Cut from the Same Cloth: An Examination of Social Identity Theory's Effect on Attachment to College Coaches

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The collegiate athletics arms race has not only incited facility expansion and conference realignment, it has led to FBS coaches being heavily compensated for their duties. Over the past decade, median expenses have increased in college athletics, mainly due to increased market demand for superior coaches and staff (McEvoy, Brown, Rascher, & Nagel, 2010). As a result, college coaches are often subjected to increased attention from their respective fan bases (Holmes, 2011). However, little research has focused on the drawing power that coaches exude as essential components of the sport product.

Studies on fan behavior have included coaches as points of attachment (Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Robinson & Trail, 2005). Results have nevertheless indicated that coaches were perceived as having lesser draw in comparison to teams, players, or universities. However, Kwon et al. (2005) acknowledged that, in their sample, the program of focus lacked a particularly notable coach and the team was conventionally perceived as rather lackluster. Thus, it is of curiosity if attachment toward coaches and their personalities and philosophies has more prevalence in settings with sufficient sport tradition. Specifically, this appears to have been evident with regard to former Nebraska head football coach Bill Callahan. Though somewhat successful during his tenure in Lincoln, he was an ardent supporter of an offense predicated on passing the ball, which failed to mesh with a program tradition of a “smash mouth” running style. Callahan’s dismissal was attributed to a lack of fit with core program philosophies (Maisel, 2007).

Similarly, though successful in previous stops, former Michigan football coach Rich Rodriguez’ unique spread offensive brand, in addition to his personality, was never embraced amongst the school’s blue collar supporters (Bigelow, 2011).

Though the FBS coaching profession is less stable in terms of tenure in recent years (Staples, 2010), fans may be less privy to attaching themselves to players due to their duration clock at the university being a bit more concrete and finite. As such, coaches have greater potential to become faces of programs and universities. In fact, it has been found that, when coaches leave programs on their own terms, fan bases can become so upset as to behave in dysfunctional fashion (Sanderson, 2013).

Given the tenets of social identity theory, which focus on the value of group membership and the development of prototype characteristics and associated biases within a group, it is reasonable to suggest that, based on perceived attributes, certain coaches may induce greater displays of fan attachment than others. As one becomes more identified with a group, eventually certain prescribed thoughts and actions become representative of what is deemed a prototype for that unit (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Consequently, group members strive to share similarities in thoughts, values, behaviors, and attitudes. Furthermore, Ashforth and Mael (1989) claimed that, when these values become traditional, it is very difficult to become accepting of those that represent incongruence. As a result, group members are assessed based on their alignment with in-group values. Those that are perceived as strongly associating with in-group features will be perceived more favorably (Hogg, 2001).

This train of thought impacts the evaluation of group leaders. In what is known as leadership categorization, leaders are judged based on how individuals perceive they should perform in a certain fashion (Hogg, 2001). In accordance, leaders that favor in-group prototype beliefs are seen as more attractive to subordinates. For this reason, Bligh and Hatch (2011) stressed the need for groups to seek leaders that match a desired culture. This provides support for examinations of bottom-up organizational culture perspectives, as subordinates may have extensive roles in effecting group philosophies.
In consideration of what is known about college sport fandom, the increased emphasis on coaches as part of the product, and the propensity for individuals to support those that represent aspects of in-group prototypes, it is expected that coaches’ philosophical attributes and backgrounds will be associated with fan attachment behaviors. Namely, coaches with similar established in-group characteristics will induce greater fan connection. Considering research has merely skimmed the surface with regard to fan embracement of coaches, a segmented emphasis is sought to explore this idea. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived congruence between coach and program prototype will be positively related to attachment to coach.
H2: Attachment to coach will be positively related to behavioral intentions, such as team support, game attendance, merchandise and apparel purchases, and athletic department financial contributions.
H3: Team identification and program tradition will moderate the relationship between perceived congruence between coach and program prototype and attachment to coach.

Multiple regression analyses will be used to test the hypotheses. A sample of 400 is sought. College football fans of FBS programs will be sought for participation and will be recruited through Amazon.com’s marketplace, Mechanical Turk. Participants will select their favorite FBS college football team. Following their selection, they will answer questions involving team identification, program tradition, attachment feelings to their current head football coach, perceptions of coach-program fit, and sport consumer behavioral intentions. Based on their selection of favorite college football team, names of current college football coaches will be piped into items accordingly.

Team identification will be measured by a seven-item instrument developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), which was initially employed in successful fashion in a college athletic setting. Attachment to coach will be comprised of items modified from Robinson and Trail’s (2005) point of attachment index, relating to coaches. Items revolving coach-program prototype fit will be modified from Til and Busler’s (2000) endorser-product fit scale to ascertain congruence between coach and athletic program/university. Behavioral intentions will be measured by a scale from Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002). A program tradition measure will be self-constructed by the researcher (e.g. “When sport fans think of historically proud college football programs, it is generally perceived that __ would be a good candidate”). Likewise, perception of program direction will also be self-constructed and serve as a control variable (e.g. “I expect the __ football team to have on-field success in the future”).

This study attempts to be the first of empirical nature to examine factors other than success that drive attachment to a coach. It will also add another element to sport social identity research, particularly regarding preferred leadership characteristics. Thus, a demonstration of the salience of congruence between coach and perceived attributes desired by a fan base may serve as an integral marketing tool. While we do not suggest that universities base their hires simply on fan preferences, given the increased reliance on fundraising in college athletics, such fan insight may have practical value.