

EXAMINATION ON THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG  
SCHOOL IDENTIFICATION, TEAM IDENTIFICATION,  
AND SPORT CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR OF  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT**

The purposes of the current study were to find the significance of school identification among university students and its relations with team identification, current sport consumption and donation intention. In order to examine the purposes, the quantitative research method was used. Among a potential population of one university students, questionnaires were distributed to American college students by a convenient sampling with 140 valid respondents (76 males, and 64 females). The questionnaire primarily included four scales: School identification (16 items), team identification (4 items), current sport consumption (11 items), and intention to donate (4 items). The results demonstrated the importance of school identification through team identification in realizing university students' current sport consumption behavior and future donation intention. Specifically, team identification fully mediated the relationships 1) between school identification and current sport consumption (i.e., sport media and merchandise consumption), and 2) between school identification and donation intention. In conclusion, athletic teams for a university play important roles to help promote the school and acquire the financial support.

**Key words:** school identification, team identification, sport consumption, donation intention, university students

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## Introduction

University students' sport consumption research has used and found various important relating factors such as impulse buying (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002), socialization (Casper & Menefee, 2010), perceived brand quality (Pyun, Kwon, & Lee, 2011) and watching motivation (Gau, James, & Kim, 2009). The current study focused examining the effect of university students' school identification on their sport consumption levels through their team identification. School identification was importantly studied by researchers in the areas of education research (Voelkl, 1997) and education psychology (Finn, 1992) because of the problem in education, "the emotional and physical withdrawal of many students from school" (Voelkl, 1997, p. 294). However, sport management researchers have not examined school identification sufficiently and have not adequately defined it. As an example in the field of sport marketing research, a study done by Bass, Gordon, and Kim (2012) proposed a conceptual framework for university identification. Especially, Bass and his associates were interested in finding the antecedents that contribute to university identification. Because of the lack of school identification research in sport marketing and use the construct for the collegiate sport marketing research particularly, the authors of this study would like to find the practical relations among school identification, team identification, and sport consumption of university students.

More specifically, the current study was designed in investigating university students' sport media consumption and sport merchandise consumption as measuring their current sport consumption levels, and also included university students' intentions to donate money as measuring their future sport consumption levels. Including the current and future sport consumption levels mean not only a short-term outcome through their university and athletic experience, but a long-term school-related outcome that could be importantly developed into students' loyalty and their relations with university as well. Thus, the purposes of the current study were to find the role of school identification among university students and its relations with team identification and sport consumption.

## Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

Not surprisingly, many researchers in sport marketing (Heere & James, 2007; Gau, James, & Kim, 2009; Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997) confirmed that sport team

identification has a positive impact on sport consumers' behavior. Our conceptual framework includes team identification in the middle of the relationship between school identification and the three sport consumption variables (i.e., sport media consumption, sport merchandise consumption, intention to donate). The authors of the current study propose that school identification would be positively correlated with university students' sport consumption and there might be integration between school identification and university sport team identification. Specifically, we plan to examine both university students' current consumption levels in the intercollegiate sport and their future consumption expectation (i.e., intention to donate for the athletic department).

### School Identification

As we already introduced, Bass and associates (2012) defined university (School) identification as "the bond and association one has with a university or college attended." School identification is a student's belongingness with and openness to a school. Some educational research scholars (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) found the positive relationship between students' identification with school and levels of academic performance and engagement.

In education research, Voelkl (1996) developed an instrument to measure the degree to which students identify with school and examined if there are gender and race differences in the extent to which they identify with school. Interestingly, Voelkl (1996) found that female students showed higher degrees of identification with school than did male students. Additional result was African American students exhibited higher degrees of school identification than did White students. Additionally, Fletcher (2009) examined and found the benefits to class size reduction on participation in school activities and school identification. He mentioned critical suggestions from his study. For example, class size reduction programs increase some aspects of school participation of students, importantly including participation in sport. Moreover, Ma (2003) suggests that student participation in school activities may be one of the most important keys to students' sense of belonging in school (i.e., school identification).

