The Influence of Point of Identification on Merchandise Consumption

Heath McDonald, Robin N. Shaw and Meagan Dell, Deakin University

Abstract

It has long been recognised that consumers can form bonds and identify strongly with the organisations with which they are involved. When the organisation in question is a professional sporting club, identification can be a complex issue. Sports fans can identify with the team as a whole, with individual players, or both. How this different point of identification affects behaviour such as merchandise consumption is the focus of this paper. The survey responses of 161 members of the Kangaroos Football (AFL) Club suggest that members can identify with both team and individual players in tandem. Far from being opposites, team and player identification were found to be distinct constructs, not significantly related to each other. The point of identification was related to the nature of merchandise consumed and the manner in which it was consumed. The results suggest both player and team identification should be encouraged and that merchandise should cater for both in an inclusive way.

Keywords: Merchandise, Identification, Sports Marketing

Introduction and Key Research Questions

Sporting clubs increasingly rely on merchandise for financial support, but little is known about why people purchase merchandise. In addition to being a substantial contributor to sporting clubs’ revenue, merchandise is an interesting research area since its consumption also acts as a means of promotion for the team and that merchandise plays a role in defining the identity and self-image of the consumer (see the “basking in reflected glory” concept posited by Cialdini et al., 1976). The research outlined in this paper aims to gain a greater understanding of the factors that influence the purchase and use of team and player merchandise by football club members. In particular, two previously under-researched areas are included – the role of team versus individual players as the point of identification for individuals and the influence this factor has on actual consumption preferences and behaviour.

The relationship between the point and degree of individual identification with an organisation and behaviour has been researched extensively, both in a broad context and in a sport-specific context. Organisation identification, with Social Identity Theory (SIT) being the most prominent perspective, is said to have a strong influence on the satisfaction of individuals and consumption behaviour (Fink, Galen and Anderson, 2002). Usually applied to employee studies, an understanding of the multiplicity of members’ self-concepts and views of the organisation’s attributes has been used to explain the overt behaviour and attitudes of sports fans and supporters (Laverie and Arnett, 2000). Recent studies (e.g., Gwinner and Swanson, 2003) have found that team identification had a substantial influence on the self-esteem, emotions and self-image of fans.

In a sporting context, identification is usually defined as the degree of personal commitment to, and emotional involvement with, a sport organisation (Sutton, McDonald and Milne, 1997). The most commonly used measurement instruments are the “Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS)” (Melnick and Wann, 2004) and the “Points of Attachment Index...
(PAI)” (Trail, Robinson, Dick and Gillentine, 2003). Typically, although they acknowledge multiple points of identification are possible, studies into sports identification focus primarily on team identification (e.g., Trail, Fink and Anderson, 2000). Instruments have been developed though, that contain items relating to identification with the team and identification with an individual player and these form the basis of our questionnaire.

**Point of Identification and Merchandise Consumption**

The literature on team identification has sought to explain a range of sport fan behaviours such as merchandise purchase (Mason 1999), media consumption, game attendance, loyalty (Fink, Trail and Anderson, 2003) and impulse purchasing of merchandise (Kwon and Armstrong, 2002; Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). The results of Bristow and Sebastian’s (2001) and Kwon and Armstrong’s (2002) studies indicate that team identification does have a positive relationship with the quantity and level of expenditure of merchandise purchases. However, whilst the aforementioned studies suggest that team identification does influence consumer behaviour, one area that has lacked recognition is the influence that player identification has on these purchase and consumption activities.

The study discussed here seeks to examine the influence of player identification further. Whilst the reasons behind an individual’s decision to attach oneself to either a team or a player are beyond the scope of this study, what is relevant is the behaviour that occurs as a result of this association with the player. The point of attachment (player or team) may influence the type of product the individual will purchase. The fact that individuals buy football jerseys then place the number of their favourite player on the back is indicative of the type of behaviour that we would theorise is influenced by player identification.

