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## Still Undefeated

### *Exploring the Dimensions of Team Identity among Fans of a New College Football Team*

Bob Heere  
Matthew Katz

#### Abstract

The authors explore issues of team and university identification in the context of an upstart National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football program. University stakeholders, including students, faculty/staff, and alumni (N=3,191), of a large southwest university completed a multidimensional group identity scale to examine how these various stakeholder groups identify with both the university and the newly established team. Results indicate that these stakeholders largely disagreed with many of the identity constructs, indicating that the various processes of identity formation occur at different points in time. Furthermore, differences among the three stakeholder groups were identified in regards to their identification with both the team and the larger university. Finally, the relationship between team identity and university identity was explored in order to empirically determine whether identifying with a college sports team impacts how individuals identify with the larger university. Managerial implications for a university implementing a new football program are detailed.

**Keywords:** *team identity; college sports; community development*

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## Introduction

Despite its immense popularity, college athletics is an expensive endeavor that requires substantial subsidies from academic institutions to persevere. In the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), for example, only 23 college athletic programs reported a profit for the 2012 season and the average FBS program received 20% of their total athletic revenue from institutional allocation (Fulks, 2013). In comparison, among schools participating in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), zero institutions reported a profit and the average program required 71% of their revenue to come directly from institutional support (Fulks, 2013). Moreover, since the growth rate in total expenses after the removal of inflation was 9% for FBS and 5% for FCS programs, the future of college sports appears to be even more financially draining for participating institutions, despite the fact that the number of participating student-athletes remains fairly consistent (Fulks, 2013).

Within the larger realm of intercollegiate sports, there is little doubt that football plays a central role within the economic realities of college sport. While football is consistently the most expensive sport to provide, it is the only athletic program that potentially brings in sufficient money to cover the costs of other collegiate sports and ideally allow universities to operate their programs without any institutional support. For the 2011 season, Louisiana State University (LSU) reported revenues from football alone of nearly \$69 million, and the University of Texas at Austin reported almost \$104 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). While these figures represent the idealized image of college sports generating income for the university and surrounding areas, outside of the traditional "powerhouses" in college football the revenue rarely exceed the expenses. When the 2005 University of Utah football team completed an undefeated season, their reported \$4 million profit included \$2.5 million in institutional subsidies and \$3.3 million in student fees (*NCAA Financial Report*, 2005). In a more recent example, the University of Connecticut (UConn) reported losses of more than \$1.6 million following their trip to the 2011 Orange Bowl, a game that culminated the most successful FBS season in program history (Conner, 2011).

Yet, despite this bleak financial picture, academic institutions are investing more and more into college athletics. Fulks (2013) reported that in 2012 the median growth rates of athletic spending was 4.4% higher than the median increase in overall institutionally expenses for FBS schools and 3% higher for FCS institutions. Moreover, Kelly and Dixon (2011) identified 37 schools that added, or were planning to add a new football program between 2004 and 2014. The rationale behind these decisions to add expensive football programs is the belief that football serves as the flagship of the athletic department and better attracts the attention of the students, local community, and media better than any other athletic or academic program (Oriard, 2001; 2009). Furthermore, football is often viewed as one of the few instruments through which an academic institution can

invoke a sense of community among students, alumni, and other stakeholders (Clopton, 2009; Smith, 1990; Toma, 2003). However, the proposition that college athletics, and football in particular, can increase sense of community within the university has yet to be validated through empirical research. A recent student by Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, Ridinger, and Harrison (2011) found no evidence of an increased sense of community among students of a university that added an FCS football program following their first season of competition. Yet, their study relied upon a one-dimensional College Sense of Community (CSOC) scale, which does not allow for an in-depth analysis of how students identify with their university, and the psychometric scores obtained signaled some challenges to the structure of their scale. The RMSEA (.09) and the Chi-square/degree of freedom ratio (10.1) were too high to be deemed acceptable, and a review of the individual items revealed items that were not worded neutral. For instance, the item "There is a strong feeling of togetherness on campus" does not allow for an objective assessment of the sense of togetherness on campus, as it includes the term *strong*. This might cause an individual to disagree with the item, even though he/she believes there is a sense of togetherness (e.g., community) on campus. Similarly, the item *I feel very attached to ODU* is problematic. Their last items, *Students at ODU feel they can get help if they are in trouble* is more reflective of social capital (e.g., the willingness of an individual to act upon their sense of community), rather than CSOC. It might be that these items caused some content validity issues. Regardless of any psychometric issues with this one-dimensional scale, the use of a multidimensional scale might be preferential because of its ability to provide a more in-depth analysis of the identity process of the individual with the group.

Instead of using a one-dimensional scale, Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, and James (2011a) implemented a multidimensional approach to examine how people identify with their community, and they reported that identity with the university had a significant impact on how students identified with the football team. While they assumed the causality to be reversed, it seems likely that this relationship exists in both directions, yet the extent of this effect remains unexplored. By implementing a multidimensional group identity scale to be distributed among stakeholders of a university that was in the process of adding a football team, the authors hope to gain more insight on the identity process of the universities' stakeholders have with the university and the college football team. In contrast to the study of Heere et al. (2011a), in which an argument could be made that identity with the university existed prior to the development of team identity, in this study it is the opposite. The population has an existing identity with the university, but not with the team, which has yet to play a game. Therefore, this particular case allows us to examine the reverse relationship between team identity and university identity, similar to what Warner et al. (2011) did in their study.

