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The meaning of team in team identification

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ABSTRACT

A voluminous literature exists on the relationship between team identification and various consumer thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours. However, the psychological meaning of team to consumers remains unknown, as scholars have studied individuals' identification with a team without empirically investigating its meaning. Following an interpretive mode of inquiry in this study, the authors used interviews and concept mapping to understand the meaning of team among fans of two separate teams. An important discovery is that the meaning of team evolves due to environmental changes and personal experiences. At the same time, the authors determined that the meaning of team in team identification has three broad components: place, past, and present, each of which uniquely contributes to the identity. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of this research on the team identification literature and offering suggestions to practitioners and researchers.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have taken great interest in understanding individuals' psychological connections to sport entities. While not an exhaustive list of concepts, when studying connection to a sport entity, one may use identification (Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), commitment (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000), attraction, attachment, and allegiance (Funk & James, 2001), or internalization (Kolbe & James, 2003) as a conceptual framework. Of these concepts, the most frequently studied among scholars has been team identification, the degree of an individual's psychological connection to a sport team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Team identification is aligned with social identity theory (Lock & Heere, 2017), a social psychology theory based on group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Scholars have posited that identified individuals are more involved with and committed to a sport entity than those who are not identified (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and that team identification influences a multitude of attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Lock & Funk, 2016). Despite the relative popularity of team identification as a topic of study, little attention has been paid to the team component of team identification. Though sport teams have been discussed as representative of other entities (Heere & James, 2007) and inclusive of other identities (Lock & Funk, 2016), empirical investigation of the psychological meaning of team is void from the literature.

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The lack of empirical examination of the meaning of team could be for a variety of reasons. For some scholars, the meaning of team may be self-evident. Others may believe the meaning of team is simply too abstract or nebulous to be understood, and perhaps others have not considered its meaning at all. Regardless of the reason, understanding the meaning of team—from the consumer's perspective—is critical. Indeed, sport consumer behaviour scholars have emphasized the importance in building conceptual frameworks from empirical study rather than just the ideas of researchers (e.g., Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). As scholars, if we do not understand the meaning of team to consumers, we risk compromising our knowledge of team identification and an opportunity for developing good theory (e.g., Cunningham, 2013).

Understanding the meaning of team is necessary because it is foundational to individuals' identification with a team, which undoubtedly influences attitudes and behaviours (Lock & Heere, 2017). A better understanding of the meaning of team may also provide insight into the theoretical underpinning of team identification, though such direction is beyond the scope of this work. Kolbe and James (2003) suggested a team may be a summary unit for related entities, and that understanding its meaning is important in considerations of consumer loyalty. Recognising the meaning of team is also necessary so that it can be reflected in the marketing activities of sport organizations to leverage fan connections, making a team identity salient in consumer decision-making (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). We contend that by understanding the meaning of team, we may be able to offer sport marketers direction in activating a team identity.

Our purpose in this article is to further our understanding of the psychological meaning of team in the minds of sport fans. Employing an interpretive mode of inquiry, we use interviewing to examine the meaning of team among fans of two separate sport teams in the United States. We conclude that while the meaning of team is fluid, it broadly consists of three components—place, past, and present—which serve to develop and maintain one's identification with a sport entity.

2. Literature review

2.1. What is meaning?

In studying the meaning of team, we work from the views of a group of consumer behaviour scholars who have studied the psychological meaning of objects (products) for decades (Belk, 1987; Fournier, 1991; Levy, 1959). In studying the psychological meaning of an object to an individual, the experiential, emotive, and subjective aspects of consumption are embraced over the functional and objective. By understanding consumer behaviour from this perspective, we are able to understand the symbolic meaning of objects to consumers, and how this meaning relates to their use of such objects.

Levy (1959) noted that products are psychological things, and that “people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (p. 118); thus, according to Levy, scholars should focus on what an object represents (personally and socially) to an individual in addition to its functionality, especially those products which provide entertainment or please the senses. Studying the meaning of objects is advantageous in expanding the theoretical understanding of consumer behaviour, as well as in a practical sense, in that meaning exposes the core of the relationship between a consumer and a product, which can allow for product-related marketing campaigns infused with consumer insights (Fournier, 1991). Recognizing that a sport team is an experiential, highly emotive, and intangible entertainment object (Funk, 2017), a study of the meaning of team to expand our understanding of team identification would be insightful. Before doing so, it is important to acknowledge the literature that could inform such an effort.

2.2. Team identification and theory

Scholars study team identification using social identity theory as a theoretical framework (Lock & Heere, 2017). According to social identity theory, an individual derives a greater sense of self from the perceived awareness, value, and emotional significance of belonging to a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social groups to which individuals perceive they belong contribute to their self-image by classifying themselves with group members and distinguishing themselves from non-group members. Positive social identity is derived from favourable comparisons between ingroups and outgroups. When a social identity is unfavourable, individuals strive to make the ingroup positive, or leave the group if possible (Tajfel, 1974).

2.2.1. Flexibility and context in identity

Social identity scholars have acknowledged that social structures are contextual and fluid, changing based on economic, cultural, and historical circumstances (Abrams, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social groups' defining features are susceptible to change, highlighting the significance of context in studying social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The meaning and importance of a social identity is dependent on the social context in which it is formed and maintained (Abrams, 1999). Thus, though some may believe a sport-related social identity is relatively stable, it is quite plausible to simultaneously consider it unfixed, not only because of salience (Reed, 2002), but also in considerations of identity meaning in the social context. Indeed, this is the stance taken by cultural studies scholars, who believe that identities are temporally and/or spatially constructed based on our experiences and interactions in society, and are therefore never complete and always partial (Bhabha, 1996; Hall, 1996). These multiple disciplinary views of identity as an ongoing project are evident, yet scholars rarely discuss this in the team identification literature.

While a majority of the team identification research to date has focused on attitudes or behaviours influenced by team identification, some scholars have studied how such identification develops and endures over time (e.g., Doyle, Lock, Funk,

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