

Examining Social Identity Theory in Sport Literature Review

Review of Literature

The review of literature begins with an overview of the social identity theory. Then, it moves to how it applies to sport. Group membership is discussed, and how that relates to brand and brand marketing. Next, children and the building of social identity at a young age is examined, and then finishing up is the discussion of cult-like followings of sport.

Overview of Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is defined as, "...a social psychological analysis of the role of self-conception in group membership, group processes, and intergroup relations" (Burke, 2006). The theory is, "explicitly framed by a conviction that collective phenomena cannot be adequately explained in terms of isolated individual processes or interpersonal interaction alone" (Burke, 2006). More simply, it is a theory that provides a core from which psychologists and sociologists can understand the associations and interactions between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit (Liu & Laszlo, 2006). The theory is concerned with the difference between social and personal identity, which underpin the difference between interpersonal and group situations (Brown, 2000). The theory starts with the assumption that social identity is derived primarily from group memberships (Brown, 2000). *Group* in this instance is a self-conceptualized thought, and, "...exists psychologically if three or more people construe and evaluate themselves in terms of shared attributes that distinguish themselves collectively from other people" (Burke, 2006).

Social identity theory is an important one in psychology and sociology, and is a "pre-eminent" perspective in social psychology (Brown 2000). He also says that social identity concepts are "widely diffused" and "extensively employed" throughout the discipline of sociology (Brown, 2000). Furthermore, he argues that this can be seen from the regularity of references to the theory in journals and even in four books dedicated solely to the study and

reporting of studies and thoughts in social identity (Brown, 2000). Brown posits that one of the main reasons it has come to such prominence is its ability to address the sociological problem of the relationship of the individual to the group, and the emergence of collective thoughts and feelings from individual cognitions (Brown, 2000).

When examining social interactions through the social identity theory, it is also important to consider that people strive to maintain positive social identities (Brown, 2000). This positive identity originates from favorable and optimistic comparisons that can be made between the group and relevant other groups. Brown is communicating that a positive outlook and attitude can be achieved when one group feels superior or compares favorably to others. In the event of an “unsatisfactory” identity, people may try and leave the group for another, or to try and “find ways of achieving more positive distinctiveness for it” (Brown, 2000).

History of Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory was first posited by a scholar named Henri Tajfel. He did not believe that large-scale social phenomena (like the Holocaust, the phenomena that inspired him to study this theory) could be wholly explained in terms of personality or interpersonal reactions (Burke, 2006). He defined social identity as, “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972; Burke, 2006). In the next decade, the “self-categorization theory,” the role the categorization process had in the social identity process, had taken center stage (Burke, 2006). We as individuals categorize ourselves fluidly in a way “that enable[s] self-positioning as ‘one’ with different in-groups...” (Liu & Laszlo, 2006). This also led to the focus of research onto group norms, and how members of a group derive these norms from behavior of appropriate in-group members (Burke, 2006). Social identity research was performed even more

frequently in the late 1980's and early 1990's, as it has become center stage in the revival of research on intergroup relations (Burke, 2006).

The “Group” Aspect of Social Identity Theory

Group membership is a, “matter of collective self-construal” (Burke, 2006) that puts an “us versus them” mentality at the forefront. Group life often frames the development of personal identities and interpersonal friendships, and it helps create a common shared social identity (Burke, 2006). According to Burke, “People have as many social... identities as there are groups they belong to and personal relationships they are involved in” (Burke, 2006). In-group bias is also prevalent, as discussed by Brown: “...It is by now a common-place that group members are prone to think that their own group (and its products) are superior to other groups, and to be rather ready behaviourally to discriminate between them as well” (Brown, 2000). Further, Brown contends that people show intergroup bias and differentiation partly to have positive self-esteem about themselves and their group (Brown, 2000). This evidence shows that groups tend to further biases and discrimination between members, giving them an outlet to pile discrimination on. One of the benefits of the social identity theory is that it, “explains the occurrence of in-group bias even in the absence of objective or instrumental causes...” (Brown, 2000). Brown is saying that this discrimination and bias can arise without a real reason, and only because of differences between groups.

Social Identity Theory in Sport

Within the context of sports, fan identification is an expression of the social identity theory (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). In turn, sport has obvious parallels to society. Groups, while prevalent in everyday life, abound in sports, as teams give a natural formation of groups for people to join. But just what is in team identification? According to researchers, “Team

identification has been described as a psychological attachment that provides fans with a sense of belonging to a larger social structure” (Heere & James, 2007, p.66). Sports teams and their fans form a sort of “group” that members form their social identities around. A part of an individual’s self-concept is then arising out of their loyalty to that group or team identification.

