The Role of Behavioral Involvement in Social Identity Work within Sport Management

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Identity in social groups has become increasingly recognized within the sport management literature as an important construct in understanding how group bonds can be sustained and how collective outcomes can be achieved (Lock et al., 2012). These outcomes are particularly important for groups that seek to use physical activity and sport to create broader social change (Wegner et al., in press). The mechanisms through which identity with this kind of group or program is facilitated however, is even less explored than the processes through which identification happens for fans of a sports team. Activity-based organizations often entail ongoing active participation with the group, as opposed to the more passive consumption associated with primary activity of sport spectators. Therefore, actual behavior may play an important role in the other aspects of member identity within these groups. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of different behaviors in identity construction for members of an activity advocacy group.

The relationship between an identity as a member of a group and behaviors associated with that group is debated within both mainstream business and sport management. Certain conceptualizations include a very broad set of dimensions for measuring the construct of identity, which includes not only affective commitment, importance, and categorization, but includes other attitudes, traits, and even behaviors associated with that identity (Ashmore et. al, 2004). Heere and James’ (2007) scale likewise uses behavioral involvement with a group as an indicator of identity within that group. Meanwhile, other organizational literature suggests that behavior is more likely the probabilistic outcome of identity rather than a component (Ashforth et. al, 2008). Despite this, identity can be constructed through repeated behaviors (Ashforth, 2001). Identity work and identity play, two identity construction processes, both involve some level of behavior in the construction of professional identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

When behavior is measured as a contributor to identity in the sport literature, it is often measured by the mere frequency or intensity of behaviors (e.g. Lock et. al, 2014), or is measured as part of a unidimensional sense of identity along with attitudes (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Just as recent literature has acknowledged that identity is multifaceted and should not be measured unidimensionally (Heere & James, 2007), certain behaviors may also contribute more strongly than others for certain aspects of an individual’s identity as a group member. It may be for this reason that Lock and colleagues’ (2014) repeated measures study did not find any significant path between behavioral involvement of T1 and other components of team identity in T2. It may be important to unpack behavior in understanding the role that it has in creating a sustained connection between an organization and its members.

Method

Women Bike PHL is an advocacy group started in 2013 that acts as a support for female bikers and cyclists in Philadelphia, primarily through interactions via a private Facebook group, supplemented by occasional offline activities such as rides, workshops, and social events. The impetus for the group is to create a space that women feel safe and empowered to support each other and to become more confident engaging in an activity still dominated in the United States by males (Singer-Vine, 2014). The study began via a census survey of the group’s 1,812 members. A total of 230 members took the survey. Respondents’ identity as group members was measured using items selected from the Ellemers et al (1999) social identity scale that most closely mimic the three core components of social identity as proposed by Ashforth and colleagues (2008): categorization, affect, and importance. Offline events were measured as a frequency of each event attended. A total of 80 members (found to be representative of the overall sample in terms of demographics and identity measures) opted in to subsequent longitudinal analysis. These members’ posts within the Facebook group were used to conduct content analysis of their online behaviors as members of the group over time, and its relationship to identity. Tenure in the group was used as a covariate.

Results, Discussion, and Implications
Initial regression analysis of the entire sample revealed that prior behaviors informed only certain aspects of subsequent identity components. Social events attended predicted all three aspects of core identity (categorization, p<.001; $\eta^2 = .07$; affect, p<.01; $\eta^2 = .05$; and importance p<.01; $\eta^2 = .05$). Attending events involving bike riding predicted categorization (p<.01; $\eta^2 = .04$) and importance (p<.05; $\eta^2 = .03$), but not affect. Finally, attending tutorial events such as Fix-a-flat classes predicted importance only (p<.01; $\eta^2 = .04$). Content analysis of Facebook group posts of the 80 woman subsample led to the creation of four typologies of individuals within this group: lurkers, members who do not actively post to the group; seekers, members whose posts sought some level of support or information from other group members; sharers, members who typically shared their thoughts, news, and information with others; and advocates, who typically shared information related to both biking advocacy and general and as it related to women bikers and cyclists. These typologies, while not significantly associated with affective or categorization components of identity, were positively associated with identity importance (p<.05; partial $\eta^2 = .11$). Tukey’s post hoc revealed specifically that sharers experienced significantly higher levels of identity importance than lurkers (p<.05) and seekers (p<.05). The group’s advocates were not significantly different from any other group. Frequency of posts overall also not a significant predictor of any aspect of social identity in the group.

The results of this study suggest that frequency of behavior, the most often used measure for the behavioral component of identity in the sport management literature, may not be sufficient for understanding the ability of behavior in general to contribute to one’s identity as a member of a group. Frequency of behavior alone was not enough to explain members’ connection with the organization, supporting Lock and colleagues’ (2014) lack of findings. Attending social events and sharing personal aspects of the self were the strongest predictors of identity importance, despite the fact that the group’s goals involved advocating for women’s biking experience. Individuals seek out identities that are congruent with their other identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), so it is possible that members who feel able to share their own identity within the group, either through online sharing or through offline socializing, feel the greatest sense of congruity, and therefore have a higher sense of importance of that identity.

Sport and physical activity organizations encourage both offline and online behavioral engagement as a means to achieve positive collective outcomes. This study suggests that organizations should be strategic in the types of behavior they promote in order to maximize the outcomes of consumer and participant engagement. For participant groups in particular, distinguishing a hierarchy of behaviors that promotes a sharing and interpersonal atmosphere may be an important step in maximizing the positive social and general health outcomes associated with the group.