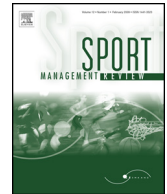




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March sadness: Coping with fan identity threat

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ABSTRACT

While a majority of team identification studies have focused on the influence of psychological connection on organizational objectives, it is important to also examine the influence of team identification on fans in terms of their well-being. Considering the latter, there has been a relative lack of inquiry into how identified fans cope with identity threat, such as program scandal. In the current study, the author uses autoethnography, an interpretive ethnographic mode of inquiry, to examine her Syracuse University Men's Basketball fandom and her reaction to sanctions imposed on the program in 2015. In doing so, the author finds that she relied on multiple emotion-focused coping strategies over a one-year period to deal with identity threat until a series of positive team-related events restored her identity. The author also finds that her role identities as fan and scholar frequently conflicted one another. Theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications of the current study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sport harnesses the attention of millions of individuals. For many fans, interest in sport is not merely for hedonic reasons, but for self-esteem purposes as well, which can lead to psychological connection (Funk & James, 2001; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Particularly, one's psychological connection to a sport entity can develop from a sense of belongingness and collective identity among fellow fans, and symbolic representation of the sport entity (Heere & James, 2007b; Lock & Funk, 2016; Sloan, 1989). Sport consumer behaviour scholars have studied identification extensively over the past several decades. These studies have often been undertaken to understand the influence of psychological connection to a sport entity on organizational outcomes (e.g., Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Madrigal, 2001). Other scholars have focused on the impact of identification on fans themselves (e.g., Heere & James, 2007b; Hyatt, 2007; Katz & Heere, 2013). A notable theoretical development in this area is the team identification-social psychological health model (Wann, 2006).

Under the framework proposed by Wann (2006), it is posited that individuals who identify with a sport team have temporary and enduring social connections to sport teams, resulting in greater social well-being. These benefits are suggested to be moderated by identity threat (e.g., poor team performance) and coping with such threats. While the framework developed by Wann is theoretically sound, it has received limited attention within sport management relative to other team identification studies. One cannot deny the psychological impact sport has on fans, nor the impact fans have on

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the revenue of sport. Thus, it seems problematic that scholars have paid relatively little attention to the processes underlying efforts to manage and negotiate identity in certain negative situations.

Several sport consumer behaviour scholars have acknowledged negative situations in sport (e.g., Lee, Bang, & Lee, 2013; Parker & Fink, 2012; Prior, O'Reilly, Mazanov, & Huybers, 2013), as negative circumstances (e.g., use of performance-enhancing drugs; relocation of teams; player, coach, and/or staff violations) are prevalent in sport today and must be dealt with by sport organizations. As such, understanding how negative occurrences in sport influence the fan (cognitively and behaviourally) should allow for theoretical development pertaining to sport fan identity (i.e., identity threat and coping) and practical insight for sport managers looking how to best interact with and communicate to fans during these times.

In this article, I seek to understand how a fan reacts to adversity faced by a team s/he supports, focusing on the coping process as a result of identity threat. I do so by studying myself, as a “case” of sorts through autoethnography. Autoethnography is a form of interpretive ethnography, which Denzin (1997) explained as, “One that is simultaneously minimal, existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical” (p. 510). Focusing on my Syracuse University Men's Basketball fandom and my unique perspective as an academic, I analyse my reaction to sanctions imposed on the program by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2015, particularly my thoughts and behaviours regarding the program from February 2015 to April 2016. In doing so, I aim to add to the literature within sport consumer behaviour by providing a deeply contextual description and analysis of how a sport fan copes with identity threat, and the theoretical and practical implications of such.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social identity theory

In studying identity threat and coping within sport consumer behaviour, it is necessary to begin by considering the theoretical framework of fan identity. Considering the use of theory to examine identity within sport consumer behaviour, a majority of scholars' work has been informed by social identity theory (e.g., Heere & James, 2007a, 2007b; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

According to social identity theory, group membership contributes to an individual's overall self-concept as a result of the derived awareness, value, and emotional significance with being a member of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social group(s) to which people belong contribute to their self-image by classifying themselves with fellow group members and distinguishing from non-members. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) posited, and perhaps a result of in/outgroup distinction, when people perceive they belong to a low status group, they may choose to leave the group or, in instances when this is not possible, engage in coping.

2.1.1. Team identification

Perhaps the most utilized concept to study sport consumers' psychological connection to sport entities has been team identification, the degree of psychological connection an individual may have with a sport entity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Although team identification (as originally developed by Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was never truly grounded in social identity theory, over time others have used similar terminology to study one's social identity with a sport entity (Heere & James, 2007b; Lock & Funk, 2016). This matter is beyond the scope of this article; however, the point to be noted is that regardless of the theoretical approach, team identification captures one's psychological connection to a sport entity, which subsequently drives many fans' thoughts and behaviours toward the sport entity.

2.2. Identity threat and coping

Although scholars have conducted a considerable amount of research regarding the organization-related behaviours of individuals (e.g., purchase intentions) as a result of being psychologically connected to a sport entity, they have paid much less attention to the maintenance of team identification, especially the area of identity threat. Such considerations might allow scholars to realize and communicate to sport practitioners how controversial events influence even the most dedicated fans, and how they can deal with such events. The focus of the current study is on the maintenance of sport team-related identity, specifically the maintenance of such identity when faced with adversity. As such, in what follows, the literature pertaining to identity threat and coping is reviewed, both outside of and within sport consumer behaviour.

2.2.1. What is coping?

Snyder and Dinoff (1999) defined coping as, “a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles,” and explained that the extent to which a coping process is effective “rests on its ability to reduce immediate distress, as well as to contribute to more long-term outcomes such as psychological well-being or disease status” (p. 5). Coping is often theorized as an ongoing process, as it does not simply describe the strategy an individual uses to deal with a stressful situation, but how an individual's behaviours and efforts to cope with change throughout the ordeal. Coping is also highly contextual, both to the particular individual coping with the stressor and the particular situation she or he is in (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus &

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