Thus, the role of athletic games and/or athletic-related events can be used for positively developing student school identification. Importantly, Voelkl (1997) mentioned that school identification has been found to be related to vital school outcomes. Some outcome examples could be student interests and support on athletics and their consumption on school sport as a

result of high identification with school. She also addressed, “theoretical perspectives suggest that components of identification with school are related to in-school learning behaviors” as well (p. 297). Thus, school administrators should develop a good strategy in order to increase their students’ identification level with school. Examples included well-planned orientation programs for new students, invitation of students and their parents to campus, academic guest speakers’ series, support on student organizations, and sporting events.

### Team Identification

Team identification is defined as “the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport [team]” (Sutton et al., 1997, p. 15). Highly identified fans would form psychological connection with a team, think of themselves part of the team, and feel vicarious achievement when the team performs well. Individuals characterized with high team identification would be more involved with a team, and have high expectations for consumption-related behaviors such as the investment of time and money in following the team (Sutton et al., 1997; Gau, James, & Kim, 2009; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005).

Interestingly, Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, and Henriksen (1993) found that team identification was positively correlated with academic success of university students. Wann and Robinson III (2002) also significantly addressed Schurr and associates’ research hypothesis: “Students attending their university’s men’s basketball games would benefit from the social integration of attendance. The consequence was thought to be a better peer network from which better academic performance could arise” (p. 37). Recently, Gray and Wert-Grace (2012) found that sport behavioral intentions (e.g., in-person attendance intention, purchase of team merchandise intention, and media-based attendance intention) of university students were directly influenced by their team identification.

### Current Sport Consumption

In the current study, sport media consumption includes print media such as newspaper, posters, and advertisement and electronic media such as television, athletic department website, school website, and cell phone. Sport merchandise consumption includes non-clothing items, clothing items, wearing on a regular basis, and wearing in game days. To examine university students’ current sport consumption, we included both sport media consumption and sport merchandise

consumption. They are typical methods used by sport fans to follow sports in the U.S. College students in the current study are expected to spend their consuming on their school sport teams and games by the same preferred ways.

Especially, consuming sport by electronic media is getting more popular and comfortable because of an advantage of accessing sport content online. Watching sport content online through websites and applications makes consumers spending and consuming sports more frequently and easily. An important aspect of electronic sport consumption nowadays is consuming sport via various social networking platforms (See Global Sports Media Consumption Report 2013). Social media has been truly a main focus in sport. Sport marketers have to think more analytically about how they can use social media to help sport fans get better sport (game) experience. University students are particularly active on using social network service in order to access sport content and communicate with their peers.

In addition to sport media consumption, university students' sport merchandise (e.g., team licensed merchandise) consumption is also considered as a critical contribution to their sport consumption in general. University branding strategies and implementation of purchasing license rights are quite common businesses. Consequently, the two behavioral measures, sport media consumption and sport merchandise consumption, were used to examine university students' current sport consumption on their university athletics. Importantly, the media impact studies of sport events were undertaken by sport scholars (Swart, Linley, & Bob, 2013). They highly considered the significance of media consumption patterns and levels of sport consumers. On the other hand, sport scholars noticed consumer spending on merchandise (Kelley, Harrolle, & Casper, 2014), and attempted to examine the purchase drivers of merchandise sales (O'Reilly, Foster, Murray, & Shimizu, 2015) or factors that trigger the consumption of team merchandise (Lee & Trail, 2012).

### Future Donation Intention

To examine university students' future sport consumption, we included a variable named intention to donate. In fact, for universities, their alumni' financial and affective support on their athletic departments is one of the most important university and its athletic program management success keys. Turner and Chelladurai (2005) already found that intercollegiate athletics has

grown immensely during the past decade because of big alumni support. There was an increasing interest in intercollegiate athletics along with the significant recognition and understanding in considering alumni donations. Thus, we consider future donation intention as the critical outcome variable in this study.

