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# The Relationship of Fans' Sports-Team Identification and Facebook Usage to Purchase of Team Products

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# The Relationship of Fans' Sports-Team Identification and Facebook Usage to Purchase of Team Products

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**Abstract:** Social media has become a regular direct marketing component for sports teams. This study explores the link between team identification and use of a professional sports team's social-media channels. Questions to answer include, Does social media impact identification fans have with a team or vice versa? What does the amount of social-media use do to impact the relationship? Does this activity lead to increased sales of tickets and merchandise? Data collected by an Internet survey of fans of a professional baseball team show a positive relationship between team identification and use of the team's Facebook page as well as to team related purchases. Implications for theorists understanding the role of social media in branding as well as implications for sports marketing are discussed.

## Introduction

Over the past few years, Facebook has emerged as a popular form of new media, with 1.1 billion users worldwide in May 2013 ([Associated Press, 2013](#)), and as a popular marketing tool for brands. Yet marketers have not yet resolved the best approaches to building consumer-brand relationships via social media.

Sports teams have been quick to use Facebook as a means of communication with fans, since new content is fairly easy to generate in season. Hence, Facebook seems to be an efficient and effective way to connect the fan personally to the team or to reinforce that connection. Thus, connecting with a team on Facebook probably has a strong relationship to team identification. Indeed, a survey for social-media usage conducted by Catalyst Public Relations on behalf of *SportsBusiness Journal* in 2011 found that 40% of fans report that social media has made them bigger fans of their respective teams ([Broughton, 2011](#)). These results are consistent with a similar survey conducted by the same entities in 2010, which focused on Major League Baseball (MLB) and National Football League (NFL) fans. The 2010 survey found that 61% of MLB fans and 55% of NFL fans consider themselves bigger fans of the respective leagues since they started following their favorite teams on Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites ([Broughton, 2010](#)). Likewise, over 50% of MLB fans and 43% of NFL fans reported spending more time watching and following their respective leagues now than prior to engaging with their favorite teams via social media ([Broughton, 2010](#)).

Furthermore, a recent study of 8,000 people who had purchased tickets through Ticketmaster found that "social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have shown themselves to be as much as three times more effective in selling tickets than traditional marketing platforms" ([Fisher, 2012, p. 4](#)). Results indicated that ticket purchasers who bought through social-media links purchase tickets "earlier relative to the event date, and spend substantially more per ticket, with an average ticket price of \$82 for social media purchases compared with \$51 for all buyers" ([Fisher, 2012, p. 4](#)). Although those figures included individuals who had purchased tickets to any event via Ticketmaster (e.g., concerts and sporting events), when it comes to

sporting events specifically, the results of the study showed that 14% of those ticket buyers may have been influenced to attend an event by a Facebook post and 49% of attendees at sporting events used social media to discuss their experience and share videos and photos.

Sports marketers could benefit from understanding how different factors can affect an individual's level of team identification. This intelligence could help sports promoters to market more effectively, which could translate into increased team support, which may include ticket sales or sales of team merchandise. Even sponsors of sports teams can benefit, given a 2012 *SportsBusiness Journal* report that shows 78% of a team's Facebook fans have "liked" a brand linked on that site ([Broughton, 2012](#)).

This study explores the associations between fans' team identification, their use of sports-team social media, and their purchase of team products, important links that need more examination in the literature. Team identification is defined as the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team ([Wann, 2006a, p. 332](#)). Questions to answer include, How does fans' use of team social media relate to their identification with a team? Might this activity lead to increased sales of tickets and merchandise? In preparation for addressing these questions, this study will give an overview of [Wann's \(2006a\)](#) team-identification–social-psychological health model.

## **Team-Identification Model**

In his team-identification–social-psychological health model, [Wann \(2006a, p. 332\)](#) defines team identification as "the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team's performances are viewed as self relevant." [Wann \(2006b\)](#) has proposed that although there are many different factors that serve as antecedents to sports-team identification, the three general categories of causes are psychological, environmental, and team related. Psychological factors include the needs for belonging and affiliation, while environmental factors are those such as the socialization process among family members or peers. Team-related factors are those such as organizational characteristics, team performance, and player attributes.

There are several psychological factors that can facilitate team identification, including the individual's need for belonging and affiliation with others and the individual's desire to feel part of distinctive groups and to be associated with something special or unique (Wann, 2006a).