Therefore, this paper serves to explore the development of both team and university identities among stakeholders of a new college football team. More

specifically, this research explores the dimensions of identity prior to the playing of the first game for a number of reasons. Firstly, examining a team before its first season allows our results to be independent of the on-field successes or failures of the team. Since new teams often struggle to compete with existing organizations (Dickson, Arnold, & Chalip, 2005), examining the impact of a new team before the common struggles of newcomers was viewed as an appealing research opportunity. Secondly, this research was also designed to serve as a baseline for a larger longitudinal study in the coming seasons. As such, it was imperative to establish levels of identification before the first season in order to properly gauge how these constructs evolved once the team started playing. And finally, since starting a new team often requires several years of planning and organizing prior to a program's first game, understanding the impact on university stakeholders prior to the first game can produce valuable results for university administrators of institutions creating new teams in the future.

## **Literature Review**

### **Exploring the Dimensions of Team Identity**

Early work on team identity suggested the concept was one-dimensional, and described it as the psychological attachment that provides fans with a sense of belonging to a larger social structure (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Studies reported on the positive effects of team identity on consumer behavior, such as attendance, loyalty, and sponsorship (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), and team identity was argued to have positive effects on the well-being of individuals (Wann, Martin, Grieve, & Gardner, 2008). Yet, despite the progress in this area, the one-dimensional focus on team identity prevented an in-depth analysis of what processes drove the concept of identity itself.

More recently, several scholars have started to explore the concept of team identity as a multidimensional concept (Dimmock, Grove, & Ecklund, 2005; Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011a; Theodorakis, Dimmock, Wann, & Barlas, 2010). Both Dimmock et al. (2005) and Heere and James (2007) framed their team identity instrument within social identity theory, and argued that our identification process with sport teams was similar to how we identify with other social groups. Following Tajfel (1978), Heere and James (2007) defined team identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a sport team, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." (p. 66).

Placing the concept of team identity within social identity theory allowed both Dimmock et al. (2005) and Heere and James (2007) to develop instruments that began to explore the different dimensions within social identity theory. Dimmock et al. (2005) proposed three dimensions: 1) Cognitive/affective, 2) Personal evaluation, and 3) Other evaluation. Heere and James (2007) proposed a six-dimensional model of team identity based on a review of Ashmore, Deaux and

McLaughlin-Volpe (2004). According to Heere and James (2007), team identity was a concept that comprised: 1) public and private evaluation of the group (similar to Dimmock et al., 2005), 2) an interconnection of the individual with the group (which Dimmock et al. captured in the cognitive/affective construct), 3) a sense of interdependence with the group, 4) a level of behavioral involvement, and 5) a level of cognitive awareness. Table 1 provides an overview of each construct.

**Table 1**

*Group Identity Instrument (Heere et al., 2011a)*

| Constructs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Descriptions                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self Categorization                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Identifying self as a member of, or categorizing self in terms of, a particular social grouping. (open-ended question) |
| Private Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I feel good about being a (fan/member) of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>In general, I am glad to be a (fan/member) of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>I am proud to think of myself as a (fan/member) of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> </ul>                                           | The positive or negative attitude that an individual has personally toward the group.                                  |
| Public Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overall, my (state/university/college football team/city) is viewed positively by others.</li> <li>In general, others respect my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>Overall, people hold a favorable opinion about my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> </ul>                                                                     | The perceived positive or negative attitude of non-members towards the groups by the individual.                       |
| Sense of Interdependence with the Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What happens to my (state/university/college football team/city), will influence what happens in my life.</li> <li>Changes impacting my (state/university/college football team/city) will have an impact on my own life.</li> <li>What happens to my (state/university/college football team/city) will have an impact on my own life.</li> </ul> | The degree to which the individual feels his/her faith is dependent on the faith of the group.                         |
| Interconnection with the Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When someone criticizes my (state/university/college football team/city), it feels like a personal insult</li> <li>In general, being associated with my (state/university/college football team/city) is an important part of my self-image.</li> <li>When someone compliments my college football team, it feels like a personal compliment.</li> </ul>    | The degree to which the individual feels the group is a part of her/himself.                                           |
| Behavioral Involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I participate in activities supporting my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>I am actively involved in activities that relate to my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>I participate in activities with other (fans/members) of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> </ul>                              | The degree to which an individual engages in actions that directly implicate the group identity.                       |
| Cognitive Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am aware of the tradition and history of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>I know the ins and outs of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> <li>I have knowledge of the successes and failures of my (state/university/college football team/city).</li> </ul>                                                             | The general awareness (or knowledge) that an individual has of the group.                                              |

Since then, several studies have been conducted that examined the reliability and validity of this instrument (Heere et al., 2011a; Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011b). The refined identity instrument of Heere et al. (2011a) allows for the most detailed discussion of team identity and proved strongly predictive of the different consumer behavior outcomes of sport fans. It has also been tested before in a college sports setting. Yet, while Heere and James (2007) argued that each of their proposed dimensions should be evaluated separately through a first order model, they have yet to do so. Both studies that they have published since then (Heere et al., 2011a; Heere et al., 2011b) have placed the different dimensions under the second order label of team identity, leaving it unclear what the exact contribution is of each of the different dimensions.

