

# (SP) SPORT FAN IDENTITY AND THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

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## **Introduction**

Recent literature is ripe with definitions and instrumentation attempting to measure and categorise sports fandom (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Shank & Beasley, 1998; Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003; Wann, 1995b; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). These attempts have encompassed conceptualisations of the sports fan (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999); and structured typologies, ranging from dualistic classifications (Hughson, 2000b; Lewis, 2001), to complex, tiered models (Funk & James, 2001; Giulianotti, 2002; Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Although the terminology and classification of individual motives related to consumers supporting and attending competitive sporting events has varied among scholars (see Funk & James, 2001 for an overview of these); the hypotheses that have received the most attention in the literature can be classified in four general categories: (a) stress and stimulation seeking; (b) entertainment; (c) achievement seeking; and (d) social interaction (Sloan, 1989). A variety of assumptions to explain motivation primarily based on psychological and social needs have emerged from these primary categorisations (Funk & James, 2001).

Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that fandom comprises more than simply attending and observing a sporting event. Additionally, prior research has suggested that the degree to which individuals identify with a team has a causal effect on their consumer behaviour (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). With reference to the proposed subject, research to date has drawn almost exclusively on established sport teams and competitions, through which they have derived assumptions regarding fan attributes, motivations, attachments and identities. The formation of personal and social identity amongst sport fans of a newly created team, in a new competition is largely unexplored territory. As such, a need to expand current understanding of fans of new sports teams exists. Through the development of a theoretically and conceptually founded framework, this research aims to diversify and advance current understanding of the sports fan, by specifically exploring how the fan-club bond develops in the first year of a club's existence. Therefore, the *objectives* for this research were to:

1. Collect empirical data pertaining to the social identity, attachment and values of club members;
2. Measure individual and collective attachment, involvement, and social identity; and
3. Extend our knowledge of sport fan identity formation in a new club environment.

## **Methods**

Members of Sydney FC, a football (soccer) club and foundation member of the new A-League in Australia were surveyed (n=1200) using an online survey provider and 490 valid responses were received for analysis (41% response rate). The questionnaire survey elicited data pertaining to the individual and collective identity of the new sports teams members. Ordinal measures of member identity to the club were obtained using the Sport Spectator Identity Scale (SSIS), which included two additional statements (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The two statements that were added to the SSIS focussed on the

personal value of victory: “when Sydney FC wins, do you feel like you have won”, and the perception of fellow fans “how strongly do you see your friends as fans of Sydney FC.” Questions regarding demographic and psychographic variables were also included. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to examine correlations between the SSIS variables. Identity strength was measured using a parametric examination of the likert scale responses. The nine SSIS variables were recoded into a single variable using the compute function in SPSS. This allowed for a total identity score to be recorded for each participant. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences between the identity scores, based on age, gender, and employment.

## **Results**

Respondents were mainly male (91.8%), in full-time employment (71.8%) and predominantly aged between 21 and 35 years of age (51.4%). A majority of fans attended games with friends (73.3%), wore official merchandise (52.1%) and had attended 8 or more (74.4%) of the teams’ 11 home games. Exploratory factor analyses, conducted using the principal axis factoring command in SPSS, validated the SSIS as a single factor solution. All statements showed significant communalities (<.30) and respondents displayed relatively high levels of identification with the new sports team (mean identity score 60.2). A one way ANOVA, showed that age, gender, and employment all had significant between group differences for identity scores. Results suggested that members were highly identified in terms of actual in-ground support for the team. Fans attributed a feeling of personal victory with team success and attributed a high level of importance to positive team results. Additionally, fans placed a high value of importance on following the fortunes of the team through media and internet sources. Conversely, levels of symbolic allegiance and definition of a distinct out group were weaker than has been reported in previous studies of established clubs.

## **Discussion**

Despite a lack of history, it is evident that fans can form significant bonds in relation to a new sports team. The validation of the SSIS provided support for the factor of fan-team identification in a new-team context. Although the fan-team factor was statistically applicable, two aspects of sport fan identity were weaker in the new sports team context. Firstly, fans were less likely to display a symbolic allegiance (in everyday life, away from the home ground) to the new sports team than would be expected in an established club. Specifically, support of the new sports team was mainly refined to the home ground. Secondly, fans showed a relatively weak level of intergroup comparison (dislike towards a rival team). The findings provide implications for managers of new sports teams and two specific areas for managerial action. Findings suggest that it could be beneficial to sport managers to attempt to leverage rivalries with opposing sides in the early stages of team/club development. Intergroup conflict is posited to increase ingroup attachment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, despite wearing official merchandise to games, fans did not display their support outside of this context. This presents a notable area for product development and future merchandising initiatives. Further discussion will be presented at the conference.

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