The team-related factors are of particularly great interest to sports marketers as, to some extent, they seem to be the factors over which teams and the sports marketers associated with them can exert some control. Thus, in regard to the first team-related antecedent of organizational characteristics, Wann suggests that teams can facilitate identification by highlighting ownership and the team's reputation and by reminding fans of the rich traditions of the team. However, if a team does not have a rich history, or perhaps has a sullied reputation, sports marketers may not be able to use the organizational characteristics to their advantage.

The second team-related factor is team performance. Wann notes that several studies have found positive associations between team success and fan identification (2006b). However, for sports marketers, team performance is a factor that is beyond their control.

The third team-related factor is player attributes, such as attractiveness and similarity. If a team has players that possess these attributes in some way, then sports marketers may be successful in highlighting those, as they have been shown to influence identification as well. For example, based on a series of studies, Basil and Brown (2004) concluded that effects of a message from an athlete depended on how much the audience member identified with that athlete. In fact, Fisher (1998, p. 283) suggests that similarity is the most important attribute when it comes to group-derived identities and consumption choices, noting that "sports marketers may benefit from emphasizing the similarities between the fans and their teams rather than the attractiveness of the team's players."

All these antecedents are important because once a fan has developed a sense of identification with a particular team, the levels of sports-team identification can be positively associated with social psychological well-being and valuable social connections with others as

well as be related to affective and behavioral responses ([Wann, 2006a](#)).<sup>1</sup>

## **Enduring and Temporary Connections**

According to Wann's model, these social connections can be either enduring or temporary. Enduring connections result from living in an environment in which other fans of the same team are easily identifiable. In this case, one may "gain vital connections to others in their community and a feeling of camaraderie. Subsequently, these persons reap the psychological well-being benefits that accompany their sense of connectedness" ([Wann, 2006b, p. 276](#)). Temporary social connections result when a fan is not residing in this type of enduring environment. An example of this may be a fan who, perhaps due to a move, must support his or her team from another location. In this instance, as Wann points out, "one would not expect these fans to exhibit a positive relationship between their level of identification with the team and social psychological health" ([Wann, 2006b](#)). However, there are instances in which connections can be made, albeit temporary ones. These temporary social connections and subsequent social psychological benefits could present themselves if, for example, one discovers that a group of individuals meets weekly to watch his or her college football team's games or perhaps, as this study is designed to explore, by visiting his or her favorite team's Facebook page and interacting with other fans of the team there.

## **Team Identification and Consumption Behavior**

Team identification elicits behavioral responses in terms of consumption. Because sports marketers are concerned with increasing attendance at sporting events as well as the sale of team-related products and merchandise, the behavioral response of consumption is of particular relevance to this study. The three general categories into which sport consumption can be divided are as follows: game consumption, which involves attendance at sporting events and following a team through media outlets, such as radio, television, newspaper, and now social networking sites; team-related consumption, which involves the purchase of team-related products

and merchandise; and sponsorship consumption, which concerns one's perception and patronage of sponsors' products ([Wann, 2006a](#)).

Wann's model of team identification dovetails nicely with marketing and branding models to show how social media and their relationship to sports teams' identity can lead to behavioral intentions that sports marketers covet. The theory of planned behavior (tpb) ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) and its predecessor, the theory of reasoned action ([Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975](#)), have been applied to purchase decisions and work well for this study. Applied to marketing, tpb suggests that three factors are involved in purchase intentions and, ultimately, behavior: (1) a person's ability to make the purchase—of tickets, for example—and voluntary control over doing so; (2) a person's attitudes favoring his or her purchase of products related to the brand or team; and (3) subjective norms, the perceived social pressures from others to behave in a certain way. Social media can easily be seen as playing a vital role in at least the latter two of these three factors, leading to intended behaviors such as the purchase of tickets, team memorabilia, and other team related merchandise like subscriptions to team magazines or television-channel coverage of the team.