Placing the different dimensions of team identity under a second order construct assumes the different dimensions to act similarly and are indicative of the second order to a similar degree, which might not be entirely correct. We know little about the relationship between these different dimensions and the causation that might exist between the different concepts. That the relationship between the different dimensions might not be as straightforward as Heere and James (2007) assume is reflected in the mediocre fits they found when testing their second order models through confirmatory factor analysis (Heere et al., 2011a; Heere et al., 2011b). For instance, intuitively it seems that the evaluation processes of an individual might be a precursor to the interconnection and interdependence of an individual, while behavioral involvement and cognitive awareness are perhaps better viewed as outcomes of these two separate attachment dimensions. Yet, at the same time, their results indicate that many of these attitudinal processes are so dyadic in nature that it is impossible to treat them as separate concepts in structural modeling. Hence, rather than continue to modify the Team\*ID instrument to improve the fit of the different factors within a second order model, we aimed to explore the different dimensions of team identity separately and independently within this study. The choice to do so would allow us to gain a better understanding of the different identity dimensions and how they relate to each other.

Applying the multidimensional team group identity scale to a new sport team could also shed more light upon the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) of Funk and James (2001, 2006). They argue that for a consumer to make the transition from a spectator (someone without an emotional connection to the team) to a fan, an individual has to move through a continuum of four different phases: 1) Awareness, 2) Attraction, 3) Attachment, and 4) Allegiance. If the PCM would be valid, stakeholders of the university would not be able to have a strong psychological connection (e.g. identity) with the sport team and disagree with statements on five of the six dimensions of group identity (private and public evaluation, interconnection with group, sense of interdependence, and behavioral involvement). Based on the PCM framework, the only dimension stakeholders could agree to would be cognitive awareness.

### **The Effect of a New College Football Team on an Academic Institution**

The role of intercollegiate athletics in and on academic institutions has been an ongoing source of controversy since its inception. Most of the studies that have examined the effect of the football team on the university have focused on comparing successful and unsuccessful seasons (McEvoy, 2005). These studies provide us with conflicting perspectives. While some have argued that winning affects alumni donations (Grimes & Chressanthis, 1994), others have rejected that proposition (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2004). Similarly, winning programs have been argued to have a positive effect on student applications (McEvoy, 2005; Toma & Cross, 1998), while other scholars have discussed the opposite effect when student applications decrease if a football program is unsuccessful (Zimbalist, 1999). Toma and Cross (1998) suggested the attention received by an institution through intercollegiate athletic success might influence important phases of student college choice. The majority of the studies examining the effects of winning percentage on incoming applications seem to indicate that there is a positive relationship, but there are studies that argue that no relationship exists (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010). Chressanthis and Grimes (1993) conducted a telling investigation that found while athletic postseason play and television coverage had no significant effect on the number of undergraduate applications, winning percentage in football did have a significant positive effect on the number of applications received by the university over a 30 year period.

While there is contradictory evidence on the effects of football on the overall university landscape, at the very least, it can be concluded that universities are seeking to derive benefits from college athletics that extend beyond mere financial gain. As this study is focused on a new FBS program, it is important to note that McEvoy (2005) found that the only sport to show a significant relationship between change in winning percentage and number of applications was football. As many scholars have highlighted, football garners more attention because it not only stands as the symbol of big time college athletics but also serves as the main financial driver for many institutions.

The recent decision of a large university in the Southwest to add a new football program to their athletic department allowed us to examine the effect of this new addition to the university in general and explore how the different dimensions of team identity manifest themselves among a new fan base. Through interviews with the athletic department management team, it became apparent that the management team realized that the addition of the football team was a costly endeavor and they stated that it was not their intention to become a profitable program. They argued that football was the only sport people cared about in this region of the nation and that it would serve as an instrument to increase the sense of community among their students and alumni base. Such a statement is consistent with literature that points to football as the pinnacle of the sports environment

in the United States (Oriard, 2001) and the expected effects of initiating an FBS football program (e.g., attracting community attention, boosting brand of the university). Due to the rarity of this situation, the researchers concluded that this university served as a unique case study to examine the effect of a new college football team on an academic institution. To gain more insight on the discussed issues, the study is framed within the following questions:

Research question 1: To what extent do the dimensions of team and university identity manifest themselves differently among the students, the faculty/staff and the alumni of a university?

Research question 2: Are there significant differences in how students, faculty/staff and alumni identify with the team and the university?

Research question 3: Do the different dimensions of team identity affect how people identify with the university?

Research question 4: To what extent do team identity and university identity explain variance in consumer behavior?

## Method

### Data Collection

In total, 3,191 surveys were collected from three different stakeholder groups. An e-mail request was sent out to all students of the university (approximately 30,000 students) asking them to fill out the survey, leading to 1,430 responses and a response rate of 4.8%. A similar e-mail was sent out to all the faculty and staff (approximately 3,800 e-mail addresses), and we received 663 responses at a response rate of 17.4%. Finally, an e-mail request was sent out to the entire database of the alumni association of the school (approximately 36,676 e-mail addresses) giving us 1,096 responses and a response rate of 3%.