Although the existence of player identification is commonly recognised, little research has focused on the effects this phenomenon has on sport purchase and consumption behaviour. It is suggested by Wann and Branscombe (1993, p. 10) that “with the high status given to many of today’s multi-million dollar players, some spectators may be more highly identified with specific players than with the team itself”. The concept of player identification is similar to that of team identification. That is, an individual will announce his or her affiliation with the player to others in order to be seen as successful through association. The forms of expressing player affiliation are also similar to that of team affiliation, in the displaying of player merchandise and player memorabilia, and recalling player statistics. It has been suggested that the more that the team can build indirect (e.g., interviews) and direct contact (e.g., autograph signings, and public social service events) with the players, the more fans will be able to identify with the players, and thus, with the team as a whole. However, the disadvantage of creating player identification is that if fans identify highly with the player, trading the player may decrease the fans’ identification with the team (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998).

Two issues remain unresolved. Are team identification and player identification competing or can they co-exist? How does the point of identification influence consumption preferences and expenditure level? The first hypothesis developed for this study is based on the idea that the object of affiliation may be a “person or group” (Trail, Fink and Anderson, 2000, p. 166) or “group or individual” (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). These researchers suggested that it is reasonable to assume that an individual will exhibit either identification with the team, or identification with a specific player in the team. It is unclear whether a person can be identified strongly with both, or if it is an “either/or” situation. To test this we assume here
that as individuals’ identification with the team increases, they are less likely to identify with a particular player.

H1: Team identification is related negatively to player identification.

Based on what is known about point of identification and the purchasing behaviour of individuals in that category, however, it is hypothesised that:

H2: Player and Team identification are both related positively to attitudes to merchandise and consumption behaviours.

Method

Postal surveying of Club members was used, as a complete postal address list was available whereas telephone numbers and email lists were incomplete. A small sample of respondents was chosen to take part in a focus group. The aim of this qualitative research was to guide the design and wording of the survey instrument. An incentive (a lottery draw for a signed guernsey) was offered to increase responses. Even though a follow up mailing was desirable, time and resource constraints did not allow it. Four hundred adult members were chosen at random from the Kangaroos Football Club membership base, from a spreadsheet list of over 21,000 members comprising all members in 2003. Each member of the sample was sent a package containing a cover letter stating the purpose of the study, the questionnaire, and a reply-paid envelope. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, and return it in the envelope provided. Of the 400 questionnaires that were distributed, three were returned unopened and 166 were returned completed (constituting a response rate of 42%). Of the 166 questionnaires returned, five were discarded due to a large part of the questionnaire being unanswered. The returned sample was checked for non-response bias using two different methods (first versus last comparison and comparison to overall population demographics) and no evidence of it was found.

Results

For this study, a total of 161 useable questionnaires were used as the basis for analysis. The overall profile of respondents was of professional people who were living as part of a couple with children, who had a medium to high income ($60,000 +), were between 30 and 40 years old, and purchased around $100 worth of merchandise per annum. This profile fitted that of the adult population of 2003 members. Structural Equation Modelling using AMOS (Figure One) allows the most efficient testing of hypotheses and the items included in the model are detailed in Table One. The model, although not meeting the standard on one commonly used measure of goodness-of-fit (chi-square = 0.002), does comply with a range of other, less sample-size sensitive measures. All correlations and regression weights shown are significant at the 0.05 level of probability, and this combined with acceptable fit measures on all other aspects suggest it is a valid model.

In testing the hypothesis (H1) that individuals could be distinguished clearly as being identified with either the team or with a specific player, the results challenge conventional thinking. Overall, identification with the team as a whole was strong, while identification with an individual player was very low. Both measures were highly skewed (team positively and player negatively) and had little correlation with each other (r = 0.07). Those who exhibited
higher levels of player identification (20 or higher) typically also had high levels of team identification, but the converse was not true.