Attitudes toward purchasing products carrying the team brand are likely to already be positive given the emotional investment that is part of strong team identity. Participation in team social media can provide opportunities to strengthen those positive attitudes and reduce the threat of attitude change, since team control of much of the content is likely to provide more positive than negative information for consumption. According to tpb, attitudes toward a behavior such as purchasing are directly influenced by salient *behavioral beliefs* about the behavior (i.e., what the purchaser believes will be the likely outcomes of buying the product and how much he or she values or devalues each of those outcomes). Again, social media can be a contributing factor in raising the salience of such beliefs surrounding the team and its products because of convenient, 24-hour access to team information whenever a team identifier has a question or a doubt about supporting the team. The greater the number of visits to the team's Facebook page and other social-media outlets, the more mere repetition of exposure could bring the team and its products to the forefront of thought and action. As long as users trust the information provided, see it as relevant and credible, these online experiences are

likely to enhance team identity and positive attitudes toward the team brand.

Subjective norms are influenced by social media through the contributions that fellow fans make to online forums. Here, fellow team identifiers often play a cheerleading role in reacting to team trades, player or team performances, or upcoming opponents. Although the commentary is not always positive, often other team identifiers in the forum come to the defense of the team and its players, adding the peer pressure of seeing someone similar in tastes and interests to their own finding the positive qualities in a given situation.

Together, these steps in the theory of planned behavior provide a conceptual framework for explaining how social media can work to build team identity that evolves into purchase behavior that favors sports teams with strong team identification. Several studies have looked at social-media use and team identification or purchase intent, but few have put the two together and almost none in the context of sports products.

Prendergast, Ko, and Yuen (2010) found that positive attitudes toward products resulted from participating in online product forums, because participants found comfort among others with similar interests and this similarity coincided with trust and credibility in the information that led to heightened persuasion. The researchers also found the length of participation in the forum was connected to participant bonding and further enhanced the attitude toward the product and intentions to buy. Although this study used mall intercept surveys rather than an experiment and general products rather than specific brands, the similarities to how social media can affect team identity and ultimately purchases related to the team are helpful to predict the findings here.

In 2002 Kwon and Armstrong conducted a study using college students to determine the factors that contribute to the impulse purchases of sports team-licensed merchandise. In examining the students' level of shopping enjoyment, their level of identification with the university's sports team, their time availability, and their money availability, the results indicated that of these variables "the only significant antecedent to impulse buying of sport team licensed

merchandise was the students' identification with the university's sport team" (p. 151). Likewise, identification also influenced the amount of money spent on these purchases. This led the researchers to conclude that "sport in particular may be a different, yet a symbolic product with characteristics that promote consumer identification" (p. 160); and thus, the researchers stress the importance of promoting identification and suggest that marketers would benefit from employing strategies to aid in increasing team identification, thereby increasing the likelihood of their purchase behavior.

In addition to Kwon and Armstrong's (2002) research, several studies have shown that team identification is an important predictor of attending, viewing, and listening to sporting events (Fisher, 1998; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Wann, Bayens, & Driver, 2004; Wann, Martin, Grieve, & Gardner, 2008). Likewise, a study conducted by Laverie and Arnett (2000, p. 238) noted that "it is important for sports marketers to take actions that enhance fans' situational involvement, enduring involvement, and attachment." In addition, they concluded that sports marketers must pay attention to identity salience, as those "for whom a 'fan' identity is salient will be more likely to attend games, regardless of their level of satisfaction" (p. 240).

Further, in an article featured in *SportsBusiness Journal*, Wendkos (2011, p. 13) suggests, "To increase identification with the sports fan behavioral role, franchises must increase the total number of people that their fans interact with when occupying the sports fan behavior role and strengthen the relationships with these other people." To do this, Wendkos suggests that franchises create an environment where fans can meet and interact with each other and foster a sense of community.

Social-networking sites such as Facebook seem to provide natural opportunities for individuals to become more affiliated and involved with a team, and they are easily controlled by sports marketers. Thus, it would serve the sports marketer well to examine the role that Facebook plays, if any, in meeting these needs, thereby facilitating team identification and increased behavioral consumption.

According to a report on Mashable (O'Dell, 2011), social customer relationship management specialists at Get Satisfaction—an

online community software provider to more than 63,000 companies ranging from small businesses to Fortune 500 companies, including Microsoft, Procter and Gamble, and FourSquare—conducted a study of why consumers follow brands on social-networking sites. Among the results, they found that, for Facebook, primary reasons people follow brands are to seek interesting or entertaining content; service, support, or product news; or special offers or deals. Other reasons are that the individuals are current customers of the brand or have friends that are fans of the brand. Additional data from the survey suggests that online experiences directly relate to behavioral consumption, as 97% indicated that an “online experience has influenced whether or not one has purchased a product or a service from a brand” (O’Dell, 2011, infographic). To the extent that a team’s Facebook page is found to be a tool that leads to an increase in team identification, teams could potentially see an increase in television viewership, ticket sales, and merchandise sales by increasing their following on the social-networking site.

