Workplace Attitudes in Professional Sports: The Role of Identification

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Abstract

AIM

The concept of identifying with an organizational entity has been widely researched in the mainstream management literature, with organizational identification now positioned as a key construct in organizational research (Riketta, 2005). While identification has also been highly researched in the sport management literature, it has been done almost exclusively from the perspective of the consumer. This research stream has focused primarily on the construct of team identification, and the extent to which fans identify with their respective sports teams (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The overall purpose of the study was to investigate the role of identification in professional team sport organizations. More specifically, the first objective was to establish team identification as a distinct construct from organizational identification in the workplace setting. The second objective was to examine the presence of foci-specific antecedents and their impact on the respective identification constructs. Finally, the third objective was to assess team identification's ability to independently predict attitudinal outcomes while accounting for the more established influence of organizational identification.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order for individuals to act in a given context, they must first situate themselves by defining their social identities in relation to others (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). However, as organizations are multifaceted entities, they can provide many different categories of membership. These categories can be referred to as organizational targets or foci, which members can incorporate into their own self-concept (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). The organizational identification literature suggests that individuals are capable of simultaneously identifying with

multiple aspects of organizations (Ashforth et al., 2008). Following recommendations for more research accounting for such circumstances (Ashforth et al., 2008), we propose that the sport environment offers a rich opportunity to engage this call with respect to the team component of professional sport organizations. This study ultimately proposes that employees in this setting can simultaneously be fans of the team as well as employees of their organization. That is, in addition to identifying with the overall organization, we propose that employees in this setting can cognitively differentiate between the team and overall organization and simultaneously identify with each entity. A hypothesized research model was then developed which proposed both organizational and team-focused antecedents for the identification constructs, which in turn independently predicted the important workplace attitudes such as commitment, satisfaction, involvement, and motivation.

METHODOLOGY

The participants for this study were business operations employees (n = 1,189) from the five largest professional sports leagues in North America: Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League. The data were collected using an online survey emailed to a random sample of employees working in departments such as accounting, marketing, sales, ticketing, etc. This study used survey items which have been shown previously in the literature to be valid and reliable. The first phase of the analysis addressed the discriminant validity of organizational and team identification through a variety of statistical assessments including confirmatory factor analysis. The second phase addressed the relationships in the hypothesized research model by utilizing structural equation modeling.

DISCUSSION

The variety of statistical procedures employed to assess the discriminant validity between organizational and team identification provided strong support for this proposition. Support for all of the proposed relationships in the hypothesized model was demonstrated with two exceptions, where prestige was not found to have a significant effect on either identification construct. The results of the current study therefore suggest that a form of dual identification exists in the context of professional sport, where employees simultaneously identify with the overall organization and the affiliated sports team. In addition, the results indicated that team identification independently predicted all of the outcomes in the study while accounting for the more established effect of organizational identification. While sport organizations and their affiliated teams are often referred to interchangeably in the literature and popular press, the current study distinguished team identification as a distinct construct from organizational identification for employees working in this setting. The

findings contribute to the literature by introducing the concept of a sports team as an additional target of identification in the organizational context. This study therefore provides empirical support for Todd and Kent's (2009) proposition that the sport industry contains aspects which warrant distinct consideration with regard to employee psychology.

References

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