Team Identification in Women’s Sport: What Do We Know?

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For decades, scholars have utilized team identification to understand individuals’ psychological connection to sport teams. As a result, we have a good understanding of how team identification influences a variety of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, as well as the impact of identifying with a team on individuals’ sense of self. However, nearly all studies of team identification to date have dealt with men’s sport, essentially ignoring team identification in women’s sport. We seek to address this issue by first reviewing team identification and the relative lack of research into team identification in women’s sport (compared to men’s), and then using the Delphi technique to obtain expert opinion on the lack of team identification research in women’s sport.

Since its introduction in the early 1990s (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), team identification has been one of the most studied concepts within sport consumer behavior. The concept is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive a positive sense of self from the perceived awareness, value, and emotional significance of belonging to a group. By classifying themselves with in-group members and distinguishing themselves from out-group members, individuals are able to make comparisons between in-groups and out-groups. When such comparisons are favorable, positive social identity is obtained (Tajfel, 1974).

Scholars have defined team identification differently over the years (Lock & Heere, 2017). However, Lock and Heere (2017) explained that it involves a cognitive realization of a connection to a team which influences an individual’s sense of self, and a vested interest in the team’s status, all of which has a degree of emotional value to the individual. Researchers’ interest in studying team identification is likely a result of the significant influence identification appears to have on numerous behaviors and attitudes (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Lock & Heere, 2017). In addition, team identification influences individuals’ social psychological health (Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; Wann, 2006). Despite the vast team identification literature, scholars have recently pointed to issues regarding the concept, such as the misuse of theoretical frameworks (Lock & Heere, 2017). In addressing such issues, scholars have aimed to improve the integrity of team identification, answering greater calls within the sport management discipline regarding the use of theory in research (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Cunningham, 2013; Fink, 2013).

While efforts to improve the study of team identification should indeed be celebrated, an additional issue must be acknowledged. In studying team identification over the past three decades, scholars have focused on individuals’ identification with men’s sport teams, largely ignoring team identification in women’s sport. In a review of 157 journal articles examining team identification through 2017, just 4 dealt with women’s sport. One might wonder: How much does the gender of the participating athletes matter in terms of team identification? Could we simply take what we have learned about team identification in men’s sport over the years and apply it to women’s sport settings? Considering mainstream team sports such as basketball and soccer, we know that fewer people attend games and consume less media coverage of women’s sport than men’s, which influences individual athlete salaries as well as team and league revenue (Sandomir, 2016). In addition, compared to women’s sport teams, men’s sport teams typically have a much greater history to draw upon, which could influence discrepancies between women’s and men’s sport concerning attendance, overall consumer interest, and team and/or league financial success. Perhaps as a result, it is no secret that the consumer experience for women’s sport is different than that of men’s sport. Scholars have found that individuals’ motives to consume women’s sport are different from men’s sport, particularly concerning affordability, the influence of family and friends, and the support of a cause (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003).

Despite what we do know about differences between men’s and women’s sport concerning consumer behavior, a question still remains: Why has there been a lack of research on team identification in women’s sport? To answer this question, we are conducting a study using the Delphi technique. The Delphi technique is useful for obtaining expert
opinion on an issue (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Martino, 1983), particularly those issues that we lack knowledge of or have failed to reach a consensus (Van Dijk, 1989). The Delphi technique may be comprised of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches. Studies using the Delphi technique typically feature anonymous responses and iterative rounds of questioning to arrive at a group consensus on a particular issue or problem (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

In terms of participants, the Delphi technique relies on eliciting feedback from experts on the particular issue. Determining the expert participants is among the most important decisions in a Delphi study. And though there are few set guidelines or specific requirements for subject selection, the most important criteria for selection is well established expertise and knowledge related to the target issue. To determine our expert panels, we aggregated a list of all editorial boards members of the Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, European Sport Management Quarterly, and Sport Marketing Quarterly with a noted publication record in sport consumer behavior or team identification more specifically. This resulted in 18 individuals that comprised our opportunity panel. We will contact each of these members and ask them to nominate individuals whom they feel are experts in sport consumer behavior and team identification. Any name that appears on more than one opportunity panel list will be eligible for inclusion in the study. This technique is consistent with previous studies using the Delphi technique in sport management (Pfleegor, Katz, & Bowers, 2017).

Once the expert panel is established, an initial email will be sent to all nominated individuals seeking their participation in the study. Those who agree to participate will receive Round I questions, which include open-ended questions based on our review of the existing literature. After receiving the completed Round I questions, we will analyze and code the responses. Round II will consist of questions prompted from Round I commentary and a brief summary by the authors, experts' comments from Round I, as well as specific questions tailored towards common categories of consensus (or non-consensus) from Round I. Similarly, the authors will review and analyze all responses to Round II comments and questions, and subsequently design Round III questions, aimed at reaching consensus.

By conducting this study, we hope to add a degree of clarity concerning the lack of research into team identification in women’s sport. Specifically, we aim to understand the extent to which expert scholars believe different settings matter in investigating team identification, why scholars have paid more attention to studying team identification in men’s sport rather than women’s sport, and any potential contributions to the team identification literature that could be made by studying team identification in women’s sport.