While the low response rate might indicate that our sample possessed some positive bias towards the university, the sport of football, and/or the athletic department, a low response rate is not unusual in these circumstances. For instance, Sheehan (2006) found that e-mail distribution surveys have lower response rates when they are sent to larger numbers of respondents, when they have larger numbers of questions, and when they are missing pre-notification and post-notification messages. Since we were unable to send either pre- or post-notifications, our low response rate is not unusual. Furthermore, studies have shown that Internet users receive nearly 39 unsolicited emails per day at the workplace alone (NUA, 2000), which causes individuals to be more likely to ignore broadcasted email messages. In many instances, people reject e-mails such as these immediately as junk mail and are reluctant to open up any links that are provided in the e-mail. Additionally, the email request itself did not contain any

reference to the football team, in order to minimize the bias of favoritism towards the new football team. As such, the research team was confident in providing a representative sample of the overall population. In the discussion, any potential limitations that might have occurred because of the low response rate will be addressed. Table 2 provides an overview of the demographics (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Demographic Information*

| Sample Characteristic | Student<br>(n=1,331) | Faculty/Staff<br>(n=609) | Alumni<br>(n= 1007) |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Age                   | 25.35 (SD=8.137)     | 44.77 (SD=12.211)        | 40.04 (SD=12.179)   |
| Years in Current City | 9.99 (SD=10.238)     | 17.72 (SD=16.565)        | 17.56 (SD=14.725)   |
| Gender                |                      |                          |                     |
| Male                  | 697 (48.7%)          | 299 (45%)                | 639 (58.2%)         |
| Female                | 699 (48.9%)          | 332 (50%)                | 434 (39.6%)         |
| City of Residence     |                      |                          |                     |
| San Antonio           | 90.1%                | 85.8%                    | 59.7%               |
| Other                 | 8.3%                 | 11.9%                    | 39.0%               |
| Missing               | 1.7%                 | 2.3%                     | 1.3%                |

*Note.* All column values do not equal the total N due to missing data in each category.

### Instrumentation

To measure the level of identity of the different stakeholders with the football team and the university, we used the group identity instrument developed by Heere and James (2007) and later refined by Heere et al., (2011a). To assess the appropriateness of the instrument in this particular context, the researchers examined the internal consistency of the scales, following the guidelines of Lance, Butts, and Michels (2006). For both team identity and university identity, the Cronbach's Alphas for each of the dimensions of identity exceeded the threshold value of .8. Finally, all stakeholder groups were asked about their consumption behavior towards the football team through single item measures and asked if they were planning to attend games for the upcoming season, and how much money they spent on merchandise over the last 12 months.

### Data Analysis

The 7-point Likert scale used to assess the group identities was based on a disagree-agree continuum, which means that if a particular score is below four (the mid-point), a respondent disagreed with the statement. To address the first research question, a percentage point was calculated that demonstrated what part of the sample agreed or disagreed with the statements reflecting the dimension. All scores from 1 to 4 were deemed to 'disagree' to experiencing that dimension.

Scores above 4 were deemed to agree. To address the second research question, descriptive statistics were calculated for the three groups (students, faculty/staff, and alumni) along the dimensions of team and university identity. Consequently, MANOVAs were used to determine differences between the groups on all dimensions of both University and Team identification. To control for type I errors, a post hoc Bonferroni adjustment was performed within each MANOVA. Follow up ANOVAs were performed to determine specific differences between the groups.

To address the third research question, multiple regressions were conducted to determine how team identity responses were predictive of variance in university identity dimensions. Since this study was the first research to explore identity through the individual dimensions independently, an exploratory approach was utilized, incorporating each dimension of university identity individually as the dependent variable with all of the team identity dimensions serving as independent variables. For the fourth research question, a similar exploratory approach was taken to explore how predictive both the team and university dimensions were of various consumer behaviors. The various consumer behaviors served as the dependent variables with each of the dimensions of team identity serving as independent variables. The same procedure was then followed replacing the dimensions of team identity with the dimensions of university identity.

## Results

A majority of the respondents provided a disagreement score for four of the six team identity dimensions. The only two dimensions that received a majority of agreement scores were the dimensions of private and public evaluation (Table 3). This sharply contrasts with the scores for the dimensions of university identity, which were all well above the point of indifference. The difference in how respondents viewed team identity and university identity also becomes apparent through the mean scores (Table 4). For four of the team identity dimensions, the average score was below the agreement value of four.