Thus, as stated previously, this study will help sports marketers understand the relationship that Facebook has with team identification and how this information can potentially be translated into increased ticket sales or sales of team merchandise by exploring the correlations between team Facebook-page use, team identification, and behavioral consumption.

## **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The following research questions and hypotheses were tested given the literature above.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the relationships of intended and past use of the professional baseball team Facebook page with professional baseball team identification?

Previous studies have indicated that fans of a team have reported becoming bigger fans after having connected with that team on Facebook. Thus, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a positive correlation between the intention to visit the professional baseball team's Facebook page and levels of team identification with the professional baseball team.

H<sub>2</sub>: Fans who have visited (connected with) the team Facebook page will have higher levels of identification with that team than those who have not visited the team Facebook page.

In addition, it is also possible that the amount of interaction one has with the professional baseball team's Facebook page has an effect on team identification, leading to suppose the following:

H<sub>3</sub>: Fans who have been more active in connecting with the professional baseball team on Facebook (i.e., those who have higher levels of previous engagement) will have higher levels of team identification than those who are less active in their connection with the team on Facebook.

Although it will not be employed or tested directly in this study, Azjen's tpb (1991) nonetheless gives a plausible conceptual framework to expect that high team identification developed with the help of social-media participation would lead to positive attitudes toward purchasing the team brand that would, in turn, lead to behavior intentions to purchase team products, whether those are tickets or team merchandise. Thus, a second research question forms:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the relationships of professional baseball team identification and team Facebook usage with purchasing behavior of professional baseball team products?

## **Method**

A random-sampling procedure was used to draw names from the professional baseball team's database of registered users, a list comprised of people who have opted in to receive e-mails from the team in the past. Being registered does not mean that the users have necessarily attended games or consumed merchandise in the past; however, these users are people who have already identified with the professional baseball team on some level, as they have opted in to receive e-mails from the team. In addition, because the group surveyed had opted to receive e-mails from the team, it was known

that this group does indeed have e-mail addresses, and thus, one could assume that they have access to the Internet and, by extension, access to Facebook and then the professional baseball team's Facebook page. This team has about 600,000 Facebook followers and about 137,000 followers on Twitter. Although this pales in comparison to the top team in baseball with over 6 million followers, it is not atypical of other teams in markets of comparable size.

The individuals selected were also within the primary media market for the professional baseball team organization and live within easy traveling distance of the team's ballpark and, hence, could ostensibly have reasonably easy access to attending games and purchasing merchandise.

A 10-minute online questionnaire was administered in mid-March of 2012 using the professional baseball team's preferred survey vendor of choice, Turnkey Surveyor. The goal was to obtain at least 100 of the 300 desired responses as having been to the professional baseball team Facebook page in the past. (It was important to this study to achieve a large enough sample of individuals who had actually been to the professional baseball team Facebook page in order to be able to compare their responses with those who had not.) A probability sample of 3,000 e-mail addresses was used. Of the 571 respondents (19% of original mailing), 179 (31.3%) indicated that they had visited the professional baseball team Facebook page in the past.

## **Measures**

The first seven questions of the questionnaire consisted of Wann's Sport Spectator Identification Scale, adapted for the specific professional baseball team. These questions were administered in random order to the respondents and were designed to measure an individual's level of team identification. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .83.

All respondents were asked how often they expect to visit the professional baseball team's Facebook page in the future (Intention,  $H_1$ ), how often they had visited in the past (Connected,  $H_2$ ), and the extent of their involvement with the team's page, specifically,

participating in contests, polls, blogs, uploading photos (More active, H<sub>3</sub>).

