“No” is Not “Low”: Improving the Assessment of Sport Team Identification

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Scholars have studied sport team identification for decades, advancing our understanding of the influence of individuals’ psychological connections to sport teams on various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Despite the contribution of the study of team identification to the sport fan psychology and sport consumer behavior literatures, a critical issue is apparent. An inspection of the methods used to assess and study team identification uncovered a misinterpretation of participant responses to team identification scale items. In previous team identification research, not-identified individuals have been examined as individuals with low team identification. In this session, we aim to unpack this issue by first addressing the specificity of the problem, and then sharing an approach to resolving the issue using a modified team identification scale.

Team identification, defined as the extent to which individuals identify with or feel a psychological connection to a sports team (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001), is considered one of the elements associated with a sport product—particularly, a sport team—that distinguishes sport marketing from mainstream marketing (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007; Shank, 2005; Trail & James, 2015). Team identification has been a popular topic of study among sport management, sport marketing, and sport psychology scholars since the 1990s. The prominence of team identification is illustrated through a simple literature review. Such a review that included team identification as a primary variable of interest, or a focal point in a research project, reveals over 100 journal articles published between 1980 and 2016. In addition, the concept of team identification has been cited in hundreds of additional articles. The impact of an individual’s connection to a sports team is a key reason team identification has been a focal topic of research. A strong connection to a team is expected to result in consistent and enduring behaviors and attitudes towards a team (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). Behaviors may include purchasing event tickets (Wann, Bayens, & Driver, 2004), purchasing merchandise (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Lee & Ferreira, 2011), purchasing team apparel (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007), positive word of mouth (Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003), repurchase intent (Lee & Kang, 2015), and attitudes toward sponsors (Chien, Kelly, & Weeks, 2016). In addition to the benefits of team identification for sport entities, consumers may experience social psychological health benefits from identifying with a team (Wann, 2006). The range—not just the magnitude—of scholarly activity regarding team identification in the past three decades is indicative of its appeal to those who study sport consumer behavior.

Given the broad appeal of team identification as a topic of study, the scales developed to measure team identification (e.g., Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005; Heere & James, 2007; Trail & James, 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) have been used extensively. However, upon a critical review of the team identification research to date, a significant issue is apparent: since its inception, there has been a potential for misinterpretation of responses to scale items, and scholars have in fact misinterpreted participant responses to team identification scale items. Specifically, scholars have classified “not identified” individuals as those with “low” identification. The misclassification occurs because various team identification scales (e.g., Dimmock et al., 2005; Heere & James, 2007; Trail & James, 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) include positive anchors on one end and negative anchors on the other. Individuals who report that they disagree with the team identification items essentially are reporting they do not identify with a focal team. Yet, scholars have consistently characterized these participants as having a low level of team identification.

The issue of misclassification can be found in instances where team identification is treated as a dichotomous variable (e.g., Lee & Ferreira, 2011; Madrigal & Chen, 2008; Parker & Fink, 2010; Wann & Schrader, 1997), and also in situations where it is utilized as a continuous variable through testing of a structural model or through some type of regression analysis (e.g., Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015; Levin, Beasley, & Gilson, 2008; Madrigal, 2000). For example, in their research on spectating enjoyment, Wann and Schrader (1997, p. 954) explained: “A median split of 5.1 on the
subjects’ identification scores was used to divide the subjects into high (n = 58; M = 6.1, SD = 0.7, range = 5.1 to 7.9) and low (n = 56; M = 3.3, SD = 1.1, range = 1.0 to 5.0) groups.”

Respondents with a team identification score of 1 reported they disagreed with the items, and were not fans. Yet, they were characterized as low identification.

More recently, Larkin, Fink, and Trail (2015) used a three-item scale (Robinson & Trail, 2005) to measure team identification. Larkin et al. reported, “…a multigroup SEM was conducted where Team Identification levels were split into two groups to ensure significant differences in identification levels; participants who rated their Team Identification at the mid-point and below were placed in the low group (N = 98; M = 2.15) and participants who assessed Team Identification above the mid-point were placed in the high group (N = 146; M = 6.35).”

With a mean score of 2.15, it is important to note some respondents disagreed with the scale items, as such, there were individuals included in the analysis that were not identified, yet the discussion is about those that are in the low group and the high group respectively.

It is critical to recognize that across all approaches to studying and measuring team identification—regardless of scale used or method of analysis—individuals who do not identify with a team have been classified as if they do have some (albeit low) degree of team identification. Any scale anchored by negative and positive anchors such as, “Strongly Disagree” and “Strongly Agree,” has the potential for misinterpretation. With such anchors, those aligning themselves with the negative or “Strongly Disagree” pole make the issue of not identified a concern to address.

Recognizing the apparent issue of not identified individuals in the measurement of team identification, we found it necessary to determine a way to accurately assess and work with the not identified individuals in our study of team identification. We conducted two studies to develop and test a revised assessment for team identification. We chose to revise the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) given its widespread use. From an extensive review of more than 100 articles utilizing team identification as a focal variable, the SSIS was used to assess team identification in over half of the studies, while all other scales were used far less frequently. However, we emphasize that the issue is applicable to any measure of team identification, given the common construction of scale anchors. The revised scale, called the SSIS-R, allows for the detection of both identified and not-identified individuals, while still also allowing for the assessment of within group differences (i.e., those with low to high identification with a team). In addition, a modified team identification scale such as the SSIS-R provides a better option for studying both within group (intragroup) and between group (intergroup) differences and thus, is better aligned with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as well as self-categorization theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Although some researchers might argue we have learned all we need to about team identification over the years, it is evident through critical reflection that we still have much more to understand about individuals’ connections to sport teams. As such, we will conclude our presentation by discussing the implications of this research for: scholars who study team identification (e.g., best practices for classifying and comparing groups of individuals, range of theoretical frameworks used to study team identification); sport marketers who apply team identification to their practices (e.g., ability to compare, target, and develop unique marketing plans for non-identified versus identified individuals); and sport management scholars generally (e.g., critical reviews of established topics within the discipline, proper measurement and interpretation in research).