**Table 3**

*Percentage of Respondents that Agree with Statements Toward Team and University Identity*

| Identity constructs | Percentage of respondents that agree they experience this team identity process | Percentage of respondents that agree they experience this university identity process |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Private evaluation  | 72.4%                                                                           | 72.5%                                                                                 |
| Public evaluation   | 66.4%                                                                           | 84%                                                                                   |
| Interconnection     | 37.8%                                                                           | 67.7%                                                                                 |
| Interdependence     | 24.1%                                                                           | 64.9%                                                                                 |
| Behav. involvement  | 31.2%                                                                           | 66.1%                                                                                 |
| Cognitive awareness | 38.5%                                                                           | 78.2%                                                                                 |

We then examined the differences in identity among the different stakeholder groups. Using Pillai's trace, there were significant differences between the groups in respect to the dependent variables  $V=3.59$ ,  $F(24,5868)=53.57$ ,  $p<.01$ . Follow up ANOVAs were used to indicate group differences (see Table 4). In dimensions of team identity, alumni appeared to be the most positive about the new football team with significantly higher scores on private (higher than both) and public evaluation (higher than students), interconnection of self with group (higher than faculty/staff) and cognitive awareness (higher than students). Faculty/staff were more positive than students, in their public evaluation as well as cognitive awareness. There were no significant differences between stakeholder groups in regard to sense of interdependence and behavioral involvement ( $p>.05$ ). Students felt a stronger sense of interconnection than faculty and staff. The assessment of the dimensions of university identity showed the faculty/staff to be the most positive, with significantly higher scores for private and public evaluation, behavioral involvement and cognitive awareness, while students felt the strongest about their interconnection with the university. The alumni evaluated their identity with the university the lowest. Only in public evaluation did they score significantly higher than students.

**Table 4**  
*MANOVA Analysis of Group Differences*

|                     | Students (S)<br>(n=1331) | Faculty/Staff<br>(FS)<br>(n=609) | Alumni (A)<br>(n=1007) | Differences between<br>groups at<br>the $p = .05$ level |
|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Team                | Mean (SD)                | Mean (SD)                        | Mean (SD)              |                                                         |
| Private evaluation  | 5.00 (2.00)              | 4.94 (1.87)                      | 5.40 (1.66)            | A > S, FS                                               |
| Public evaluation   | 4.65 (1.57)              | 4.83 (1.41)                      | 4.89 (1.24)            | FS, A > S                                               |
| Interconnection     | 3.53 (1.84)              | 3.24 (1.66)                      | 3.71 (1.62)            | S, A > FS                                               |
| Interdependence     | 2.93 (1.76)              | 2.94 (1.73)                      | 2.83 (1.60)            | None                                                    |
| Behav. involvement  | 3.22 (1.81)              | 3.39 (1.75)                      | 3.15 (1.71)            | None                                                    |
| Cognitive awareness | 3.38 (1.67)              | 3.72 (1.59)                      | 3.69 (1.60)            | FS, A > S                                               |
| University          | Mean (SD)                | Mean (SD)                        | Mean (SD)              |                                                         |
| Private evaluation  | 5.83 (1.26)              | 6.02 (1.00)                      | 5.95 (0.99)            | FS > S                                                  |
| Public evaluation   | 5.21 (1.30)              | 5.44 (1.11)                      | 5.43 (1.06)            | FS, A > S                                               |
| Interconnection     | 4.79 (1.57)              | 4.61 (1.44)                      | 4.57 (1.42)            | S > FS, A                                               |
| Interdependence     | 5.00 (1.47)              | 5.16 (1.45)                      | 3.71 (1.56)            | S, FS > A                                               |
| Behav. involvement  | 4.84 (1.62)              | 5.25 (1.22)                      | 3.96 (1.56)            | FS > S > A                                              |
| Cognitive awareness | 4.82 (1.30)              | 5.46 (0.97)                      | 4.86 (1.19)            | FS > S, A                                               |

When addressing the third research question, multiple regression analysis revealed that several team identity dimensions were predictive of the variance within the university identity dimensions for the different stakeholder groups, yet to different extents (see Table 5). In general, team identity explained about 16% to 49% of the variance in the different university identity dimensions. What became apparent from the analysis is that for alumni, there is a much stronger link between university identity and team identity, than for faculty/staff and students.

**Table 5**

*Multivariate Regression Analyses of the Effect of Team Identity on University Identity among the Different Stakeholder Groups*

| University identity dimensions | R <sup>2</sup> Adjusted | Significant team identity predictors at the .05 significance level |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Students</b>                |                         |                                                                    |
| Private evaluation (PREV)      | .335                    | PREV, PUB                                                          |
| Public evaluation (PUB)        | .221                    | PUB                                                                |
| Interconnection (INT)          | .491                    | PREV, INT, SOI                                                     |
| Interdependence (SOI)          | .182                    | INT                                                                |
| Behav. Involvement (BEH)       | .294                    | INT, SOI, BEH                                                      |
| Cognitive awareness (COG)      | .254                    | PREV, PUB, BEH, COG                                                |
| <b>Faculty /Staff</b>          |                         |                                                                    |
| Private evaluation             | .278                    | PREV                                                               |
| Public evaluation              | .254                    | PUB, INT                                                           |
| Interconnection                | .348                    | INT                                                                |
| Interdependence                | .165                    | SOI                                                                |
| Behav. involvement             | .173                    | BEH, COG                                                           |
| Cognitive awareness            | .142                    | COG                                                                |
| <b>Alumni</b>                  |                         |                                                                    |
| Private evaluation             | .361                    | PREV, PUB, INT                                                     |
| Public evaluation              | .238                    | PUB                                                                |
| Interconnection                | .472                    | INT, SOI                                                           |
| Interdependence                | .416                    | PREV, INT, SOI                                                     |
| Behav. involvement             | .450                    | PREV, BEH, COG                                                     |
| Cognitive awareness            | .336                    | PREV, BEH, COG                                                     |

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that both team identity and university identity dimensions were able to explain variance in consumer behavior constructs such as home game attendance and merchandise sales. In particular, dimensions such as private evaluation and behavioral involvement were effective predictors of the intention to attend home games and how much team/university related apparel the consumers had bought over the last twelve months.