For example, Clotfelter (2003) found that participation in university athletics is positively correlated with following giving toward the university. Several other scholars (Frank, 2004; Humphreys & Mondello, 2007) examined the positive relationship between intercollegiate athletic success and donations. Similarly, Goff (2000) addressed that athletic success can produce financial benefits, including increased donations by stakeholders such as alumni and season ticket holders. Frederick (1984) already found that universities with unproductive athletic programs (i.e., American football) had the lowest percentage of alumni contribution in their annual fund events. It is true that there is a great deal of university consideration and plans on making revenues from alumni donors especially throughout their intercollegiate athletics.

#### Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

As we already addressed, the purposes of the current study were to find the role of school identification among university students and its relations with team identification and sport consumption. Particularly, we wanted to examine how school identification could influence team identification, and then figure out how different levels of school identification could be favorably or unfavorably related to college students' current and future sport consumption levels through team identification.

Based on balance theory (Heider, 1958), when a person has a positive (or negative) attitude toward a "unit" (for example, a school), the person will have a similar attitude toward what is associated with the unit (for example, the school's athletic team). Parker and Fink (2010) also defined Heider's balance theory (1958) as "individuals strive to maintain a sense of balance in their lives, and that people's actions, beliefs and judgments are influenced by the need to preserve such balance" (p. 202). Otherwise, imbalance or cognitive dissonance would occur (Gau & Kim, 2011; Heider, 1958; Woodside & Chebat, 2001).

Balance theory is applied to explain the relationship among a university, its athletic team, and its students. It is hypothesized (H 1) that school identification levels lead to a positive relationship

with its (sport) team identification. The team identification would then contribute to the team-related consumption and donation as a behavioral demonstration in following the team (Sutton et al., 1997; Gau, James, & Kim, 2009). The behavior of media consumption, merchandise consumption, and intention to donate money for the athletic department is all related to the team and the school. When the media broadcasts the team's game, the school's name would be frequently mentioned by the broadcasters. The merchandise logo is possibly the team's name or the school's name. The donation to the athletic department is likely considered part of school financial sources as a whole. Therefore, this study proposed that higher school identification levels lead to higher media and merchandise consumption (H 2.1), and higher donation intention levels (H 2.2) partly through the team identification (H 3.1 and H 3. 2). That is, the team identification partly mediated the relationships between school identification and sport media and merchandise consumption, and between school identification and donation intention (H 4) (See FIGURE 1).

< **Insert Figure 1** >

Thus, the importance of the current research is to examine the roles of university students' identification with their universities and their athletic teams. Further, the authors are interested in finding causes on students' sport consumption behavior.

## **Methodology**

### Measurement

The scale of school identification developed and used by researchers (Goodenow, 1993; Voelkl, 1996) had 16 questions (10 items regarding feelings of belongingness in school; 6 items regarding feelings of valuing school and school-related outcomes). Four of the 16 questions were reverse questions. We re-code the responses of the four items so that high scores indicate high identification. The scale of team identification (James & Ross, 2002) included 4 questions. The scale of sport media and merchandise consumption had originally 7 questions (3 media consumption-related and 4 merchandise consumption-related) derived from James and Ross (2004) and 4 additional sport media consumption-related questions generated and reviewed by the authors in order to include various media consumption styles. Additional questions are, "I read about the [team name] in the weekly university newspaper sport pages; I read about the

[team name] on the sport-related websites; I use my cellphone to get information about the [team name]; I am interested in the posters or advertisements about the [team name]. So, there were totally 11 questions measuring current sport consumption. The scale of intention to donate (i.e., future sport consumption) had 4 questions (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). One of the four questions was reverse questions and we re-code the responses of this question so that high scores indicate high intention (See TABLE 1)

### <Insert Table 1>

#### Cronbach Alphas

All of the items used seven-point Likert scales. For school identification, team identification, and donation intention, respondents answered between “1 strongly disagree” and “7 strongly agree.” As for sport media and merchandise consumption, respondents answered items by choosing “1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = sometimes, 5 = often, 6 = nearly always, or 7 = always.” The reliabilities, Cronbach Alphas, of the five scales were between 0.84 and 0.93 (Table 1). Media and merchandise consumption were combined as current sport consumption with an Alpha 0.81. Demographic information was included in the questionnaire.

#### Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed to American college students at a southeastern university taking classes in the department of Health and Human Performance. Although a convenient sampling was used, a potential population is the university students. One of the authors of the current study distributed the questionnaires and finally collected 141 survey data (140 usable; 1 unusable because of incompleteness) from respondents in several undergraduate-level classes (e.g., sport management classes, exercise science classes, and physical education classes) in the department. The sample of 140 surveys is representative of the small university in a southeastern state. Of the responses, 12 were freshmen, 22 were sophomore, 48 were juniors, 56 were seniors, and only 2 graduate students taking a senior-level class. The sample had 76 males, and 64 females, all of whom consented to participate.

## Results

The survey used in this study represents pilot research aimed to understand the relationships among school identification, team identification, and sport consumption behavior of university students. Given the student population at a university, the following results show possible contributions of school and team identification to sport consumption and future donation. The results of the survey offer insight to the case of potential college students.

### Correlation Analysis

The results demonstrated the importance of school identification through team identification in realizing university students' experience outcome (i.e., sport consumption behavior) within the context of university and its athletic programs. The relationship between school and team identification was significant ( $p < .05$ ) and positive ( $r = 0.37$ ). H 1 was supported. School identification was significantly related to sport consumption ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p = .036$ ) and donation intention ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p = .011$ ). H 2.1 and H 2.2 were supported. However, compared to school identification, team identification was more closely related to sport consumption ( $r = 0.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and donation intention ( $r = 0.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Table 2). H 3.1 and H 3.2 were supported.

<Insert Table 2>

### Regression Analysis

An analysis of a regression model with sport (media and merchandise) consumption as the dependent variable and school identification and team identification as the two independent variables showed that only the regression coefficient (0.734,  $p < .001$ ) of team identification was significant. Another regression model which included donation intention as the dependent variable and school and team identification as the two independent variables showed the similar result that only team identification had a significant coefficient (0.651,  $p < .001$ ) (Table 3). These results indicated that the team identification fully mediated the relationships between school identification and sport consumption, and between school identification and donation intention. H4 was partly supported.

## &lt;Insert Table 3&gt;

In the assessment of mediation, four steps were implemented (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The first step examines whether an independent variable, school identification, affects the mediator-team identification in this case ( $r = 0.37, p < .05$ ). The second step examines whether the mediator affects the dependent variable. Team identification was significantly related to sport consumption ( $r = 0.70, p < .001$ ) and donation intention ( $r = 0.64, p < .001$ ). Both of these two conditions were met. The third step examines whether the independent variable affects the dependent variable when the mediator is not included in the model. The results showed that school identification was significantly related to sport consumption ( $r = 0.18, p = .036$ ) and donation intention ( $r = 0.22, p = .011$ ) (Table 2), thus satisfying the third step. The fourth step examines whether the relationship from the independent variable to the dependent variable becomes non-significant (i.e. full mediation) or reduced (i.e. partial mediation) when the mediator is included in the model. The results showed that the coefficients from school identification to sport consumption and to donation intention became non-significant (Table 3), indicating a full mediation of the team identification.

**Discussion**

The finding of this study implies that representative athletic teams for a university play important roles to help promote the school and acquire the financial support. Alumni would transfer their school identification into behavioral sport consumption and donation support if the school had its sport teams for alumni to identify with. Collegiate sport marketers could develop their marketing strategies using university history, university activities, university culture along with athletic logos and their athletes, coaching staff, and graduated players. For example, the university's recognition achieved from their research, academic achievements, and athletic success could collectively impact on their current and future sport consumption level.

Most of the higher education institutions are nowadays experiencing some critical academic issues such as a number of students registered, the graduation rate, and high tuition problems (Selingo, 2013) that also cause less support from their alumni. Thus, their athletic programs could be considered as a serious business partner. The authors of the study stress the importance of understanding on school identification among university students and also the use of athletic

programs for students' identification with school. If a university can provide positive experiences for students during the four years when staying at campus and continue to build good alumni relationships, the university can generate good financial support from sport consumption and donation. University success and athletic success must go intrinsically and strategically together. Their success could produce both high university and team identification level of students. Finally, their high identification could yield both financial and affective benefits.

