Identity Pendulum Effect in Group Dynamics of NFL fans

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Sport fans continually internalize their favorite team as part of their self-concept (Wann, Melnick, Russel, & Pease, 2001). Traditionally, it has been believed that group membership triggers a loss of individuality (Forsyth, 2016). However, individuals simultaneously act differently from the group to fulfill a psychological need to be distinct (Brewer, 1991). The concept of group dynamics refers to the psychological process of collective and personal self-identification within a social group. Fan inclusiveness (FI) refers to psychological signals from the fan group as a target of inclusion, while fan distinctiveness (FD) serves a role in establishing the psychological mechanisms of individuals’ self-identification. Considering FI and FD in understanding team-apparel consumption, the identity pendulum highlights the swing between opposing sides of FI and FD, mutual determinants of the interpersonal self. Furthermore, group dynamics accommodate situational differences in the relative activation of FI and FD needs. The effect of seeking conformity and distinctiveness will occur when an individual’s choice is visible to other group members (Brewer & Roccas, 2001; Papyrina, 2012). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Group dynamics mediate the association between team identification and team-apparel consumption behaviors.
H2: A sports fan’s inclusiveness negatively influences fan distinctiveness.
H3: Social visibility has a moderating effect on the relationships between team identification and team-apparel consumption through group dynamics.

399 NFL fans were recruited from MTurk. In terms of in-group dynamics, FI and FD were measured from early works on ODT (Brewer, 1991; 1993; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). TID and team-apparel consumption behaviors (i.e., FREQ=frequency of purchase/wearing, UPS=unique product seeking) were adopted from existing scales. In the moderated mediation model, the results showed a sequential effect from FI to FD and a moderating effect of social visibility on the mediation model throughout group dynamics. NFL fans’ TID had a significant association with FI in both social visibility situations ($\beta=.57**; \beta=.49**$). The negative sign estimates between FI and FD meant that fans’ group inclusiveness and personal distinctiveness are competing needs (public: $\beta=-.24*$, private: $\beta=-.41**$). The relationships between FI and team-apparel consumption behaviors were accepted across both situations. Lastly, the amount of mediation was calculated. 18% of the total effect of TID on FREQ was mediated by FI in the public situation and 31% in the private situation. Approximately 37% of the total effect of FI on FREQ was mediated by FD in the public situation and 83% in the private situation.

This research confirms the identity pendulum effect in group dynamics according to the contextual characteristic of NFL fans and the moderating effect of social visibility as a situational cue influencing team-apparel consumption. Once group members advance beyond the first phase of the collective self, the group situation determines how much force is applied to move toward FD. Findings confirm that FI and FD coexist, but the activation of one subset occasionally suppresses other components of identity (Forsyth, 2016). Findings also provide sport marketers with practical guideline for understanding what products and services should be offered according to situational cues or environmental contexts.