Among other measures in the questionnaire, respondents were also asked about their plans for game attendance in the future and their frequency of past and future merchandise purchase. Reliabilities ranged from .80 to .95 for these scales. Analyses were conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Demographic questions included sex, age, and income. Noteworthy demographic findings were that women ( $m = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $n = 233$ ) were slightly more likely than men ( $m = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $n = 338$ ) to say they intended to visit the team Facebook page in the upcoming season ( $t_{569} = 5.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Women ( $m = 3.14$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) were also slightly more likely than men ( $m = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) to purchase team merchandise ( $t_{569} = 2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In terms of age, younger fans were more likely than the older to plan to visit the team Facebook page,  $r(571) = -.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ; purchase team merchandise,  $r(571) = -.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and identify with the team,  $r(571) = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . The fan's income had a small negative relationship with his or her plans to visit the team Facebook page,  $r(571) = -.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , although this relationship may be largely explained by the age and sex of the fan, partial  $r(567) = -.08$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, sex, age, and income were used as covariates in the analyses to follow.

## Results

Previous research suggested that use of a professional baseball team Face-book page might be related to stronger identification with the team. Thus, the first research question asked, "What are the relationships of intended and past use of the professional baseball team Facebook page with professional baseball team identification?" Since this study did not allow tracking respondents across time to see whether their intention to visit the professional baseball team Facebook page is fulfilled by actual behavior and if therefore they develop or strengthen their identification with the team, directionality could not be established. Instead, this study used intention to visit the professional baseball team Facebook page.

Previous studies have indicated that fans of a team have reported becoming bigger fans after having connected with that team on Facebook. Thus, by using Wann's team-identification-social-psychological health model (2006b), it was expected that connecting with a team via Facebook helps fulfill the needs and motives for fans, therefore resulting in greater sports-team identification. Specifically, hypothesis  $h_1$  proposed that there would be a positive correlation between the intention to visit the professional baseball team Facebook page and levels of identification with the professional baseball team. Using a third-order partial correlation controlled for sex, age, and income, this hypothesis was supported, partial  $r(566) = .30, p < .001$ , meaning that the more frequently one intends to visit the professional baseball team Facebook page in the future, the higher his or her level of team identification.

$H_2$  proposed that fans who have already visited the team Facebook page will have higher levels of identification with that team than those who have not visited the page. Using the SPSS general linear model (GLM), an analysis of variance with sex, age, and income as the covariates was conducted. This hypothesis ([Table 1](#)) was also supported ( $f_{2,565} = 27.93, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .09$ ). Notably, those who are unsure if they have been to the professional baseball team's Facebook page fall approximately in the middle between those who have and those who have not been to the page.

Furthermore, it is also possible that the amount of active involvement one has with the professional baseball team Facebook page might be associated with team identification. Thus  $h_3$  proposed that fans who were more active in connecting with the professional baseball team on Facebook would have higher levels of team identification than those who are less active in their connection with the team on Facebook. This hypothesis was supported. Third-order partial correlation, controlling for sex, age, and income, found a significant positive relationship between team identification and how involved one is with the professional baseball team Facebook page, partial  $r(174) = .35, p < .001$ .

In essence, those associating with the professional baseball team via the team's Facebook page have higher levels of team identification than those who do not engage with the team via

Facebook. However, since directionality cannot be established, it is not clear whether those who have higher levels of team identification seek out the team's Facebook page or conversely whether the team's Facebook page might aid in increasing team identification.

The second research question asked, "What are the relationships of intended and past use of the professional baseball team Facebook page with professional baseball team identification?" According to Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, many factors can go into performing a behavior such as purchasing a product, including one's ability to perform and control the behavior, a sense of social normative pressures, and attitudes about performing the behavior. Although this study was not able to examine those factors directly, the second research question in this study did begin to explore the relationships of Facebook usage and team identification with behavioral consumption.

**Table 1.** Relationship of Having Been to the Professional Team Facebook Page on Team Identification

	Having Visited the Professional Team Facebook Page			F	df	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$ (controlling for sex, age, and income)
	Yes	Unsure	No				
Mean Level of Team Identification	6.95 (n = 179)	6.46 (n = 30)	6.18 (n = 362)	27.93	2,565	.000	0.09

Using a third-order partial correlation controlled by sex, age, and income (Table 2), team identification correlated positively with frequency of merchandise purchase, partial  $r(566) = .53, p < .001$ , and with game attendance, partial  $r(566) = .43, p < .001$  (Table 3). Game attendance and frequency of merchandise purchase also correlated positively with one another: partial  $r(566) = .34, p < .001$ . Thus, consistent with past research, the higher one's team-identification level, the more frequently he or she is to attend games or purchase team merchandise.

