

The Psychological Continuum Model and the Role of Team Identification

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25-minute oral presentation
(including questions)

Scholars have put forth considerable effort to better understand the impact of psychological variables on sport consumption. Wann and Branscombe (1993) and Funk and James (2001) pioneered two streams of research with their conceptualizations of Team Identification (Team ID) and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) respectively. Team ID and the PCM can be and have been utilized by academics and practitioners to better understand psychological drivers of sport-related consumption (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009; Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013; Heere & James, 2007a; 2007b; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009; McLeod, 2017). To date though, scholars have not examined the role of identification within the PCM.

Funk and James (2001) conceptualized the PCM as a model “intended to provide researchers with a platform for the systematic study of sport spectators and fans” (p. 120). The PCM consists of four stages of increasing psychological connection—Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance. Beaton and colleagues (2009) developed a staging algorithm that supported the distinction of the four PCM stages through low-medium-high categorizations of sport consumer involvement scores represented by Pleasure (enjoyment and interest), Centrality (importance to lifestyle), and Sign (self-expression and symbolism). Scholars have provided evidence that individuals within each of the four stages of psychological connection are linked to discrete psychological and behavioral outcomes (Alexandris, Du, Funk, & Theodorakis, 2016; Beaton et al., 2011; Filo, Chen, King, & Funk, 2013). Scholars have reported that individuals with higher levels of psychological connection are more prone to engage in sport-related consumption activities at a higher frequency, depth, and breadth (Beaton et al., 2011; Doyle et al., 2013).

In the introduction of the PCM, Funk and James (2001) did not specifically address the role of identification as a type of psychological connection. In a discussion of the revised PCM (Funk & James, 2006), identification was presented as an outcome of attitude formation through an attachment process, contributing to the formation of allegiance. Although this relationship is supported conceptually, the role of identification as a type of psychological connection has not been studied. Of particular interest is the extent to which identification is manifest relative to the stage of attachment and allegiance. In one sense, a question to consider is to what extent identification is manifest (e.g., low or moderate) as part of attachment, or as part of allegiance (e.g., high identification). Another question of interest is the extent to which the dimensions believed to comprise team identification (c.f., Heere & James, 2007) may help scholars and practitioners better understand consumer attachment and/or consumer allegiance.

Scholarship on team identification is grounded in the writing of Ashforth and Mael (1989) and Mael and Ashforth (1992), who draw from Social Identity Theory (SIT). Team identification has been defined as the “extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, p. 3). Scholars suggest that team identification is a multidimensional construct (Heere & James, 2007) consisting of Private Evaluation, Public Evaluation, Interconnection of Self, Sense of Interdependence, Behavioral Involvement, and Cognitive Awareness dimensions. Analysis of team identification through a multidimensional lens allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the elements believed to comprise identification with an object, including how the elements relate to one another (Heere & James, 2007). High levels of team identification are indicative of higher levels of sport consumption (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007; Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). The multi-dimensional perspective may help us better understand the nature of identification with an object, which, when applied to the PCM, could mean a better understanding of the processes associated with the stages of Attachment and Allegiance.

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In this study, we examine the dimensions of team identification in an effort to better understand the processes and outcomes associated with the attachment and allegiance stages. Specifically, the authors are seeking to assess whether particular dimensions comprising team identification are related to the stages of the PCM. In the current study the authors first measure the strength of connection to a focal sports team using the staging tool developed by Beaton et al. (2009), with cut points for the staging mechanism based on the suggestions of Doyle and colleagues (2013). Second, the authors measure the six dimensions of team identification: Private Evaluation, Public Evaluation, Interconnection of Self, Sense of Interdependence, Behavioral Involvement, and Cognitive Awareness (Heere et al., 2011).

Survey responses were collected from individuals located in the Midwestern and southeastern United States ($n = 296$), and results presented are to be considered preliminary as a more robust sample is currently being collected. Participants were staged within the PCM based on their involvement scores (Beaton et al., 2009) and a team identification score was calculated based on responses to questions on the six dimensions; all items measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Significant differences in collective team identification were displayed across all stages of the PCM. Through discriminant function analysis, the authors determined that Cognitive Awareness and Private Evaluation measured highest within the Attachment ($M = 4.84; 4.98$) and Allegiance ($M = 6.77; 6.43$) stages respectively. Significant differences across PCM stages were found among the team identification construct mean scores for all elements except Public Evaluation. Along with Sense of Interdependence and Interconnection of Self, Public Evaluation was found to be a weak indicator of connection to a sport object at the Attachment and Allegiance stages.

Findings from this study will provide initial evidence of the role various dimensions comprising team identification may play in the psychological connection individuals form with a sports team. The findings are expected to advance our understanding of the identification-related outcomes of the Attachment Process and how they contribute to the formation of consumer allegiance (Funk & James, 2006). Marketing managers will be provided information on important group-level associations that foster attachment and allegiance. With this information, key group-level elements can be leveraged in collaboration with elements of consumer involvement to prepare marketing campaigns. The results will advance our understanding of the function of identification among sport consumers with a psychological connection to a sports team and will serve as a foundation for future scholarship.

Selected References

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