Fan Identity Formation in New or Non-Traditional Sport Market Environments: The Case of NHL Teams in the Sunbelt Region

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Approaching the third decade of the new millennium, the growth of professional sports may have reached the point of saturation (Gaines, 2013). Especially in the United States with the dominance of three professional leagues (i.e., NFL, NBA, and MLB), other leagues face a large challenge in building a fan base and growing their brand. In such a competitive climate, a viable strategy for small or new leagues has been to add franchises in markets where that sport does not have a long standing tradition in order to tap into areas where new fans could be developed. As the NHL has made concerted efforts in recent years to expand into the Sunbelt region of North America, its teams still face tremendous challenges to build up their fan bases. Previous research findings revealed key patterns and trends that influenced individuals to become fans of NHL teams in this strategic region of growth. Fan community would play a significant role in fan identity formation and be a major driving force of the league’s market penetration into new marketplaces (Mastromartino, Wann, & Zhang, 2018). The purpose of this study was to propose and test a structural model of NHL fan identity formulation in the Sunbelt States from the perspective of both teams and fans. Specifically, this study seeks to address two research questions: (a) what are the factors that contribute to the socialization of sports fans in new and non-traditional markets? and (b) to what extent do the socialization factors affect identity as a sports fan and overall fan consumption behavior? Based on a comprehensive review of literature, team initiated fan identity formulation activities include the following: (a) development of personal relationships, (b) making community impacts, (c) provision of school programs, (d) facilitation of hockey participation, and (e) launching unique promotions. A fan perspective usually includes the following: (a) first game experience, (b) team success, (c) media exposure, and (d) influence of family and friends. The behavioral outcomes of a highly identified fan are civic pride, psychological attachment to players, a sense of friendship with other fans, an enjoyment of socializing with others, and participation in fan community activities. These concepts, themes, and ideas were incorporated into a questionnaire, which also included sociodemographic and fan consumption variables. Data collection is being conducted through an online survey via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to those who self-identify as a fan of an NHL team located in the Sunbelt States. This study aims to collect data from around 800 participants based on guidelines for conducting an EFA, CFA, and subsequent SEM analyses (Bollen, 1989; Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988; Hoelter, 1983), the first random half of the data set will be used for EFA and the second half for CFA and SEM. This on-going study is expected to be completed in spring 2019. Discussions will be made on theoretical and practical implications for socializing people into hockey fans and growing professional hockey in Sunbelt regions, as well as implications for other sport organizations attempting to expand to new markets.