Conceptualising the Influence of Subgroup Membership on Team Identification

Daniel Lock, Griffith University

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Since Cialdini et al. (1976) published the Basking in Reflected Glory hypothesis, academic interest in sport consumer behaviour has increased exponentially. A predominant focus in sport research applies social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to explore the role of group identification on consumer behaviour. For the purposes of this project I apply Tajfel's (1982, p. 63) definition of group identification as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." In the following conceptual paper (a graphical framework will be presented at the conference), I outline a framework to explain how subgroups form and activate within team identities to diversify understanding of fan collectives in sport.

The prevalence of research findings indicating the influence of team identification on consumptive behaviours manifests in the promotional campaigns of teams, sport and organisations in various countries. As such, campaigns emphasising the common group membership that fans, the organisation and players share are commonplace (e.g., 'We are Geelong' 'We are Red' 'We are Football'). However, these approaches ignore that consumers potentially belong to multiple social categories, which may drive behaviour from outside the team identification (i.e., community, ethnicity etc.; Heere & James, 2007), and subgroups, which nourish team identification from within (i.e., informal friendship and formalised consumer groups) (Tyler, 2013).

The theoretical and empirical work conducted on subgroup formation and effect to date, explore nested identity groups including geographically distinct chapters of the American Outlaws (Tyler, 2013), Harley Davidson riders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a) and Linux users spread across the globe (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b). As such, extant research places subgroups as geographically located entities that nourish consumer relationships with the superordinate brand through consumer interaction in specific regions. These studies extend understanding of how subgroup membership influences superordinate group identification.

Yet the existing studies do not explore how subgroups form when consumers exist in the same environment (i.e., a stadium or an online platform). To theorize the role of subgroups within a superordinate identity, I draw on social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theories (Turner, 1985) to understand how groups form and activate in relevant social contexts. Building on current understanding, I concentrate on presenting a theoretical framework to explain the (1) formation, (2) activation and (3) abstractions of fan group memberships.

First, recent research in sport management has started to focus on how fan groups form between two or more individuals (Katz & Heere, 2013). Such work advances on previous efforts, which focused on motivational variables that explained the most variance in team identification. To understand how subgroups contribute to team identification, I draw on the metacontrast principle (Turner, 1985). In similar terms to those presented by Katz and Heere (2013), Turner (1985) argued that groups form to accentuate similarities between members, relative to a defined outgroup or rival. As such, team consumers converge as members of one team identity, which is distinct to other teams in the same competition.

Second, previous research focuses on the behavioral manifestations of team identification as it strengthens (i.e., purchase behaviours, match attendance; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). However, original social identity work focused explicitly on the contextual activation of identification. While the internalization (i.e., strengthening) of team identification remains important in terms of the accessibility of a group membership in a person’s cognitive structure, work addressing how identification activates in relation to sport organisations is sparse. Reed (2000) argued that a group membership could only influence a person’s consumption behavior if activated in their working self-concept. When active, the norms, values and beliefs of a specific group membership, act as a behavioral frame of reference. Therefore, when a team identification activates, specific norms guide understanding of rivals, acceptable behaviors and the like.
Third, combining point one and two, Turner (1985) argued that group memberships operate at a series of more or less inclusive abstractions. For example, in relation to a sport organisation, the team identification is the most inclusive group membership – as all fans belong to the same group. However, within the team identification, consumers may belong to fanatical crowd elements (e.g., The Kop), which become active in relation to other fan groups of the same team (within the team identity; Bernache-Assolant et al., 2012). Under that, the informal attendance groups and external subgroups, to which individuals belong, also have potential to influence the superordinate membership in situation that they activate (i.e., Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2012). Such subgroups provide members with the opportunity to converge with other fans of the same team that share similar values and ideologies on support styles and behavior to reduce subjective uncertainty (Tyler, 2013). Specifically, if the team identity activates in situations that involve a specific outgroup (i.e., another team in the same league), the other groups to which an individual belongs, have the potential to activate and supplement the superordinate membership in situations that the team identification is not salient.

This preliminary framework provides a basis to continue recent efforts to contribute realistic accounts of sport consumers group memberships (Katz & Heere, 2013; Tyler, 2013). In doing so, instead of marketing to a single superordinate group membership, practitioners can evolve understanding in relation to how service delivery and marketing efforts may be shaped to create environments, which are conducive to subgroup formation. Future work is required to test the effect of subgroup membership on team identification. Furthermore, experimental work testing specific situations designed to activate different levels of identity groups provides an opportunity to further understanding of the interactions between different group memberships in the team support context.