In-Groups and Out-Groups: The Impact of Social Identity Theory on Local Sports Talk Radio

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Several studies have examined source credibility in sport media (e.g., Hahn & Cummins, 2014; Lim, Chung, Frederick, & Pedersen, 2012). Messages recognized as credible have substantial value, with credibility linked to positive audience attitudes and future consumption intentions (Mudrick, Burton, & Lin, 2016). This is integral in the sport context, given the genre’s popularity (Schultz & Arke, 2016), particularly driven by highly identified fans’ elevated desires to consume game programming and analyses (Onwumechili, 2018). However, little academic work has focused on sport radio. With over 700 stations dedicated to programming across the U.S., sport talk shows consistently rank amongst the most popular in Arbitron ratings (Schultz & Arke, 2016). Sport radio is a unique medium, featuring aggressive hosts who engage highly involved audiences in discussions that can often evoke emotion. With many outfits focused on local teams and fans, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) presents an explanation for the promotion of hosts with local ties, as individuals with strong in-group identification tend to align with those of similar characteristics. Fans, then, may feel better engaging in difficult sport dialogues when led by “one of their own.”

Gantz (1981) found topic locale to impact perceived credibility, with local stories seen as better dispersed by local news stations. This suggests a geographic in-group bias, with possible ramifications on consumer perceptions of local media. Evidence of this appeared to manifest in Boston, as sport radio station WEEI made several programming changes in response to listener dissatisfaction with new, non-local hosts. The station claimed it needed to find the right geographical background fit for its avid fan base (Finn, 2014).

Therefore, this study investigates this phenomenon in the unique and largely untapped context of sport radio. Using staged radio broadcasts, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Perceived congruence (sport talk host/fan geographic background) will be positively related to perceived credibility of the host.
H2: Host identification will moderate the relationship between perceived congruence and credibility of the sport talk host.
H3: Perceived sport talk host credibility will be positively related to media consumption intentions.

Multiple regression analyses will be used for hypothesis testing. A sample of 400 New England residents is sought, using segmented geographic recruitment through Qualtrics. Participants will be randomly assigned to two conditions, representing differing geographic congruence via host accent (New England accent vs. Southern accent). Participants will listen to a mock broadcast, with two hosts discussing current events involving a New England sport team. Participants will then complete a manipulation check and questionnaire gauging variables of interest. Measures include host/fan congruence (Til & Busler’s (2000) endorser-product fit scale; modified), perceived credibility (Ohanian, 1991; modified), identification with host (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; modified), and media consumption intentions (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011; condensed).

This study seeks to be the first to empirically measure the influence of tenets of social identity theory and group bias on media identification within the context of sport radio. Results from this study hold considerable practical implications for program directors via sport radio hiring strategies.