Exploring the Impact of Multiple External Identitilies on the Development of Team Identification

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The study of team identification has been amongst the most prominent streams of research in sport and leisure studies over the past several decades (e.g., Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Heere & James, 2007; Hirt et al., 1992; Madrigal, 1995; Trail et al., 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). This is largely attributable to the fact that highly identified sport fans have been shown to exhibit more behavioral consistency than less invested fans, including the tendency to attend more games (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2000) and purchase more team-related merchandise (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). This has led to the emergence of a growing stream of literature on the development of team identification (e.g., James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2009). Perhaps the most influential discovery to emerge from this research was Kolbe and James’s (2000) finding that individuals’ perceived linkage between the community and the team was a more important non-interpersonal factor than direct team-related factors such as game experiences. This was followed up by closely related theoretical work arguing that external identities (e.g., geographic identity, religious identity, vocational identity, etc.) could act to strengthen one’s identification with a team, provided that there is a close fit between the external and team identities. It has not yet been examined, however, the extent to which external identities might influence the development of team identification. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which external identities influence the development of initial team identification, and, in the context of a new South Korean soccer team, which external identities are most impactful in the development of team identification.

Literature Review

Researchers studying the development of team identification have recognized such factors as socializing agents (e.g., father figures, family, friends, etc.) as instrumental in the initial formation of identification with a sport team (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). They have also identified manifestations of newly developed team identification, including the centrality of the identification to fans’ self-concept, increased affiliation with team players and coaches, and an increased desire to both search for information related to the team and promote the team to others (Lock et al., 2012). Further, this research has demonstrated identification can develop quite quickly with a new team (James et al., 2002) and very early in life (James, 2001). Kolbe and James (2000) found the link between community and team to be even more influential than team-related factors in the development of team identification, a finding that was later extended in Heere and James’s (2007) work highlighting the role of external identities (e.g., geographic identity) in strengthening team identification and loyalty (Heere & James, 2007). Heere and James proposed that the role of fan is more than just supporting the team; rather, they argued that fans can actually be part of the organization (i.e., organizational members). In particular, Heere and James (2007) argued that strengthening external identities such as demographic identities (e.g., cities, states, nationalities) and/or affiliation identities (e.g., religious identity, corporate identity) could serve to strengthen individuals’ team identification and, consequently, team loyalty. However, the authors argued that this was only the case to the extent that there was a certain degree of fit between external identities and the team identity. For example, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is an industrial city beholden to its blue-collar, union, hard-working roots (Delano, 2015), values that emerged from its history of steel production. The Pittsburgh Steelers, a National Football League team based in this city, not only have “steel” in their name, but have also historically embodied these blue-collar values in their team culture and style of play. Accordingly, per the arguments of Heere and James (2007), the fit between the Steelers identity and Pittsburgh identity in the minds of fans should serve to strengthen their identification with the Steelers.
While it is well established that external identities may serve to strengthen fans’ identification with a team (Heere & James, 2007), the role of external identities in shaping the initial development of identification with a team has not been studied. It would seem, however, that provided there is a certain degree of fit between the team identity and one or more external identities, the external identities could play a role in this initial formation of team identification. For example, if one is unfamiliar with a team, but they seem to embody many of the same values as the citizens of the city or region they call home, this should serve to increase the attraction to the team. Funk and James (2001) identified four phases of psychological connection to a sport object in their psychological continuum model (PCM). After initial awareness, fans would proceed to attraction and then attachment, a phase the authors suggested is akin to team identification. The final stage of the PCM is allegiance. It would seem the extent to which there is a fit between the team and external identities could foster movement along the continuum and thus developed team identification; however, this concept has not been explored. This leads us to our two primary research questions:

RQ 1: What role do external identities (e.g., geographical identity, religious identity, corporate identity) play in the development of initial team identification?

RQ 2: What external identities are most influential in the development of initial team identification?

Method

To answer our research questions, we are conducting interviews with fans from Seoul E-Land FC, a new professional soccer team in South Korea. We selected a new team because we are interested in exploring the development of team identification. Given that the team is brand new, it is expected that initial team identification development has only just begun. This will allow us to examine the extent to which external identities of the team’s fans influence the development of team identification. We will be interviewing 12 team fan club members both during and at the conclusion of the season. Currently, 10 of the 12 in-season interviews have been completed.

Implications

The research is intended to make several contributions—both theoretical and practical—to the field. With respect to theory, the answers to our research questions will extend the literature on team identification in general, as well as the literature on the development of team identification, both in general, and with a new team specifically. In doing so, we will also extend the theoretical work of Heere and James (2007) by demonstrating the extent to which external identities may influence the development of initial team identification. In addition, we will extend this work by exploring which external identities are most impactful. Lastly, we will provide additional empirical support for the PCM. Practically speaking, our research aims to provide insight on which external identities teams can leverage in their marketing communications to foster the development of team identification and loyalty.