The purpose of the study was to investigate the mechanisms through which sport fans balance the psychological needs for distinctiveness and assimilation (Brewer, 1991) through the expression of their team identity, thereby contributing to a stronger explanation of how these psychological needs function within the attachment process towards stronger fan loyalty. Although a growing body of knowledge has addressed the internalisation of a sport team into the self-concept (Funk and James, 2004), existing theoretical frameworks provide limited explanation of the mechanisms through which these needs are met. Specifically, previous work (Kolbe and James, 2003) has suggested that fans build affiliation with in-group team supporters, while enhancing distinction from non-members, but lacked an explanation of the ways in which a fan can achieve this.

Literature on team identity (Heere, James, Yoshida and Seremin, 2011) and psychological distinctiveness (Vignoles, Chryssochoou and Breakwell, 2002) was reviewed in order to derive research questions predicting the use of the structural reality and perceptual framing mechanisms (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004) at an individual and group level for sport fans at higher levels of psychological connection to their chosen team. Specifically, the review found that the structural reality mechanism involves group members drawing distinctiveness from something intrinsic to the group, suggesting that this mechanism may operate within the attachment process. The review of the perceptual framing mechanism included group members reframing their perceptions of their social world, which may include the cognitive biases that Funk and James (2001) suggested characterize the progression towards allegiance.

A two-phase mixed method research design (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), which firstly categorized surveyed fans in terms of their level of psychological connection and then conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with those at higher levels of team identity, allowed for an investigation of optimal distinctiveness within the attachment process. Saturation sampling was employed to interview 29 rugby union fans via an interview guide drawing on Andrijiw and Hyatt’s (2009) interview protocol. A combination of patterns and themes, clustering, and making metaphors was used in a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), in order to draw conclusions during data analysis.

The findings provide evidence of the use of both the structural reality mechanism and the perceptual framing mechanism as fans use their team identity to balance their needs for belonging and distinctiveness. Within the structural reality mechanism, fans used language, race and gender to gain individual distinctiveness within their supporter group:

To a degree, I am not exactly the same as them completely, because I mean I am not white Afrikaans, but I did go to Rand Afrikaans University at that stage, which was… predominantly white Afrikaans. So I understand the support and I understand the fans but I am not maybe exactly like them. (Interviewee, Steven)

In terms of the perceptual framing mechanism, fans categorized themselves in terms of their levels of fan loyalty, fan behaviour, and fan knowledge:

I once moved my season ticket because I was sitting in front of a racist of note. Um… that bugs me, and people who have got a one track appreciation of the game but me a bit, but otherwise I think I am fairly laissez faire… Oh there are people who want the team to pass the ball all the time you know. (Interviewee, Gareth)

The study contributes these two mechanisms to the revised Psychological Continuum Model theoretical framework (Funk and James, 2006), thus examining sport fan identity motives beyond self-esteem.
The findings of this research are relevant to sport marketers, sponsorship managers, and sport broadcasters who wish to facilitate stronger and more positive relationships between fans, as well as with the sport object. Marketers are able to use the mechanisms and strategies examined in this study to create additional opportunities for attached and allegiant fans to express their distinctiveness within the attachment process towards stronger fan loyalty.

References