**Table 6**  
*Consumer Behavior Explained through Team and University Identity Dimensions*

|                      | R2 Adjusted<br>explained by<br>team identity | Dimensions<br>predictive at .05<br>significance level | R2 Adjusted<br>explained by<br>university identity | Dimensions<br>predictive at .05<br>significance level |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Students</i>      |                                              |                                                       |                                                    |                                                       |
| Home game            | .611                                         | PUB, INT,<br>PREV, BEH                                | .259                                               | PREV, INT, SOI,<br>BEH, COG                           |
| Merchandise sales    | .176                                         | INT, BEH                                              | .099                                               | INT, BEH                                              |
| <i>Faculty/Staff</i> |                                              |                                                       |                                                    |                                                       |
| Home game            | .563                                         | PREV, BEH                                             | .195                                               | PREV, INT, SOI,<br>BEH                                |
| Merchandise sales    | .177                                         | PREV, BEH                                             | .092                                               | PREV, BEH                                             |
| <i>Alumni</i>        |                                              |                                                       |                                                    |                                                       |
| Home Game            | .526                                         | PREV, BEH,<br>COG                                     | .249                                               | PREV, BEH                                             |
| Merchandise sales    | .220                                         | BEH                                                   | .128                                               | PREV, BEH                                             |

## Discussion

This study provides the first insight into the different dimensions of team identity, and the agreement-disagreement percentage scores indicate that the dimensions do not all manifest themselves among the fan base during the initial stages of the newly formed team. By comparing a newly established group (college football team) with an established group (university), it became clear that group identity with a newly formed community starts with the evaluation processes, as these were the only two dimensions that a majority of the stakeholder groups agreed with. This contradicts our previous belief that our psychological connection to the sport team starts with awareness (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). It appears from this data that people are quite comfortable making evaluations toward the team, even though they know little of the team. According to Funk and James, these evaluations (e.g., *I am happy to be fan of the college football team*) should be outcomes of the attraction process that could not occur without awareness. Most likely, our respondents are able to do so, because they have a strong connection to the university and they feel the team represents the university. Because of the symbolic representativeness of the team, the fan skips the awareness stage altogether (Heere & James, 2007).

The comparison of our stakeholder groups did not only show that it was the alumni base who were the most positive about the new football team, it also showed that for this group, team identity had a stronger impact on university identity. For this group, the new college football team was more important to their connection to the university than for the students or faculty and staff. This makes sense, as students and faculty/staff have a more diverse set of avenues available in order to connect with the university and feel more interconnected to the university than alumni. Yet, even between faculty/staff and students there were significant differences in how important team identity was to their identity with the university. For students, the presence of a college football team played a large role in their identity process with the university. That faculty/staff are less enthusiastic about the new college football team seems logical as most of them might still carry a strong identity for the team at the university where they completed their education.

Results indicate that not only is team identity able to explain variance in consumer behavior such as intention to attend games and merchandise sales, but university identity as well. This supports the previous findings of Heere et al. (2011), which indicated a similar model in which both university and team identity affected consumer behavior. Our regression analysis also shed more light upon the difference between asking respondents about their intentions to behave and actual behavior. When respondents were asked whether they were planning to attend a game, they easily agreed and most likely overestimated what would actually turn out to be their actual attendance, while when they were asked about actual purchases they made, they were more realistic. Hence, the impact of identity on merchandise sales seemed to be much lower than on game attendance.

One of the limitations in this study is related to one of the dimensions in team identification, behavioral involvement. One could argue that behavioral involvement in a sport team setting is formed by game attendance and merchandise sales, thus the proposed relationship between team identification and consumer behavior in research question four is somewhat redundant and tapping into the same concept of behavior. We believe this to be partially true as behavior within the group extends beyond game attendance and merchandise sales, and one could easily feel they are behaviorally involved with the team without attending games or buy merchandise. The relatively low impact that behavioral involvement had on these specific consumer behavior patterns supports this view, as well as the fact that other identity dimensions were significant predictors of attendance and merchandise sales.

Another limitation is the low response rate obtained through the Internet survey. While low response rate for an Internet survey is quite common and not surprising for this study, considering the fact that we reached out to the entire population, it might have been that the sample demonstrated some response bias and that the effect of the football team on the university identity is overestimated, because only people interested in the football team might have taken the time to complete the survey.

Finally, this study further increases our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of team identity. Rather than providing a structural analysis of the overall scale as done extensively by Heere and James (2007) and Heere et al. (2011a, 2011b), the authors explore the relationship between the different team identity constructs and related outcomes and are able to further increase our understanding of these processes in the early stages of a new sport team.