This part of social identity theory can be looked at as a positive for sports teams and their bottom lines. If a fan derives some of their identity from their team identification, they can be looked at as, “more than a consumer of a product. A fan may be thought of as a member of a special group” (Heere & James, 2007, p.66). If the fan sees themselves as part of a team, they are likely to be loyal, and loyalty leads to higher attendance, greater spending on merchandising, and more fan interaction. Sports fans often derive identity and esteem from their affiliation with a team (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Because of this, they see the product as an extension of themselves, and can equate team success with personal success. As a result, “members” of these affiliated groups may spend a few thousand dollars on high-demand tickets, while more rational, casual consumers may not. This move from casual fan to fanatic can effect spending tremendously, from things as obvious as tickets, to apparel, home goods, and tailgating equipment (McIntyre, 2011). To further accentuate this point, a study by Wann and Branscombe in 1993 found, “...persons high in identification to be more involved and invested in a team, resulting in greater likelihood of attendance, greater willingness to spend time and money following the team, and more favorable expectations...” (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Obviously, sports teams, whether they are college or pro, are in favor of this level of social identification with a sports team, and the membership that many fans feel drives this.

Branding and Social Identity

Branding in sport is deeply related to social identity. Strong brands are built by making an emotional connection with an audience (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001). Customers are often zealous in their commitment. A path towards emotional loyalty can be a, “strong user community” (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). According to their research, “To the extent that customers incorporate identification with a service into their self-concepts...opportunities for building brand equity abound” (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). As a result, sports teams often capitalize on emotions to build brands, which, in turn, builds distinct group membership.

This “brand” that leads to building social identities in sports can be promoted in four ways: the group experience, history and tradition, the role of the physical facility, and ritual (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Spectator sports with large followings and massive stadiums (like European soccer and American football) cultivate feelings of group bonding based on experience and the physical facility. The group experience that people share being a fan of a team can be related to belonging to a family, as Steelers owner Dan Rooney conjectures (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). The kinship that is brought about by this “group experience” frequently contributes to a fan’s sense of self. Physical facilities role on our social identity is in fans reverential treatment of stadiums—often sparked by their memories associated with the facility (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Really, these stadiums are bastions for memories both good and bad, and of shared experiences with others in the fandom.

Social Identity in Children

Social identity can be developed in sports early, and cultivating an identity as a child can be powerful (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2014). According to a study of Facebook data on fandom of professional sports teams, popular teams are largely influenced by their success in seasons during

children's' sixth, seventh, and eighth years (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2014). Fans of the New York teams (Yankees and Mets) varied greatly with age, and correlated with years that each team won the World Series. For example, it was found that Mets fandom spiked in men aged fifty-two years old; men this age were seven years old when the Mets won the World Series (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2014). These findings give evidence to social identity in fandom being cultivated at a young age, especially in baseball. If a team wins a World Series when a child is eight years old, he is eight percent more likely to support the team as an adult (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2014). This evidence could even lead to a broader implication: that winning not only leads to increased success and financial gain now, but can pay dividends (in the form of lifelong fans) in the future as well.

Hooliganism & Sport Fandom

When sport fandom and social identity, some group members may take it too seriously, or resort to violence to solve their discrimination disputes against rival sport groups. These fans are often called hooligans, and it can be said they act like they are part of a cult. It may seem that sports fandom and religious cults have little relation. However, both employ intricate rituals, and sports, "have... an appropriated significant religious terminology as a means of expressing their sincerity, fervour, and seriousness" (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). Many researchers distinguish different groups of fans, from casual fans, observers, and temporary fans to fanatical and dysfunctional fans (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). Commitment to the group is also cited as a key measure of fandom, ranging from occasional attendance to assuming wins and losses of the group/team as their own (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). Commitment level has been found to influence and bias thoughts before, during, and after games, and that this bias effect is

most evident when a threat to one's social identity or group is present (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008).

Relating to riots and crowd control, social identity and the shared feeling of membership can lead some groups to riot. Research has found that, "individuals in crowds shift from behaving in terms of disparate individual identities to behaving in terms of a contextually identified common social identity" (Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001). Rather than losing control over behavior, then, group members act in the way they believe they should based on their social and group identification. Crowd events (like rioting, fighting, etc.) are often intergroup encounters, which relates back to group biases and discrimination against others. This tendency to dislike and put down other, "rival" fandoms because of social identity directly leads to aggressive encounters. The context in which any group acts is influenced by the actions of other groups (Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001). The implication of these findings is that disorder and crowd control must be studied and examined by the dynamics of the relationship between the groups present at the event, rather than individual actions or behaviors.

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