Group Dynamics: The Role of Group Inclusiveness and Personal Distinctiveness in Collegiate Licensed Apparel Consumption Behavior

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Retail sales of collegiate-licensed merchandise have been estimated at $3.4 billion in North America (The Licensing Letter, 2015). The collegiate-licensed apparel market continues to show consistent growth, converting on the fact that the collegiate market is the largest fan base (Mitchell, 2015). Analyzing consumers’ choices regarding collegiate-licensed merchandise is useful for understanding the situations and circumstances in which sports marketers and manufacturers provide a variety of apparel options to meet sports consumer needs. From a consumer perspective, collegiate sport fans purchase and wear their favorite collegiate-licensed apparel to signal their social identity to others (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). Sport consumers join groups of like-minded fans and engage in collective behavior to express their group identity in relation to a team. However, individuals simultaneously act to fulfill a psychological need to be distinct (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012). This research examines the conflicting group dynamics of group inclusiveness and personal distinctiveness in a group of fans and their collegiate-licensed apparel consumption behavior.

Literature Review
Researchers have previously confirmed that sport consumers’ group identity accounts for how individuals signal their sense of belonging through team apparel choices and enhance their self-image by associating with their reference groups (Kwon & Kwak, 2014). Therefore, individuals’ identifications with their collegiate athletic team and university play a key role in collegiate-licensed team apparel consumption. However, in terms of intra-group dynamics, an individual’s identification fluctuates to balance the need to feel group inclusiveness and to feel personal distinctiveness (Slotter, Duffy, & Gardner, 2014). The group dynamics, which involves a system of behaviors and psychological processes that occur within a group of fans can be meaningful in understanding sport consumers’ decision-making behavior.

Sport consumers buy and wear apparel to fulfill group inclusiveness needs in terms of a collective mindset (Berger & Heath, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). However, individuals also consume apparel in order to establish personal distinctiveness in their social group. By investigating group inclusion and personal distinctiveness motives in terms of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991; 2003) in the context of collegiate sport spectators, this research contributes to an understanding of the role of intra-group dynamics and the consequential consumption behaviors.

In addition, a consumer’s need for optimal distinctiveness depends on social contexts (Brewer, 2003). The collective sense of self that interplays with a sense of distinctive personal identity has not yet been explored sufficiently, particularly when behaviors and attitudes toward a product are socially visible. Collegiate-licensed apparel evaluation depends on whether consumption takes place in a socially visible situation and whether the signal is easy to recognize (e.g., Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012). When being watched in a public situation, such as watching a game in a stadium, the social visibility overrides the need for personal distinctiveness temporarily. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Intra-group dynamics mediate the association between team identification (TID) and collegiate-licensed apparel consumption behaviors.

H2: Social visibility moderates the association among TID, intra-group dynamics, and collegiate-licensed apparel consumption behaviors.
Methods and Results
An online survey was distributed to collegiate football fans via MTurk (N=301). All participants were randomly assigned to read a hypothetical scenario in order to create two social visibility conditions (in a stadium vs. home alone). In terms of intra-group dynamics, group inclusiveness and personal distinctiveness were measured with existing scales modified from Brewer (1991; 1993) and Sheldon and Bettencourt (2002). TID evaluated the degree to which an individual affiliates with their collegiate football team (Heere & James, 2007) and university identification was measured on existing organization identity scales adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). Collegiate-licensed apparel consumption included measures about the frequency of purchase and wearing, spending, willingness to pay (WTP), uniqueness seeking, and share of wallet (SOW). Construct factorial validity and reliability were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis and revealed a satisfactory measurement model.

Mediation analysis and group moderation analysis were conducted in AMOS. Results confirmed that a direct effect of university identification and TID on collegiate-licensed apparel consumption was statistically significant in both public and private situations at p<.05 ($\beta_{\text{public\_purchase}}=.56$, $\beta_{\text{public\_wear}}=.51$, $\beta_{\text{public\_spend}}=.24$, $\beta_{\text{public\_WTP}}=.23$, $\beta_{\text{public\_SOW}}=.24$; $\beta_{\text{private\_purchase}}=.64$, $\beta_{\text{private\_wear}}=.53$, $\beta_{\text{private\_spend}}=.32$, $\beta_{\text{private\_WTP}}=.36$, $\beta_{\text{private\_US}}=.26$, $\beta_{\text{private\_SOW}}=.19$). With respect to H1 and H2, the mediation effect indicated that in a public situation, group inclusiveness partially mediated the effect of TID on collegiate-licensed apparel purchase, wearing, and share of wallet ($\beta_{\text{TID\_public}}=.61$, $\beta_{\text{GI\_public}}=.42$, .39, .19 respectively, p< .05). Personal distinctiveness partially mediates the effect of TID on collegiate-licensed apparel purchase, wearing, spending, WTP, and uniqueness seeking ($\beta_{\text{TID\_public}}=.22$, $\beta_{\text{GI\_public}}=.34$, .29, .36, .34, .71 respectively, p< .05), but no conditional indirect effects of group dynamics were found in the private situation. These findings demonstrated that intra-group dynamics (i.e., group inclusiveness and personal distinctiveness) account for greater variance in a relationship between TID and collegiate-licensed apparel consumption behaviors in a stadium than in a private situation.

Discussion
This research explored the mechanisms through which sport consumers reconcile the need for group inclusiveness and the need for personal distinctiveness in a collegiate sport context. Intra-group dynamics balancing the need for distinctiveness from other group members and the need for group inclusiveness played a key role in explaining why sport consumers are willing to spend more on collegiate-licensed apparel. Especially, in a socially visible, public situation, such as viewing a game at a stadium, highly identified sport consumers towards the university and collegiate team were more likely to purchase and wear collegiate-licensed apparel through the intra-group dynamics compared with people in a private situation, such as viewing alone at home. Also, these empirical findings contributed to understanding unique apparel demands in a sport apparel industry as consumers who desire distinctiveness were more likely to choose less popular, but unique apparel in a public, rather than private, situation. In practice, creating a wide variety of team merchandise options generates better fit with sport consumers’ preferences and allows them to distinguish themselves from others (Chan et al., 2012; Lancaster, 1990). This research extends existing social identity research in sport management by demonstrating the psychological mechanism in which sport consumers’ group dynamics have an impact on their team apparel consumption behaviors.