THE TEAM THAT NOBODY CARED FOR: OLYMPIC FOOTBALL TEAM IDENTITY AMONG BRITISH FOOTBALL FANS FROM ENGLAND, WALES, AND SCOTLAND

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Background

Team identity allows scholars to examine fans as members of a community, rather than as just consumers of a product (Heere & James, 2007a; Wann&Branscombe, 1993); and the construct has the power to predict variance in consumer behavior such as attendance, merchandise sales, media consumption and sponsor preference (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011a). This trend in usage patterns and preferences has made the team identity constructan important element to explain and predict marketing and consumer behavior patterns. In order to explain variance in team identity, Heere and James (2007b) showed that team identity waspredicatedon how strongly an individual identifies with various communities that surround (and represent) a given sport team. Furthermore,the authors revealed that these associated communities only predicted team identity when the team was representative of the external community (Heere and James, 2007b), and the strength of the association was a key indicator of how the team represented the community (Heere, James, Yoshida, &Scremin, 2011b).

Aim of paper

In order to test the idea of representation, the authors of this study took advantage of one unique case. For the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games, the British Olympic Association entered a team consisting of players from Great Britain and Northern Ireland (referred to as 'Team GB') into Olympic football men's competition. The team consisted of eighteen players, which was subdivided by thirteen players from England, five from Wales, and no players from Scotland or Northern Ireland. This uneven state representation allowed us to test just how important representation was for the team to take advantage of an associated community. The populations in each of the states (i.e., England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) have varying dispositions towards the supranational political entity of the United Kingdom, ranging from positive (England), to somewhat negative (Wales), to negative (Scotland), or divided on the issue (Northern Ireland), which added to the novelty and influence of the investigation.

Method

Through a repeated-measures design,data were collected fromhomogeneous student samplesamong three of the four nations (England N=88, Scotland N=89, Wales N=28) at three time points. The first data collection took place before the Olympic team was announced, whichserved as a baseline to understand how respondents in each nation felt about the Olympic team (i.e., before knowing how well their own nation would be represented). The second data collection took place after the team was announced (i.e., before the competition), and the third took place after the tournament. For each of these data points, nine hypotheses were proposed to measure the relationship between state identity (England, Scotland, and Wales) and Team GB, the varying levels of team identity in each nation, and the effect of representation as a mediator of team identity.

Results

We found support for representation as a mediator, as there were significant correlations between Team GB identity and state identity for England and Wales (who both had players on the team), but not for Scotland (who did not have players on the team). Yet, the data did not support the other hypotheses since (in general) team identity levels were low among the British respondents and the other state respondents disagreed with the identity statement (i.e., all the mean scores fell below 4/7.00).

Discussion

On the surface, creating a team supposed to represent each nation state of the UK was a novel approach. However, this team that was supposed to represent everyone became a team that actually represented no one. Team identity among respondents never reached levels that are expected of fans. Additionally, the negative Scottish attitude towards the team was expected, as no Scottish players wererepresented on the team. While the Welsh did increasingly care about Team GB because of players on the team, the data indicated that they never actually embraced the team. English fans remained ambivalent, since their attentions were likely more focused on other English athletes during the Games.This unique case provided the first empirical support of the issue of representation within social identity theory. As such, it might serve as a jumping off point for subsequent research endeavors to explore the influence of particular players on team identity among fans in professional leagues with fans around the world.

References

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