

Team identification research: searching for an identity

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Since the start of the new millennium, sport management researchers have placed increasing emphasis on theory. A particular challenge, however, is the diverse range of theoretical approaches used by scholars. In some cases, this diversity is a considerable strength as it breeds a broad outlook on applied issues. However, it becomes problematic in instances when overlaps or contradictions between different theoretical or disciplinary perspectives are overlooked. In this paper, we concentrate on one specific example of a construct that is taken-for-granted in the consumer behaviour literature: team identification. Specifically, our purpose is to critically analyse the theoretical basis of team identification research in order to contribute a clearer basis from which to progress research into sport consumer identity processes.

Background

Team identification research gained traction in the 1990s as Daniel Wann and his colleagues published a series of papers exploring fan behaviour in psychology (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Branscombe & Wann, 1992). Although this work made a series of important contributions, it lacked a strong theoretical basis to underpin the development of measurement instruments or empirical studies of team identification. As an example of this issue, the Sport Spectator Identity Scale (SSIS) and Team Identification Index (TII) were developed without an explicit theoretical basis. Compounding the weak theoretical basis, researchers have advanced a range of definitions for team identification. Our research for this abstract revealed 10 different definitions of team identification or similar constructs (e.g., organisational identification and fan identification). Without a broadly accepted definition, we continue to study team identification – as a single construct – from a range of conceptual positions.

The increased theoretical rigour initiated in the early 2000s saw the emergence of two related, but different theoretical frameworks to advance understanding of team identification: social identity theory (e.g., Fink et al., 2002) and identity theory (e.g., Trail et al., 2005). Problematically, these two streams of research emerged without critical analysis of the overlaps and differences inherent to each approach. The SSIS and TII, although very similar, are used to measure team identification from each perspective. The differences between social identity and identity theory are such that two comprehensive reviews comparing the frameworks have been published in social psychology (e.g., Hogg et al., 1995). Sport management scholars, however, have continued to contribute understanding of a single unified construct without critical attention to the issues associated with using two different theoretical bases.

Theoretical framework

The lack of attention paid to the differences between social identity and identity theories creates a confusing landscape for research. Yet, more frustratingly, it limits our capacity to understand the behaviour of consumers using the full potential of each approach. Social identity theory provides a basis to understand how psychologically self-categorizing oneself as a member of a group (i.e., sporting team), shapes behaviour in favour of group interests. Therefore, it provides an extremely useful framework to understand how team identification shapes consumer behaviour.

Identity theory, on the other hand, has been used in less research (e.g., Trail et al., 2005). Moreover, the studies in which it features typically include fleeting mentions without considering its novel offerings, beyond a fan's identification with a team. Promisingly for future research, identity theory provides a framework explaining how identification with a role label (e.g., team fan) leads a person to behave in relation to other consumers that enact counter-roles. In contrast to social identity theory, which explains in-group homogeneity, identity theory explores how interpersonal differences and interactions shape the manner in which a person behaves. From this perspective, the people with whom we consume sport play a pervasive role in shaping our behaviour as consumers; above and beyond the groups to which we belong.

Implications

By incorporating the strengths of both theoretical approaches used in team identification research, we can make a large stride forward in how we conceptualise consumer identification. Specifically, sport fans act as members of groups, in many cases, which lead to the enactment of meaningful rituals, conventions, and interactions. However, people also interact with other consumers while watching sport through a series of role-based interactions that also influence their experience, identity, and behaviour. As such, this work has implications in relation to the: (1) design of products and services to leverage team and role identification (2) content validity of instruments we use to measure team and role identification, and (3) theoretical accuracy of our explanations for why consumer identity processes influence behaviour in sport.

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