The Effect of Perceived Relationship Quality of University and University Athletic Program on Social Capital and Community Identification

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University campuses through their academic success, local service work, and potentially most noticeably their athletic programs are becoming increasingly important to many communities. A university has the ability to serve as a social anchor because of its ability to connect numerous individuals with diverse backgrounds (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Beyond the university itself, sport management scholars have found the potential for university athletic departments to become social anchors in their respective communities (Katz & Clopton, 2014). Based upon everything that a university has to offer communities, it is worth investigating how well a university and their athletic department act as social anchors.

A social anchor has been defined as, “any institution—which can take the form of social, economic, physical, legal, etc.-that acts as a support for the development and maintenance of social capital and social networks” (Clopton & Finch, 2011, p. 70). It has been suggested that schools, sports, and corporations could act as social anchors (Goodsell, 1997). Further, authors have considered social capital to be a community asset (Putnam, 2000) utilized community identity as an indirect way to measure social capital (Katz & Clopton, 2014). Based upon the past literature on social capital in sport management, the authors utilized bonding, bridging, and community identification as their outcome variables for social capital (also as a means to determine if an institution is acting as a social anchor in the community).

Past scholars have examined the ability of a campus athletic department to work as a social anchor, but only in the context of smaller Division III programs (Katz & Clopton, 2014). This study extends the social anchor and social capital research in sport by examining a Division I state flagship university. While perceived relationship quality has been utilized to best predict the nature and strength of the relationship between a consumer and product (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006), it was utilized in this study as a proxy measure in predicting the extent to which the university and athletic department generate social capital, thereby deciphering the degree by which each act as a social anchor. Division I athletics have been found to potentially impact the profile and prestige of a university and community overall (Goidel & Hamilton, 2006; Lucas & Lovaglia, 2005; Tucker, 2004). Given the important role that Division I athletics plays on a college campus as well as in the community it resides, the purpose of this study was to examine how the perceived relationship quality of two potential social anchors, a state flagship university and a Division I athletics department, dually impacts social capital and community identification among both students and community members alike.

This study was conducted at a large, public midwestern university in the US as well as the mid-sized community in which it is located. A convenience sample of undergraduate sport management students (N = 423) was utilized for this study, as well as a sample of community members (N = 202) who were contacted through direct email with the assistance of neighborhood association leaders. The student sample was 52% male, 75.9% white, and the average age was 20.2. The community sample was 83.5% female, 85% white, and the average age of participants was 38.5. Participants were asked to complete a 57-item online or in-person survey. The survey measured perceived relationship quality with the university and university athletics program (12-items each; Kim, 2009), community identification (6-items; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), social capital bonding (10-items) and bridging (10-imes) (Williams, 2006), and demographic information (7-items). Evaluation of the model via MPlus version 7.31 involved two steps where the basic principles of analyzing a confirmatory factor analysis and structural model apply (Kline, 2005).
Viewing the university as a social anchor, the path between relationship quality and community identification was statistically significant for all respondents ($\beta = .74; p< .01$), the community ($\beta = .64; p< .01$) and university students ($\beta = .78; p< .01$), indicating that relationship quality had a positive impact on community identification as expected. Examining the university as a social anchor, relationship quality was found to have a positive effect on both bonding (all: $\beta = .37; p< .01$; community: $\beta = .15; p< .01$; students: $\beta = .52; p< .01$) and bridging (all: $\beta = .41; p< .01$; community: $\beta = .28; p<.01$; students: $\beta = .55; p<.01$) in all sample groups.

Viewing athletics as a social anchor, the path between relationship quality and community identification was statistically significant for all respondents ($\beta = .59; p< .01$), the community ($\beta = .55; p< .01$) and university student ($\beta = .61; p< .01$), indicating that relationship quality had a positive impact on community identification as expected. Examining athletics as a social anchor, relationship quality was found to have a positive effect on bonding in the all respondents and student contexts (all: $\beta = .37; p< .01$; community: $\beta = .31; p<.01$; student: $\beta = .52; p<.01$), bridging in all contexts (all: $\beta = .26; p< .01$; community: $\beta = .21; p<.01$ student: $\beta = .29; p<.01$). It is important to note that relationship quality did not have a significant effect on bonding in the community context (community: $\beta = .12; p< .01$).

This study examined how well a university and its athletic department operated as a social anchor with two different sets of stakeholders. Beyond looking at a different context than past scholars, this study also utilized perceived relationship quality to assess its’ impact of social capital. These findings support the main purpose of social anchors, which was described as constructing a deep sense of community and trust within a community’s social networks (Clopton & Finch, 2011). The university acted as a social anchor when all the respondents were combined as well as singularly in the community and university context respectively. Most importantly for the field of sport management, we found that the athletic department at this university was an effective social anchor among all respondents as well as within the student setting but not for the community. This finding is contrary to Katz and Clopton (2014) as they argued identification with an athletic department would not prove to be a strong social anchor. The fact that this athletic department acted as a social anchor to the students may be due to the school being a flagship state school with an incredibly successful basketball history, which diverts from past research on social anchors and athletic departments. This study has a practical application as it provides convincing evidence that the university and its athletics department uniquely benefit the students and community members. It is also exceedingly important to remember that the absence of social anchors in a community could significantly hinder the process of community development (Clopton, 2011).