

Session: **Open session I.**

Abstract nr: **EASM-0194**

Conceptualising new team identification

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Background

The dynamic process associated with the formation, strength and development of identification with established sporting teams attracts much attention in sport literature to date (Funk & James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Current literature frames how individuals transition from awareness that a sporting team exists to an attraction to attend games or form identification (Crawford, 2004; Funk & James, 2001). Research shows that as identification with a sport team develops, fans will engage in multiple support behaviours and be increasingly likely to develop a long-term and sustainable bond (Crawford, 2004; Funk & James, 2001). Thus, numerous studies have sought to measure the strength and direction of fans team identification (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and psychological attachment with established teams (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000).

In addition to studies of established sport teams, work exploring identification with new sport teams is flourishing (new team identification (NTI)) (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Lock, 2009; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009). This research tests the cognitive connection developed by season-ticket holders of a new sport team before their first season (James et al., 2002). And, more recently the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of NTI (Lock, 2009; Lock et al., 2009). Despite advancements in understanding of fans of new teams, no conceptual model or theorisation framing the formation, strength and development of NTI is currently available. This paper presents a model of conceptual outcomes developed empirically from responses to the following research questions: What themes drive the formation of NTI? How strong is NTI? How does NTI develop?

Method & Analysis

A mixed-method research design investigated the formation, strength and development of new team identification with members of new sport team, Sydney FC. The quantitative survey method included two questionnaire instruments, distributed at the end of Sydney FC's first (n=490) and second (n=788) competitive seasons. The Sports Spectator Identity Scale (SSIS) was included in both questionnaire instruments to measure NTI and test for differences in identity strength based on participant characteristics. The survey method was complimented by 21 in-depth interviews (theme saturation is indicated in brackets () during the results below) undertaken following Sydney FC's first season to deepen understanding of the formation and development of NTI. This

approach included three stages of research, which sought to achieve methodological triangulation and cross-validate findings.

Results

The key theme driving the formation of NTI was an existing social identification with the sport of football. This finding was underpinned by 90% of questionnaire one respondents, 19 of 21 interview participants and 60% of questionnaire two respondents selecting support of football as the key theme driving the formation of NTI. Members' home-city (5) and the match-day occasion (9) also influenced the formation of NTI.

The SSIS provided a valid measure of new team identification. Principal Components Analysis of questionnaire one and two SSIS data returned replicated relationships between variables; however, two specific differences were noted with previous work. Members of Sydney FC did not strongly identify with a rival grouping and the value of victory displayed a weaker relationship than shown previously (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). One-way ANOVA testing showed that the independent variables age, salary, membership category and games attended caused significant between-group differences for the dependent variable identity score ($<.01$), in questionnaire one and two data.

SSIS responses returned insignificant differences between seasons one and two questionnaire data for the development of NTI. However, qualitative interviews showed that 20 of 21 respondents experienced a developed NTI. Five emergent themes were associated with developed NTI. These included: Increased eagerness for match days (13); searching for team news and media (13); expressions of support (4); increased knowledge of players (7); and promoting Sydney FC to others (6).

Conclusions

The model of conceptual outcomes developed during this study informs practice in three ways. First, new sport teams should be cognisant of existing social identifications possessed within the market they enter. Members in this case supported Sydney FC to support the success of football in Australia, which stemmed from the sport's turbulent history in Australia. Second, the SSIS data highlights that in a new team context, rivalries are notably absent. Therefore, they require leveraging. New sport teams cannot rely on rivalry formed through history. Thus managers of new sport teams should seek to explore avenues to leverage this feeling. Thirdly, this study informs key themes which drive the development of NTI. New sport teams should be acutely aware of the need to provide fans with current team-related information, rare merchandise articles, educational information on the team and players, opportunities to meet players and reward existing fans that attract others to engage or attend games.