**Table 2.** Relationship of Team Identification to Merchandise Purchase and Attendance

		Frequency of Merchandise Purchase (Past and Future)	Frequency of Game Attendance (Past and Future)
Team Identification	Partial <i>r</i> (controlling for sex, age, and income)	.53	.43
	Sig. (2-tailed)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

**Table 3.** Relationship of Visiting the Professional Team's Facebook Page and Game Attendance

	Having Visited the Professional Team Facebook Page			<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Partial <i>ETA</i> <sup>2</sup> (controlling for sex, age, and income)
	Yes	Unsure	No				
Mean Level of Games Attending (Past/Future)	4.30 ( <i>n</i> = 179)	3.50 ( <i>n</i> = 30)	3.53 ( <i>n</i> = 362)	20.78	2,565	.000	.069

Using the GLM, controlling for sex, age, and income, results indicated that those who have visited the Facebook page are more likely to attend games (partial  $ETA^2 = .07$ ,  $f_{2,565} = 20.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, about 7% of the variance accounted for in game attendance is associated with visiting the professional baseball team Facebook page (Table 3).

In addition, using GLM, controlling for sex, age, and income, results indicated that those who have visited the Facebook page are more likely to purchase professional baseball team merchandise more frequently ( $f_{2,565} = 13.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $ETA^2 = .05$ ). Thus, 5% of the variance accounted for in likelihood of merchandise purchase is associated with visiting the professional baseball team's Facebook page (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Relationship of Visiting the Professional Team’s Facebook Page and Frequency of Team Merchandise Purchase

	Having Visited the Professional Team Facebook Page			<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$ (controlling for sex, age, and income)
	Yes	Unsure	No				
Mean Level of Frequency of Merchandise Purchase (Past/Future)	3.30 ( <i>n</i> = 179)	3.17 ( <i>n</i> = 30)	2.93 ( <i>n</i> = 362)	13.83	2,565	.000	.05

## Discussion and Conclusion

The significant relationships between intended and past use of the professional baseball team’s Facebook page and team identification are consistent with past research and with those aspects of Wann’s (2006a) team-identification–social-psychological health model that formed the background for this research. Since this study did not allow tracking respondents across time to see whether their intention to visit the professional baseball team Facebook page is fulfilled by actual behavior and whether they therefore develop or strengthen their identification with the team, causal direction could not be established. Instead, this study used intention to visit the professional baseball team’s Facebook page as a surrogate for actual behavior.

Results related to the first research question indicated that those connecting with the professional baseball team via the team’s Facebook page have higher levels of team identification than those who do not connect with the team via Facebook. These results indicate that those fans connecting with the team on Facebook identify more highly with the team and, thus, should be treated differently by sports marketers. Furthermore, in spotlighting the group that is connected with the professional baseball team on Facebook, another revealing set of relationships was found: the more often individuals visit the professional baseball team Facebook page and the more involved they are with the professional baseball team on Facebook, the higher are their corresponding levels of team identification. These results suggest

that it would behoove sports marketers to continue to find ways of engaging fans with their Facebook page.

Whether team identification, in a cross-sectional study, is causative of using the Facebook page, or a potential effect of it, will have to be left for future research. It is indeed quite possible that these variables might form a reinforcing loop: a fan's desire to maintain or strengthen identification with a team might motivate him or her to visit the team's Facebook page; if that need is met, the fan would likely feel rewarded for visiting the Facebook page, which, in turn, might well increase the probability that he or she would return regularly to the team Facebook page in the future. Such a proposition is consistent with decades of media "uses and gratifications" research (e.g., [Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980](#); [Papacharissi, 2009](#); [Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008](#)) and would be a valuable follow-up to the results of this study. For example, what kinds of social and psychological fulfillment, consistent with [Wann's \(2006a\)](#) model, might fans expect to get from visiting the team Facebook page? How might a team design and promote their Facebook page accordingly?

