

Team Identification Revisited: New Zealanders' Connection to the All Blacks

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**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
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The All Blacks are New Zealand's national rugby union team and are considered one of the most iconic sporting brands in the world. The All Blacks enjoy a privileged position in New Zealand society. They are currently ranked number one in the world by the International Rugby Board, won the 2011 Rugby World Cup and enjoy unrivalled coverage in the media. The relationship between the All Blacks and their fans is an ideal context to conduct team identification research, due to the apparent depth of the connection. Reliable and valid measurement of this construct will lead to an accurate understanding of the underlying psychology that underpins this connection. The objective of the research is to develop and test a refined team identification scale using factor analysis and to then explore the relationship between the construct and outcomes that are of interest from a sport marketing perspective.

This project is significant to sport management research for several reasons. First, the project makes an important theoretical contribution to team identification research. Significant psychometric concerns have been raised with the TEAM*ID scale which demand a rethink of the dimensionality of the scale and necessitate further empirical testing. This research utilises an innovative operationalization of the team identification construct that reflects seminal work outside of sport management. Second, this explicit exploration of the impact of team identification dimensions on outcome variables bridges the gap between theory and practice. In addition, the project represents a rare exploration of the construct outside of North America, utilizes a high quality, representative sample and incorporates a rigorous statistical approach.

Background

The team identification construct is grounded in Social Identity Theory which suggests that individuals place themselves in categories based on perceived membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). A unidimensional conceptualization of sport team identification was initially proposed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), but, most now believe that team identification is actually multidimensional. Heere and James (2007) conceptualized the construct as having six dimensions: Sense of Interdependence, Interconnection to Self, Public Evaluation, Private Evaluation, Behavioral Involvement and Cognitive Awareness. Both the unidimensional and the six dimensional conceptualization are departures from some of the important work that had been done outside of sport management.

Taken together, the work of Ellemers et al. (1999), Ashmore et al. (2004) and others suggest three fundamental components of the way in which an individual identifies with an object: affect, evaluation and cognition. Other dimensions have also been suggested to exist, but are not supported empirically as comprehensively. The body of literature developing in sport management supports the notion that self-categorization and behavioural involvement dimensions exist in sport contexts. Therefore, the five-dimension conceptualisation of team identification utilised in this research is innovative because it reflects findings outside the discipline as well as recent empirical evidence from sport management researchers. Examining statistical evidence both at the item and dimension level is necessary to comprehensively assess sport-team identification to determine what components make up an individual's identification with a sport entity. In marketing research, linking a consumer's underlying psychology to outcomes is also important. An individual's identification with a sport team is likely to influence match attendance, merchandise purchase, television consumption, word of mouth recommendations and other related media consumption. These five outcomes are explored in this research.

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Procedure

Data for the pilot and main study were collected during the 2012 Rugby Championship – a six match, international competition involving the national teams of four southern hemisphere countries including New Zealand. A pilot study with a sample of Auckland university students ($n = 272$) was conveniently generated across seven undergraduate classes early in the competition. The main data collection was carried out in conjunction with a market research firm several weeks later. In the main study, a representative sample of New Zealand residents ($n = 1019$) responded to the items as part of a larger, bi-weekly survey process. Participants were rewarded points for participation as part of a well-established membership program.

Items representing the aforementioned five dimensions of team identification were developed for this project. Items were generated from pre-existing scales, refined by the authors for the current context, tested in a pilot study, refined again and subsequently implemented in the main study. The pilot instrument included 26 team identification items, five outcome variables and demographic questions. Through psychometric testing of the pilot data, the number of item needed to measure the construct effectively was reduced to 15. The instrument used in the main data collection included these 15 items as well as five similarly worded outcome variables and demographic questions. Mplus statistical software was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis to assess model fit, reliability and validity. Structural equation modelling procedures examined relationships between the construct and the outcome variables.

Results & Discussion

Model fit for the five-dimensional model featuring all 26 items in the pilot study was initially weak, but improved significantly ($\chi^2 = 114.29$, $df = 80$, $p < .01$) when poor-performing items were removed. CFI (.99), TLI (.99), RMSEA (.04) and SRMR (.02) scores interpreted in combination provided evidence of good fit to the data. A variety of metrics and statistical evidence were used to determine which items were carried through to the main study. Items removed at this stage were interpreted theoretically as well, and it was determined that the dimensions could still be measured effectively in the main study without them.

The data from the main data collection was a good fit to the final estimated model ($\chi^2 = 11.31$, $df = 11$, $p < .05$). Other fit indices support this conclusion. This model, however, was only three dimensional, as high correlations associated with both the self-categorization and behavioural involvement dimensions noted in the pilot data analysis carried through to this stage as well. Therefore, the results of this study provide further evidence supporting the existence of the three core dimensions of team identification in the context of sport: affect, evaluation and cognition. While the other two dimensions may exist, the lack of discriminant validity creates uncertainty as to whether they actually form a distinct component of a person's identification with a sport team.

One of the goals of the research was to further explore the relationship between team identification and behaviours that are of interest from a marketing perspective. When the three core dimensions of team identification were estimated to underlie a second order team identification latent construct, large and statistically significant paths were produced from that construct to the five outcomes that were measured. Based on responses to the items, the study also provides evidence that New Zealanders do identify strongly with the All Blacks as had been speculated.