### **Managerial Implications**

Despite evidence that suggests that football programs might result in unwanted outcomes for a university (e.g., financial loss), universities across the country are continuing to initiate college football programs. Most of these programs are not founded for financial gains, instead they are meant to build a sense of community among the stakeholders of the university. This study was a first exploration of how a new college football program affects how stakeholders identify with the university. It appeared that each of the different stakeholders has a different way it identifies with the team, and with such information, administrators are more likely to produce effective strategies that appropriately target these specific communities. Alumni are primarily interested in ways to engage with the university and as such play a crucial role in the potential success of the newly developed team.

Additionally, the notion that not only the team identity, but also the university identity plays a significant role in the consumer behavior of the stakeholders is important. It indicates that the university should not only incorporate team-related signage in its marketing strategies, but incorporate the importance of the overall university. For many of their stakeholders, the team is not the focal point of their identity. Instead, they see the team as an instrument to identify with the university.

### **Future Research**

This manuscript was the result of the first stage of a longitudinal study that was initiated with a large public university in the Southwest of the United States. As such, the results in this study served mainly as a baseline for future data collections to build upon. Over the next three years, the same scales will be presented to the different stakeholder groups once a year. These data collections will present more insights on two important questions in sport marketing. First, it will give us a better understanding of how an individual's identity process with a sport team evolves. This first study indicates that the psychological continuum model (PCM) of Funk and James (2001; 2006) might not be appropriate for those settings where the sport team symbolizes a larger community. Future years should present more empirical insights on how the PCM might work in a sport setting when it is tested in a longitudinal study.

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## Management Whitepaper

### Still Undefeated

#### *Exploring the Dimensions of Team Identity among Fans of a New College Football Team*

Bob Heere and Matthew Katz

#### I. Research Problem

The purpose of this paper was to explore issues of team and university identification among fans of a newly created college football program.

This research contains important information regarding not only the psychological effects of a new college football team but also how new fan identity is created across organizational stakeholders. Results indicate that most stakeholders largely disagreed with many of the identity constructs, indicating that the processes of identity formation occur at different points in time. Also, this research explored whether changes in levels of team identification lead to changes in how stakeholders identify with the larger university as well.

This research is designed for all decision makers involved in the intercollegiate athletics. Dozens of schools have publicly stated their intention to implement new college football program in the near future, and our research is especially pertinent for any individuals involved in that decision-making and planning process. Moreover, sports organizations outside of the intercollegiate athletic scene may also benefit from our research, as the findings presented have implications within other levels and structures of organized sport as well.

#### II. Issues

Despite its immense popularity, college athletics is an expensive endeavor that requires substantial subsidies from academic institutions to persevere. In the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), for example, only 23 college athletic programs reported a profit for the 2012 season and the average FBS program received 20% of their total athletic revenue from institutional allocation. In comparison, among schools participating in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), zero institutions reported a profit and the average program required 71% of their revenue to come directly from institutional support. Moreover, since the growth rate in total expenses after the removal of inflation was 9% for FBS and 5% for FCS programs, the future of college sports

appears to be even more financially draining for participating institutions, despite the fact that the number of participating student-athletes remains fairly consistent.

Within the larger realm of intercollegiate sports, there is little doubt that football plays a central role within the economic realities of college sport. While football is consistently the most expensive sport to provide, it is the only athletic program that potentially brings in sufficient money to cover the costs of other collegiate sports and ideally allow universities to operate their programs without any institutional support. In the 2011 season, Louisiana State University (LSU) reported revenues from football alone of nearly \$69 million and University of Texas at Austin almost \$104 million. While these figures represent the idealized image of college sports generating income for the university and surrounding areas, outside of the traditional “powerhouses” in college football the revenue rarely exceed the expenses. When the 2005 University of Utah football team completed an undefeated season, their reported \$4 million profit included \$2.5 million in institutional subsidies and \$3.3 million in student fees). In a more recent example, the University of Connecticut (UConn) reported losses of more than \$1.6 million following their trip to the 2011 Orange Bowl—a game that culminated the most successful FBS season in program history.

Yet, despite this bleak financial picture, academic institutions are investing more and more into college athletics. Data indicate that in 2012, the median growth rate of athletic spending was 4.4% higher than the median increase in overall institutionally expenses for FBS schools and 3% higher for FCS institutions. Moreover, research has identified 37 schools that added or were planning to add a new football program between 2004 and 2014. The rationale behind these decisions to add expensive football programs is the belief that football serves as the flagship of the athletic department and better attracts the attention of the students, local community, and media better than any other athletic or academic program. Furthermore, football is often viewed as one of the few instruments through which an academic institution can invoke a sense of community among students, alumni, and other stakeholders. However, the proposition that college athletics, and football in particular, can increase sense of community within the university has yet to be validated through empirical research.

