

IDENTITY AND FAN BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Study Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the influence of identity on Greek football fans' attachment to their home team's stadium and game attendance. We suggest that various football-related objects have the potential to become embedded within individual self-conceptualizations with implications for a range of behavior. The game, the team, and even the stadium can each be powerful symbols reflective of individual and collective selves. With this in mind, we tested a model using data collected from Greek football fans where their attachment to the home stadium was hypothesized to be the product of their identification with the game and team. We also hypothesized that fans' attachment to the stadium would impact their attendance to games. The relationships specified in our hypothesized model are derived from theory on identity (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). We suggest that identity is a driver of fans' attachment to their home stadium and game attendance. We also measure identification at three levels of specificity; a) identification with game of football, b) identification with the team, and c) identification with the stadium. Consistent with past work modeling attitude-behavior relationships (Ajzen, 1991), we hypothesized that increasing levels of specificity would add to stronger prediction of behavior. Also, a key mediator of identity and its influence on behavior reflected in the model is fans' attachment to the stadium. Following theory on identity noted above, an accompanying expectation associated with the role of a fan is a reverence for the team's stadium and, ultimately, attendance.

Method

Data were collected prior to a professional football game of the Super League in Greece. A total of 300 surveys were distributed and 293 were collected. A supervisor along with 10 trained interviewers was situated throughout the stadium and approached fans at concession outlets. Identification with the game of football was measured using items drawn from Kyle et al.'s (2007) modified involvement scale. Team identification was measured using items drawn from Wann and Branscombe's (1993) team identification scale. Finally, stadium identification and attachment was measured using Kyle et al.'s place attachment scale. All measured were translated into Greek. Following tests for non-normality and an analysis/treatment of missing data (multiple imputation), we tested the measurement and structural model (path model) using LISREL.

Results

Results from the test of our structural model are depicted in Figure 2. The findings illustrate that;

- a. Fan identity was positively predicted by identity affirmation ($B=.37, p<.001$) and accounted for 14% of its variance. The stronger the self-verification provided to the individual through their football fandom, the stronger their identification with the specific football team.
- b. Place identity was positively influenced by both identity affirmation ($B=.67, p<.001$) and fan identity ($B=.21, p<.001$) accounting for 60% of the variance. As fans' identification with both the sport and team increased, so too did their identification with the football stadium.
- c. Place dependence was positively influenced by place identity ($B=.53, p<.001$) and accounted for 28% of the variance. As respondents' identification with stadium increased, so too did their dependence on the venue.
- d. Affective attachment was strongly and positively influenced by place identity ($B=.91, p<.001$) and accounted for 83% of its variance. As respondents' identification with stadium increased, so too did their emotional attachment to the venue.
- e. Social was strongly and positively influenced by both identity affirmation ($B=.49, p<.001$) and place identity ($B=.40, p<.001$) accounting for 68% of the variance. As respondents' identification with the game and stadium increased, so too did the intensity of their social ties related to the venue.
- f. Last, social bonding was a positive predictor of both the number of games respondents typically attend each year ($B=.32, p<.001$) and their attendance within the past year ($B=.25, p<.001$). The variance accounted for by social bonding was ten and xi percent, respectively.

Discussion

These findings highlight the importance of identity for understanding fan behavior. We observed that identity was a key driver of fans' attachment to their team's stadium and game attendance. While elements of identity have been included in other models depicting loyalty processes (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998, 2004; Pritchard, Havitz & Howard, 1999), absent has been a theoretical explanation for their integration. An identity-based framework such as we

propose also has the potential to offer insight on a variety of other fan behavior beyond game attendance; e.g., fan violence, purchasing team merchandise.