Enhancing Team Spirit? The Role of Professional Cheerleading and Dance Squads in Team Identification

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Many U.S professional sport organizations feature cheerleading or dance squads as part of their game entertainment and marketing programs. For some franchises, these squads produce substantial revenue, with National Football League (NFL) teams generating an estimated average of $1 million annually through their cheerleaders (Wherry, 2003). Yet critics decry the squads as sexist and argue that they may alienate some fans, particularly women (Geschwind, 2014). Further, in recent years, teams have faced lawsuits over employment practices related to their cheerleaders, resulting in millions of dollars in settlements and the disbandment of at least one cheerleading squad (Lantz, Margolin, & Beradi, 2017; Rodak, 2014).

Despite the public debate and ongoing lawsuits, as well as the prevalence of cheer and dance squads in professional sport, sport consumer behavior research has yet to closely examine the topic to understand the extent to which cheer and dance squads are important to fans. One area to begin such an examination is team identification. Team identification is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity is ‘that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Through such memberships, individuals come to share a set of characteristics, values, and norms (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Team identification increases fan loyalty, involvement, and investment, often leading to greater ticket, merchandise, and media revenue (Heere & James, 2007b; Madrigal 2000, 2001; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003; Wann, 1993). These potential benefits have led researchers to suggest it is critical that sport teams cultivate and maintain team identity among their fans (Heere & James, 2007a; Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). When it comes to professional cheerleading and dance squads, a question arises: Do these squads impact the ways in which fans identify with sport teams?

To explore this question, the researchers will pursue three areas of inquiry. First, to what extent do sport fans associate professional cheerleading or dance squads as part of the team with which they are identified? Delia and James (2017) explored the meaning that fans attribute to teams, finding that concepts that fans associated with place, past, and present made up the concept of “team” in team identification. In order to understand the role of cheer and dance squads in team identity, we first must assess whether fans perceive these squads as part of their meaning of the team. One team executive described cheerleaders as part of the culture of the sport (Geschwind, 2014). Since membership in a social group such as a team involves adopting shared values and norms, if fans view these squads as part of the culture, then one would expect them to associate them as part of the team with which they are identified.

Second, does the existence of the cheerleading and dance squad present any conflicts with fans’ external group identities? Individuals have multiple group identities of varying levels of importance, with membership in one group related to membership in other groups (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995; Putnam, 2000). These identities can be classified into three types of groups: demographic categories, social roles, and membership organizations (Deaux et al., 1995). In sport, Heere & James (2007b) have suggested that team identification can be symbolic of external group identities, noting the connection between team and demographic and membership identities, such as geographic location or religious affiliation. However, multiple group identities do not always overlap so neatly. In the context of the present study, a professional teams’ promotion of its cheerleading or dance squad may present conflicts with certain external group identities. If a fan also maintains, for example, a feminist identity, this would be in conflict with the norms and values of that external group. Similar conflicts may arise for fans with conflicting identities in certain demographic categories (e.g. gender), social roles (e.g. parent), and membership organizations.
Third, how do fans negotiate these identity conflicts? As the degree of overlap between multiple group identities decreases, social identity complexity increases (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). While studies of social identity complexity in sport are limited, Brewer and Pierce (2005) found that sport fans have lower levels of social identity complexity, though Delia (2015) demonstrated that this complexity may be much higher on non-game days compared to game days, when they perceive their team identity is under threat. However, conflicting group identities may represent another form of identity threat. When faced with identity threat, individuals may attempt to change perceived negative group attributes (Doyle et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If they are unable to change the group, they may leave (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Other research has shown that when making decisions, individuals with conflicting identities will make a choice that is aligned with the currently salient identity (LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010). The results of the present study will attempt to further our understanding of how sport fans respond to threats from conflicting external group identities.

Study participants are fans of the Indiana Pacers of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the New England Patriots of the NFL. Fans from teams in two different sports and regions were selected in order to account for variability based on sport type or geography, thereby enhancing the credibility of the results. Participants will be recruited using a snowball sampling method, with efforts made to include individuals of diverse backgrounds in order to consider a variety of external group identities. Interviews will be conducted until data saturation is reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1977). Data collection includes the use of meaning-centered interviews. Such qualitative interviews aim to understand the meaning that participants make of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). In this study, the researchers aim to understand the meaning the participants attribute to the cheerleading and dance squad, their team identification, external group identities, and the relationship between these concepts. Data will be first analyzed at the participant level to ensure understanding of individual meaning. The researchers will then analyze the data at the team level and then across both teams to identify patterns and themes that emerge across the data (McCracken, 1988). Member checks will be performed to enhance trustworthiness of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the researchers will practice reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process in order to acknowledge the researchers’ a priori understandings of the topic and assure results are based on the views of the participants (Lincoln, 1985).

This study has several implications for academics and practitioners. For researchers, it will first extend the work of team identification into understanding the role of professional cheerleader and dance squads, while further exploring the concepts that sport fans include in the meaning of “team.” Second, it will further our understanding of how fans negotiate multiple group identities, particularly in circumstances where those identities present potential conflicts. Third, it will provide directions for future research on the role and implications of cheerleading and dance squads in sport consumer behavior. For practitioners, the study will offer insights into fan perceptions of cheerleading and dance squads in professional sports, as well as the potential implications and consequences of such perceptions. Beyond the group identity conflicts presented by cheer and dance squads, the study may also be helpful to practitioners in understanding the implications of other types of external group identity conflicts that fans may face.