Therefore, this paper serves to explore the development of both team and university identities, both stakeholders of a new college football team. More specifically, this research explores the dimensions of identity prior to the playing of the first game for a number of reasons. First, examining a team before its first season allows our results to be independent of the on-field successes or failures of the team. Since new teams often struggle to compete with existing organizations examining the impact of a new team before the common struggles of newcomers was viewed as an appealing research opportunity. Second, this research was also designed to serve as a baseline for a larger longitudinal study in the coming seasons. As such, it was imperative to establish levels of identification and sense of

community before the first season in order to properly gauge how these constructs evolved once the team started playing. And finally, since starting a new team often requires several years of planning and organizing prior to a program's first game, understanding the impact on university stakeholders prior to the first game can produce valuable results for university administrators of institutions creating new teams in the future.

### III. Summary

Our results indicated that a majority of the respondents provided a disagreement score for four of the six team identity dimensions. The only two dimensions that received a majority of agreement scores were the dimensions of private and public evaluation. This sharply contrasts with the scores for the dimensions of university identity, which were all well above the point of indifference. The difference in how respondents viewed team identity and university identity also becomes apparent through the mean scores, where for four of the team identity dimensions, the average score was below the agreement value of four.

We then examined the differences in identity among the different stakeholder groups. In dimensions of team identity, alumni appeared to be the most positive about the new football team with significantly higher scores on private (higher than both) and public evaluation (higher than students), interconnection of self with group (higher than faculty/staff) and cognitive awareness (higher than students). Faculty/staff were more positive than students, in their public evaluation as well as cognitive awareness. There were no significant differences between stakeholder groups in regard to sense of interdependence and behavioral.

Moreover, students felt a stronger sense of interconnection than faculty and staff. The assessment of the dimensions of university identity showed the faculty/staff to be the most positive, with significantly higher scores for private and public evaluation, behavioral involvement and cognitive awareness, while students felt the strongest about their interconnection with the university. The alumni evaluated their identity with the university the lowest. Only in public evaluation did they score significantly higher than students.

Next, results indicated that several team identity dimensions were predictive of the change within the university identity dimensions for the different stakeholder groups, yet to different extents. In general, team identity explained about 16% to 49% of the variance in the different university identity dimensions. What became apparent from the analysis is that for alumni, there is a much stronger link between university identity and team identity, than for faculty/staff and students.

Finally, results indicated that both team identity and university identity dimensions were able to explain variance in consumer behavior constructs such as home game attendance and merchandise sales. In particular, dimensions such as private evaluation and behavioral involvement were effective predictors of the intention to attend home games and how much team/university related apparel the consumers had bought over the last 12 months.

#### IV. Analysis

This study provides the first insight into the different dimensions of team identity and the agreement-disagreement percentage scores indicate that the dimensions do not all manifest themselves among the fan base during the initial stages of the newly formed team. By comparing a newly established group (college football team) with an established group (university) it became clear that group identity with a newly formed community starts with the evaluation processes as these were the only two dimensions that a majority of the stakeholder groups agreed with. This contradicts with our previous belief that our psychological connection to the sport team starts with awareness. It appears from this data that people are quite comfortable making evaluations towards the team, even though they know little of the team. Prior research has indicated that these evaluations (e.g., I am happy to be fan of the college football team) should be outcomes of the attraction process that could not occur without awareness. Most likely, our respondents are able to do so, because they have a strong connection to the university and they feel the team represents the university. Because of the symbolic representativeness of the team, the fan skips the awareness stage altogether.

The comparison of our stakeholder groups did not only show that it was the alumni base who were the most positive about the new football team, it also showed that team identity was most predictive of university identity indicating that for this group the new college football team was more important to their connection to the university. This makes sense as students and faculty/staff have a more diverse set of avenues available in order to connect with the university and feel more interconnected to the university than alumni. Yet, even between faculty/staff and students there were significant differences in how important team identity was to their identity with the university. For students, the presence of a college football team played a large role in their identity process with the university. That faculty/staff are less enthusiastic about the new college football team seems logical as most of them might still carry a strong identity for the team at the university where they completed their education.

Finally, results indicate that not only team identity is able to explain variance in consumer behavior such as intention to attend games and merchandise sales, but university identity as well. Our results also shed more light upon the difference between asking respondents about their intentions to behave, and actual behavior. When respondents were asked whether they were planning to attend a game, they easily agreed and most likely overestimated what would actually turn out to be their actual attendance, while when they were asked about actual purchases they made, they were more realistic. Hence, the impact of identity on merchandise sales seemed to be much lower than on game attendance.

#### V. Discussion/Implications

Despite evidence that suggests that football programs might result in unwanted outcomes for a university (e.g., financial loss), universities across the country

are continuing to initiate college football programs. Most of these programs are not founded for financial gains, instead they are meant to build a sense of community among the stakeholders of the university. This study was a first exploration of how a new college football program affects how stakeholders identify with the university. It appeared that each of the different stakeholders have different ways they identify with the team, and with such information, administrators are more likely to produce effective strategies that appropriately target these specific communities. Alumni are primarily interested in ways to engage with the university and as such play a crucial role in the potential success of the newly developed team.

Additionally, the notion that not only the team identity, but also the university identity plays a significant role in the consumer behavior of the stakeholders is important. It indicates that the university should not only incorporate team related signage in their marketing strategies, but incorporate the importance of the overall university. For many of their stakeholders, the team is not the focal point of their identity. Instead, they see the team as an instrument to identify with the university.