### Practical Application

This study suggested that university might strategically use athletic programs to increase financial support. On the one way, universities may use their research and academic achievements to enhance their image and school identification; on the other hand, universities may use athletic logos, coaching staff, and athletic success to increase team identification. When the university's positive recognition was combined or extended to its team's identification, this would encourage sport consumption and donation intention.

### **Conclusion**

As Hardin, Koo, Ruihley, Dittmore, and McGreevey (2012) described, "Sport consumers and stakeholders have been examined from myriad of perspectives and have been a main focus of many studies in the sport management and consumer behavior fields" (p. 370). The authors of the current study believe that college students are one of the most important stakeholder groups.

This study concluded two major findings. First, the variance of sport (Media and Merchandise) consumption explained by school and team identification was 50%, while the variance of intention to donate explained by school and team identification was 42%. This indicated that school and team identification played important roles to boost current sport consumption and future donation intention. Second, team identification fully mediated the relationships between school identification and sport (Media and Merchandise) consumption and between school identification and intention to donate. This indicated that the varsity is important to provide a specific target for stakeholders to identify with and experience vicarious achievement. This will further influence sport consumption and donation intention.

This research makes a contribution in the particular field of sport, physical education and recreation. It is recommended that similar studies might be undertaken in the South African context. Based on the results from this pilot study, the intention is to expand this survey and collect data nationally or internationally to further generalize the findings. Future research will involve more colleagues to further distribute the survey across numerous universities to see how trends differ across different universities or if wider findings can be generalized.

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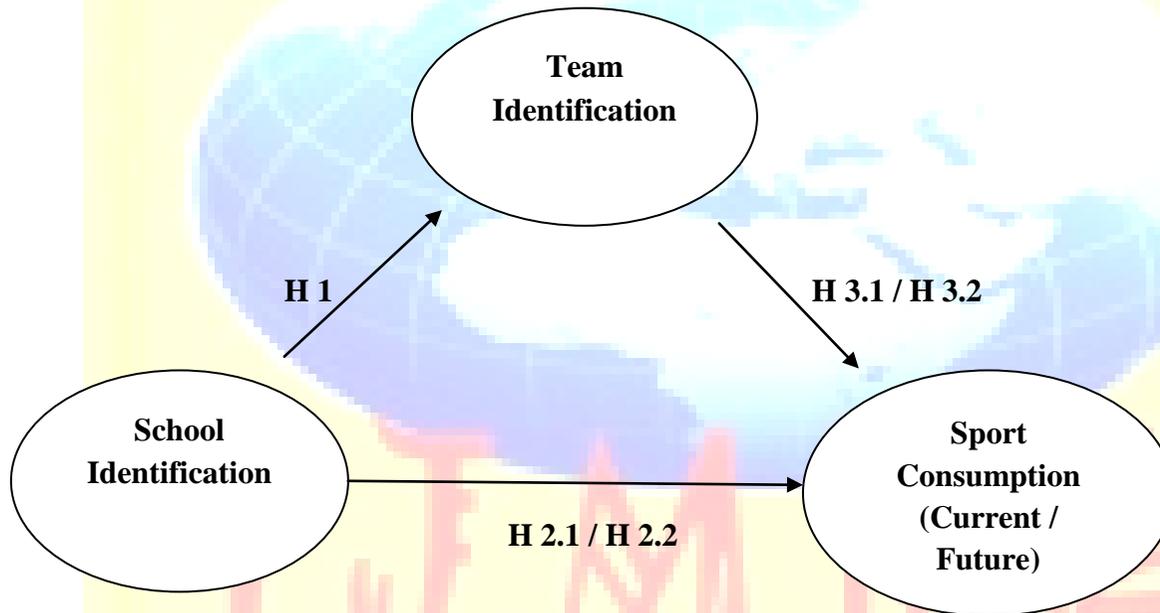
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**Figure 1: A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK BETWEEN SCHOOL IDENTIFICATION AND SPORT CONSUMPTION THROUGH TEAM IDENTIFICATION**



