

Fan Identification: Towards a Common Understanding of the Conceptualization and Measurement of the Construct

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Keywords: Fan Identification, Social Identity Theory, Identity Theory, Fan Behavior, Relationship Marketing

Abstract

Introduction and Research Questions

Research on managing fan relationships has become an international topic in sport organizations. While there are a lot of empirical studies published on fan involvement or fan loyalty (Shank & Beasley, 1998, Depken, 2000), very little is known about fan identification. Some facets of fan identification were visible during the Soccer World Cup in Germany in 2006. Many fans from all over the world used T-shirts or flags as symbolic symbols of their identification with their favourite soccer team and/or country. It is assumed that a high degree of identification leads to several positive sport marketing outcomes (e.g., willingness to buy sport merchandising articles, attendance, price sensibility, sponsor recognition etc.).

However, marketing researchers differ over the meaning and measurement of the construct fan identification. Gwinner and Swanson (2003), conceptualized "team identification" in sports based on the original items of the construct organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), whereas Laverie and Arnett (2000) used the term identity salience and a scale introduced by Callero (1985) to measure nearly the same research object. Researchers from socio-psychology argue in this context that different components of identity should be observed (Ellemers et al., 1999). A cognitive component (awareness of one's membership in a social group), an evaluative component (positive or negative value evaluation related to a group membership), an emotional component (sense of emotions related to the group membership), and a behavioral component (participating in rituals or songs).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold: Firstly, we want to contribute to sport marketing research by a systematic review of different "fan identification models" given in the literature. By doing so, we aim to describe the state of the art of conceptualization and measurement of the constructs used, as well as the antecedents and outcomes of the different frameworks. Secondly, we aim to analyse to what extent empirical results vary (impact of fan identification on sport marketing outcomes), if the construct fan identification is conceptualized and measured in different ways.

Theoretical Background

Within the literature there are two dominant theories – identity theory and social identity theory – which are helpful for the understanding of fan identification. The identity theory is a sociological theory that explains individual behavior. The basic question of identity theory is how and why individuals select certain roles given in a set of alternatives (e.g., Why does one person choose to work on the weekend while another chooses to visit a football match?). Identity theory suggests that the different identities of an individual are arranged hierarchically and that salient identities are more likely to effect behavior than less important ones (Stryker, 1968, Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Social identity theory is a social psychological theory that sets out to explain group processes and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1974, Turner, 1985). The basic idea of social identity theory is that social categories a person belongs to (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, age, gender, and in our case a sport membership) provides a definition of who he/she is.

Methodology

To answer our two research questions we realized a two-step approach. We started the research by a systematic literature review on fan identification. As a result, four different fan identification models were identified. Furthermore, we analysed 83 returned answers of an online survey which was collected by a master thesis student of the University of Fribourg via an online portal (Zurkinden, 2007). Specifically, the study focused on the behavior of Swiss soccer fans related to "their" team: Young Boys Bern. Based on the items used in the different fan identification models, the data analysis will lead of a comparison of the different measurement approaches. At the moment, the process of data analysis is ongoing and will be finished in June 2008 by using partial least squares path analysis (PLS). Managerial implications for sport marketing and ideas for further research will be presented at the conference.

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