Conceptualizing Effects of Relative Size and Entitativity of Sports Fan Bases on New Residents’ Socialization: A Self-Categorization Perspective

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Introduction
Because of significant social changes such as industrialization, people in modern society change their residences frequently (Jansen, 1970; Ihrke, 2017). Those who move to new communities seek to develop new social connections with other community residents and feel a sense of belonging (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Local sports teams can attract these new residents and satisfy their needs by providing opportunities to interact with other community members (Doyle, Filo, Lock, Funk, & McDonald, 2016). Additionally, the presence of sports teams may help new residents adjust to their new social environments and maintain their well-being (Wann, Brasher, Thomas, & Scheuchner, 2015). Thus, sports teams should develop effective strategies to facilitate new residents in initiating and sustaining their socialization processes, and sport management scholars can contribute to such efforts by providing a systematic understanding of how new residents undergo their socialization processes in their new social environments.

According to the sport socialization literature, people start following sports teams through the influence of socializing agents (Melnick & Wann, 2011). In particular, the influence of community members can be significant for new residents who do not yet have many friends or acquaintances in their new communities. However, little is known about how new residents perceive community members and how this perception influences their socialization. Accordingly, in this conceptual research, we identify the key characteristics of sports fan bases (i.e., relative size and entitativity) and discuss how these characteristics influence new residents’ perceptions and behaviors in their socialization processes. In this research, we define a sports fan base as a group of fans of a specific sports team who live in the team’s local community.

Theoretical Background and Propositions Development
Self-categorization theory posits that an individual’s category system is structured hierarchically, ranging from very abstract and inclusive categories (i.e., superordinate category) to more specific and exclusive categories (i.e., subordinate category; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In a sports team’s local community, the residents of the entire community make up a superordinate category (the resident category), and the team’s fans form a subordinate category (the fan category). When a new community resident sees the team’s fans, he or she activates either the resident category or the fan category to understand fans’ supporting behaviors. Specifically, if most of a community’s residents are fans of a local sports team, being a fan will be perceived as a common characteristic of the entire community residents. Hence, new residents would activate the resident category and be more likely to engage in fan behaviors (Rosch, 1999); “They support the team because they are residents of this community. I am also a community resident, so I should support the team.” In contrast, if only a small group of residents support a team, being a fan will be a distinctive feature of existing fans, and thus, new residents would activate the fan category and perceive a clear distinction between existing fans and themselves (Nelson & Miller, 1995). Consequently, new residents would be less likely to engage in fan behaviors: “They support the team because they are fans. I am not a fan, so I do not support the team.” Based on this theoretical background, we identified a key attribute of sports fan bases: relative size. The relative size of a sports fan base refers to the proportion of a sports team’s fans in a community relative to the community’s entire population (Travaglino, Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Yetkili, 2015). The relative size of a sports fan base determines the salience of the resident and fan categories, which eventually influences new residents’ willingness to support a local sports team. Accordingly, we developed the following proposition:
Proposition 1: New residents are more likely to engage in fan behaviors when a team’s fans represent a majority rather than a minority of a community’s residents.

The other key characteristics of sports fan bases that we identified is entitativity. The entitativity of a sports fan base refers to the extent to which a sports team’s fans living in a local community appear to bond together as a cohesive entity (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). If a fan base is highly entitative, new residents perceive fans as a coherent unit rather than an aggregate of individuals (Leach et al., 2008). Consequently, new residents understand fans’ attributes and behaviors based on group stereotypes (Rydell, Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007). However, if a fan base shows a low level of entitativity, new residents see each fan as an independent individual and pay close attention to their personal characteristics rather than simply applying categorical information to them (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). As such, entitativity reinforces the boundary between in- and out-group members and intensify intergroup prejudice (Rothbart & Park, 2004). Specifically, when new residents activate the fan category, the entitativity of the fan base reinforces the distinction between existing fans and new residents. In contrast, when new residents activate the resident category, the entitativity of the fan base exerts greater social pressure on new residents to support the team. Accordingly, we developed the following propositions:

Proposition 2. The relative size of a sports fan base and entitativity of a sports fan base create two-way interaction effects on new residents’ fan behaviors.

Proposition 2a. When fans of a sports team are a minority in a community, a low-entitativity fan base results in greater fan behaviors among new residents than a high-entitativity fan base does.

Proposition 2b. When fans of a sports team are a majority in a community, high-entitativity fan bases results in greater fan behaviors among new residents than a low-entitativity fan base does.

These two key characteristics of sports fan bases also influence how new residents develop social ties with other community residents. For example, new residents can develop a diverse social network when most residents support a local team. Additionally, they can develop intimate relationships in a highly entitative fan base. In the presentation, we will discuss how the key characteristics of sports fan bases influence new residents’ successful adjustment and propose directions for future research.