The second research question examined the relationship between professional baseball team identification and consumption of the team's products. Results showed significant, positive correlations between team identification and game attendance as well as memorabilia purchase, both past and intended for the future. Team identification manifests itself in a number of ways relating to purchase. Strong team identifiers often display team memorabilia inside (e.g., bobbleheads, glassware) and outside (e.g., banners, flags) their dwellings, in their cars (e.g., bumper stickers, license plates), and on their person (e.g., shirts, hats, jewelry). One question on the survey showed respondents overall averaged 5.6 on an 8-point scale from never to always in exhibiting such memorabilia, with stronger team identifiers scoring higher on the scale. Social media give identifiers yet another way to show their team loyalty by posting pictures of these displays, potentially reinforcing attitudes and social norms ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) toward purchase of team products.

[Wann's \(2006a\)](#) model is an important tool in understanding the impact of a team on an individual's social psychological well-being. In practical terms, this model combined with Ajzen's tpb can also be used

by sports marketers, as it can help sports marketers understand the effects that their marketing efforts have on increasing an individual's level of team identification. Enhancing a fan's psychological connection to the team seems to be a necessary precursor to increased ticket sales or sales of team merchandise.

## **Limitations**

A shortcoming with this study is that, because it did not allow for tracking respondents across time, it was impossible to note whether an individual's level of team identification is, in fact, strengthened by visiting or using the professional baseball team Facebook page or whether individuals with higher levels of team identification are more likely to visit or use the professional baseball team Facebook page to begin with. Hence, although it is clear that individuals who visit and use the professional baseball team Facebook page have higher levels of identification with the team, attend more games, and purchase team merchandise more frequently, directionality could not ultimately be established in this study.

Another shortcoming was in measuring income. Additional insights were not captured on self-assessments of the adequacy of buying power for team-related products as well as game scheduling conflicts with work or other social responsibilities that may have limited purchase behavior. These behavioral controls are a dimension of the tpb ([Ajzen, 1991](#)), which thus distinguishes itself from its predecessor, the Theory of Reasoned Action ([Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975](#)). Future studies need to address these perceived and actual behavioral control factors, which are related to personal efficacy and voluntarism.

This study is also geographically limited to one professional baseball team and is confined to responses from a probability sample of those on the team's registered e-mail list. Although being a registered team website user does not mean that the users have necessarily attended games or consumed merchandise in the past, these users are people who have already identified with the professional baseball team on some level, as they have opted to receive e-mails from the organization. Hence, those participating in the study may have already had higher identification levels with the team than other fans to begin with, as they have already opted to

receive information from the team and have also chosen to participate in the study by responding to the survey. Furthermore, a special ticket incentive of 50% off select professional baseball team games was offered to those completing the survey, and it can be inferred again that one must have a moderate level of team identification to want to obtain this type of offer and attend a future game, which also might impact the consumption behavior data. However, since the results of this study still indicate marked differences between fans who are connected with the professional baseball team via Facebook and those who are not in regard to intended use of the team's Facebook page, team identification, and consumption behavior, these items were not of major concern to the researchers in the end.

Some may argue that focusing on Facebook use skews toward younger demographics, ignoring the significant buying power of older sports fans. However, 2012 surveys indicate almost 40% of consumers over the age of 50 years use social media in the United States and over half of them do it to stay in touch with important people and things in their lives (The poll, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

To the extent that it formed part of the background for this study, Wann's (2006b) team-identification–social-psychological health model was very useful for examining the processes by which sports-team identification might be linked to use of a team's Facebook page and consumption of team products, including game attendance. Overall, the results indicated that, consistent with past research, the higher one's team-identification level, the more likely he or she is to attend games or purchase merchandise more frequently. In regard to Facebook usage, results indicated that those individuals who have visited the professional baseball team Facebook page are more likely to attend professional baseball team games and more likely to purchase team merchandise than fans who do not visit the professional baseball team Facebook page, again suggesting to sports marketers that they should actively engage fans through their team's Facebook page to impact the bottom line. This study adds to the literature by incorporating social-media use into the model and examining the relationship in a real sports-market situation.

## About the Authors

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## Note

1. Although this study focuses on the results of a positive relationship between team identification and social psychological well-being in order to glean insight into how sports marketers may be able to use the model to their advantage, it should also be noted that there can also be negative implications of higher team-identification levels. These consequences can be hostility and aggression, leading to spectator violence, the desire to assist a team through cheating, or possible addiction to following the team in a variety of forms ([Wann, 2006b](#)).

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