**Table 1: QUESTIONNAIRES**

	M	SD	$\alpha$
<b>School Identification (16 items)</b>			<b>0.84</b>
1. I am proud of ____.	5.75	1.22	
2. I feel that I am treated with respect at ____.	5.78	1.26	
3. I believe ____ is preparing me to get a good job, upon graduation.	5.74	1.33	
4. I actively participate in ____ campus activities.	4.65	1.73	
5. I believe ____ is an important aspect in my life.	5.66	1.38	
6. I feel that the things I learn in my ____ class are useless. (R)	5.48	1.52	
7. I feel that my professors at ____ don't care about my success. (R)	5.91	1.30	
8. I would rather be out of ____.(R)	5.51	1.59	
9. I have professors at ____ that I can go to with my problems.	5.39	1.48	
10. I feel that ____ is useful for getting a job.	5.67	1.30	
11. ____ is one of my favorite places.	4.49	1.68	
12. I feel that I have people at ____ that are interested in me.	5.24	1.48	
13. I feel that college education at ____ is a waste of time. (R)	6.41	1.04	
14. I feel it would be a mistake to drop out of ____.	6.07	1.69	
15. ____ is important to me.	5.70	1.27	
16. I have made close friends here at ____.	5.76	1.61	
<b>Team Identification (4 items)</b>			<b>0.93</b>
1. The _____ is my team.	4.71	1.99	

2. I consider myself a loyal fan of the _____.	4.43	1.84	
3. Supporting the _____ is very important to me.	4.26	1.82	
4. I want others to know that the _____ is my team.	4.17	1.87	
<b>Sport Media Consumption (7 items)</b>			<b>0.92</b>
1. I watch sport broadcasts on the local TV news for information about the _____.	2.98	1.83	
2. I read about the _____ in the daily newspaper sport pages.	2.81	1.81	
3. I read about the _____ in the weekly university newspaper sport pages.	2.89	1.82	
4. I read about the _____ on the athletic department website.	3.28	2.06	
5. I read about the _____ on the sport-related websites.	3.10	1.92	
6. I use my cell phone to get information about the _____.	2.87	2.14	
7. I am interested in the posters or advertisements about the _____.	3.63	1.96	
<b>Sport Merchandise Consumption (4 items)</b>			<b>0.88</b>
1. I purchase the _____ merchandise (non-clothing items).	2.90	1.80	
2. I buy the _____ clothing (T-shirts, caps, etc.).	3.66	2.04	
3. I wear the _____ apparel on a regular basis.	3.84	2.25	
4. I wear the _____ clothing when I attend a game.	4.32	2.38	
<b>Intention to Donate (4 items)</b>			<b>0.85</b>
1. I would like to donate to the _____ athletic department after my graduation.	3.43	1.82	
2. I would not be willing to donate to the _____ athletic department in the future. (R)	4.08	1.93	
3. I would encourage other alumni to donate to the _____ athletic department.	4.21	1.76	
4. I would share with others about the importance of donation to the _____ athletic department.	3.84	1.75	

Notes:  $\alpha$  = Cronbach Alpha. (R) indicates that the item is reverse. We re-code the responses so that high scores indicate high identification.

**Table 2: RESULTS OF CORRELATION ANALYSIS**

	<b>School Identification</b>	<b>Team Identification</b>	<b>Sport Media and Merchandise Consumption</b>
<b>Team Identification</b>	0.369		
p value	<0.001		
<b>Sport Media and Merchandise Consumption</b>	0.180	0.701	
p value	0.034	<0.001	
<b>Intention to Donate</b>	0.223	0.644	0.679
p value	0.008	<0.001	<0.001

**Table 3: RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS**

		<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
Dependent Variable		Sport (Media and Merchandise) Consumption	Intention to Donate
Independent Variable	School Identification	Not significant	Not significant
	Team Identification	0.734, p<.001	0.651, p<.001
F value		67.970	48.711
p value		<.001	<.001
R <sup>2</sup>		0.498	0.416