples of some of the distinguishing processes present in the domain of sport. With such fandom-related elements present in this context, sport is often recognized for the heightened level of attachment and personal identification experienced by consumers (e.g., Sutton et al., 1997). Accordingly, a research paradigm has been well-established for the area of marketing, with a major emphasis on understanding the attitudes and behaviors of consumers of sport.

However, since employees in this context are often at the same time fans, there exists a need to consider whether sport-specific phenomena might also play a role with regard to employees in sport (Todd & Kent, 2009). That is, while other distinct aspects of management in sport have been referred to previously, a fundamental question is whether or not differences exist in the way people should be managed in this context. In order to address this question more fully, further investigation is needed to assess the attitudes of those who work in the sport organization context. As a starting point, Todd and Kent (2009) proposed that one distinction may lie in how people are attracted to working in sport due to the prestige that comes from being associated with a high status social group. As Todd and Andrew (2008) indicate, students in sport management programs are often attracted to working in the sport industry primarily because of their fandom. Motivations for pursuing a career in this context may originate simply from the love of sport (Gillentine & Crow, 2009), and psychological fulfillment as employees might similarly stem from the passion involved with sport (Parks, Quarterman, & Thibault, 2011). With perspectives such as these, a deeper look into employee attitudes has the potential to inform management in sport in a similar fashion as consumer behavior research has informed sport marketing.

Assessing the degree to which employees identify with their organizations has been studied for nearly three decades, with organizational identification now positioned as a key organizational construct (Edwards, 2005; Riketta, 2005). However, it is of note that there has been little organizational identification research undertaken with regard to employees in the sport context. While identification has had a major presence in the sport management literature, it has primarily been studied from the perspective of team identification, and fans' psychological connections to sport teams (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Research in this area has shown an assortment of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009), including those with high levels of team identification experiencing more satisfaction from positive outcomes (Madrigal, 1995), being more loyal and having higher expectations for performance (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and being generally more likely to attend games and purchase tickets and merchandise (e.g., Wakefield, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

As it is unlikely that individuals decouple themselves from their fandom when employed by a sport organization, it follows that team identification may also play a role in the attitudes and perceptions within the workplace. In concert with the organizational identification literature which indicates that employees simultaneously identify with multiple organizational targets such as departments, workgroups, unions, and friendship circles (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), the present research proposes that employees in sport also maintain a level of team identification which is separate from that of the overall organization. While the ubiquity of identification is well-established in the context of fandom, the absence of team identification research with regard to employees in sport represents a gap in the literature in need of attention.

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The purpose of the current study is to investigate the role of identification in professional team sport organizations. To accomplish this purpose, this study first aims to empirically establish team identification as a construct which is empirically distinct from organizational identification in this context. Second, this study attempts to assess the relative impact of antecedents to identification on organizational identification and team identification in the team sport environment. Finally, it intends to examine the moderating effect of team identification on the relationship between organizational identification and key attitudinal outcomes such as satisfaction, involvement, and the engagement employees have with their organizational roles.

As an initial indication of the discriminant validity between organizational identification and team identification, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of individuals with actual work experience in a professional team sport organization (N=63). The findings supported the discriminant validity of the constructs and provided a sound rationale for moving forward. The population of interest for the current study is employees working for professional teams in North America who work on the business operations side of the organization and are not members of executive management. This research is currently in the data collection phase and utilizes an online survey technique. The sample consists of approximately 400 employees conveniently sampled from organizations from the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS). This study utilizes established scales for organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and their discriminant validity will be assessed using the guidelines outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Structural equation modeling (SEM) will then be utilized to test the hypothesized relationships of the overall model. This process will entail a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the measurement model, and a structural model using established fit indices from the literature to test the hypothesized relationships. This study will be completed in early 2013, well before the NASSM Conference.

Once completed, this study will make significant contributions in the following three ways. First, a theoretical contribution is made by introducing team identification to the organizational behavior literature as an additional target of identification in the context of sport. Just as individuals may simultaneously identify with the organization as a whole and various subgroups, identification with an affiliated sport team may represent another significant target of identification within this context. Second, while a conceptual distinction can be made between the collectivity of the workplace and the entity competing athletically, this study contributes to the literature by empirically testing the discriminant validity of organizational identification and team identification. Finally, as conflicting anecdotal evidence exists as to whether it is good for employees in sport to also be fans, this study has practical significance due to the potential impact that team identification could have on key attitudinal outcomes.