

A REVIEW OF THE FUNCTION OF SPORT FAN IDENTITY IN SEEKING OPTIMAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS

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Abstract

Aim of Abstract

The aim of the abstract is to critically review existing literature and findings within the domains of sport fan identity and optimal distinctiveness theory, in order to propose a model to explain the function of sport fan identity in seeking optimal psychological distinctiveness. In this way, the research contributes to an understanding of the psychological process through which a member of a sport fan group attempts to balance the competing human needs for distinctiveness and inclusion in the expression of their identity. It therefore answers the call by Andrijiw and Hyatt (2009) to examine sport fan identity motives beyond self-esteem, as well as that of Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge and Scabini's (2006) to concentrate on identity motives such as belonging and distinctiveness.

Theoretical background

The behaviour of sport fans is of significant importance to their chosen sports team, which includes the managers tasked with marketing the team to current and prospective fans. Individuals who identify with a specific team may derive a sense of belonging from their interaction with other fans, as well as a sense of distinctiveness from interpersonal and intergroup comparison. Although significant strides have been taken in the area of sport marketing, a number of questions relating to sport teams or objects and their relationship with fan groups remain. Key among these issues is gaining a deeper understanding of the processes that contribute to sport fan behaviour, including the psychological processes at the level of the individual, which play a role in developing and operating the fan's group membership and their related sport fan group identity.

The achievement of optimal distinctiveness for a sport fan has been hypothesised to lead to the strongest level of social identification (Brewer, 1991). A high level of social identification has been shown to enhance self-esteem, psychological well-being, likelihood of attendance and greater willingness to spend time and money following the team, attitude towards the sponsor and purchase intentions, as well as the construction of brand equity for the sport team. Understanding the mechanisms through which sport fan identity is used to resolve the tension between the needs for distinctiveness and inclusion, may assist sport marketers to facilitate stronger and more positive relationships between fans, as well as with the sport object. This psychological connection between an individual and a sport or recreation object has successfully been studied through the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001), which proposes that recreation participation can be examined within four general hierarchical stages: awareness, attraction, attachment or allegiance.

Methodology

A thorough search of the sport marketing literature and optimal distinctiveness literature was undertaken. The search targeted any article reporting an empirical or conceptual investigation of sport fan identity or optimal distinctiveness. Following Cornwell and Maignan's (1998) application of research integration guidelines, informal, primary and secondary channels of information were used to locate relevant studies. All articles were collected in 2011. The indexing and abstracting services used as secondary channels included ProQuest and EBSCOHost, including SportDiscus.

Implications of the review

The review proposes a model that integrates sport fan identity, measured by an individual's psychological connection to the team, with the mechanism through which the individual seeks to achieve optimal distinctiveness. In this way, the research suggests the following propositions:

P1: The stronger the individual's psychological connection to the team, the more moderately inclusive the group is perceived and therefore, the more optimal balance between differentiation and assimilation.

P2: The stronger the individual's psychological connection to the team, the more those individuals will employ the mechanism of identifying with a relevant subgroup in order to achieve optimal distinctiveness.

P3: The stronger the individual's psychological connection to the team, the more those individuals will employ the mechanism of perceptually enhancing the distinctiveness of the group in order to achieve optimal distinctiveness.

References:

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