There's No Place Like Home: Understanding Team Identification as a Memory of Home

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Today’s increasingly mobile society, coupled with skyrocketing technology has created an opportunity for individuals to continue to engage with their favorite hometown sports teams long after they physically leave their hometowns. Most people become identified with teams in their youth (James, 2001), and by adulthood possess a steadfast social identity surrounding that team (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002). Heere and James (2007) found such identification intertwined with maintenance of social identity within a larger community. Historically, however, when a fan left the team’s home market there were few opportunities remain engaged with to that team. Modern technology has changed that. The purpose of this research is to use qualitative data to support the quantitative findings that demonstrate not only are these displaced fans remaining engaged, but the level to which they remain engaged is directly related to how highly identified they remain with the hometown community, as well as how much modern technology they use to consume sport.

Literature Review

Team identification bolsters social identity through vicarious association with a successful team (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman & Sloan, 1976) and by combining emotional and value driven individual attachment to allow individuals to create a social identity by making values of the group their own (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Early work on social identity and team identification examined the construct as a psychological phenomenon providing a means for fans to experience a sense of belonging within a larger social structure (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001). Recent work views team identification as an instrument of social identity, hypothesizing that individuals identify with sports teams the same way they identify with other social groups (Dimmock, Grove & Ecklund, 2005; Heere & James, 2007). Prior scholars have found that community identification is the single largest driver of team identification (Uhlman & Trail, 2012) making sports teams symbols of the communities they represent (Heere & James, 2007). The difference between identification with one’s hometown and one’s current community also has a significant impact on level of team identification with the hometown team (Authors, in progress). While traditionally the stadium experience was critical to a fan’s sense of community, new research suggests that fans want fan communities without sacrificing game experience (Fairley & Tyler, 2012). Because home viewing does not build community, people opt to view game in a “third place,” location (Weed, 2007). The “third place” option makes geography irrelevant to fan communities, because “third place” locations can exist anywhere with television.

Method

This study employed a cross sectional descriptive survey design that utilized an online survey posted to both mainstream social media sites and sites specifically targeting football fans. The sample included American adults who are displaced fans, defined as those individuals that meet the following criteria: (1) identified as fans of the NFL team that best represented their hometown community, and (2) lived more than 100 miles from that hometown. The online survey instrument asked a series of open-ended questions focusing on how and why displacement from the hometown has impacted team identification, as well as how various forms of new media use has made it easier for fans to stay engaged with the team.

Results

Results of this study support prior research that demonstrates a direct connection between how highly identified people were with their hometown team and how highly identified they were with the entire hometown community (Authors, in progress). This study, however, extends the literature by demonstrating explaining the depth of this relationship. A common theme found in the results seems to indicate that displaced fans saw engagement with the team as symbolic of the pride they feel for their hometown. Similarly, the responses appear to consistently
demonstrate that remaining a fan of the team may be a way to recapture the lost connection to both the hometown and the associated emotional connections to that hometown surrounding those connections. In addition to better explaining the relationship between hometown identification and team identification, an analysis of the data revealed to the authors that new media sources, particularly streaming and social media, might facilitate this relationship. Insight into the idea that new media sources are viewed as a way to engage with the team, as opposed to being a way to create virtual communities of displaced fans was also revealed.

Discussion

Considering the existing literature (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Uhlman & Trail 2012) it is not surprising that there is a relationship between hometown identification and hometown team identification. It is therefore unsurprising that after becoming displaced, fans began to see the hometown team as a symbol of the hometown, and therefore, the more important the hometown is to the individual, the more effort the fan is likely to expend to remain connected. The qualitative data clearly demonstrated that the symbolic value of the hometown team was decidedly more important than the convenience of becoming a fan of a local team, even if the individual is also highly identified with the new community (James, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Uhlman & Trail 2012). The authors found that in some cases, people’s identification with the hometown team is actually higher than it was prior to leaving the hometown, specifically because it provides a tangible way to remain engaged with the hometown community that would not be necessary if one were actually a physical part of that community. Becoming identified with a new team requires individuals to change not only an alliance with a sport team, but also to let go of the social agents, such as family and community.

In a technology driven world that offers extensive sport viewing options, there is simply limited necessity to change the team with which one identifies. By understanding team identification as a symbolic construct that represents the geographic location of the community, it becomes clearly evident why despite an increasingly mobile population, there is a continued drive to create technology that allows for greater levels of engagement with those teams. While new media options were important for allowing the fan to remain engaged with the team, many people did not view these options as a legitimate source of engagement with other fans. This suggests that while new media options are critical to engagement with the team, they are not a sufficient replacement for personal interaction between sport fans.

Managerial Implications

This finding demonstrates the potential benefits which will be reaped for sport organizations that are successfully able to reach and retain displaced fans. Because continued identification with the hometown team was seen as a way to remain connected to the hometown, sport franchises should activate this relationship by marketing themselves within the context of the community that they represent. Teams can further bolster people’s team identification levels by providing supports such as building ties with fan-groups around the country to supplement new media use, allowing for displaced fans to be united in their new communities. This would higher levels of engagement with the team, by supplementing new media options with meaningful personal interactions between fans. The importance of marketing to highly identified fans has been established by prior research demonstrating that highly identified fans are more likely to spend money on sport-related items (Shapiro, Ridinger & Trail, 2013), meaning displaced fans may be a source of additional revenue for sport properties.