

Team Identification and Perceptions of College Athletes: Faculty Motivation to Attend Intercollegiate Athletic Events

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College campuses are unique spaces, with college towns having their own distinctive culture. However, attendance at intercollegiate athletic events has declined in recent years. Long-term strategies for building faculty fanbases are uncommon, yet, faculty maintain high organizational identification, positively impacting brand loyalty and purchase intentions. As such, university faculty may be an ideal target market for athletic departments through relationship marketing. Utilizing Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory, this study examined faculty motivation to attend university athletic events regarding their university identification, perception of college athletes, and motivation for sport consumption. Two hundred thirty-eight faculty members at Power Five institutions completed the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption, the Points of Attachment Index, and the Perceptions of Athletic Departments Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics suggested that faculty are motivated differently than other fans, as the *physical skills of athletes* served as the strongest motivator for faculty. The multiple regression analysis provided evidence to conclude higher levels of both faculty university athletic team identification and their perceptions of student-athletes contributed to increased athletic event motivation scores. Based on the results, in order to increase faculty motivation to attend athletic events, marketers should consider designing innovative marketing efforts specifically for faculty members and utilizing marketing techniques to increase faculty's perceptions of college athletes.

Keywords: college sport, faculty, intergroup contact theory, sport marketing

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Introduction

Attendance at intercollegiate athletic events has declined over recent years, with the latest available numbers reporting attendance at college football games is the lowest in 40 years (Dodd, 2022). Fan segmentation (e.g., gender, age) has also been found to influence attendance (Chang et al., 2019). Much of the literature has recognized the importance of student spectators and examined students' motivations for attending intercollegiate athletic events (e.g., Fridley et al., 2022; Simmons et al., 2021) while other stakeholders in the campus community (e.g., faculty) have been ignored.

College campuses are unique spaces, with college towns having their own distinctive culture (Almond, 2020). With nearly 650,000 faculty members employed at four-year public universities, faculty are considerable stakeholders in higher education and have the potential to be highly involved within their respective campus community (Almond, 2020; Institute of Education Sciences, 2017). Given the NCAA (2022) requires Division I membership institutions to sponsor at least 16 sports, athletic events occur on a regular basis nearly year-round. To this, faculty members are an ideal target market for intercollegiate athletic departments to employ intergroup contact strategies designed to establish a committed consumer base, enhance team identification, and create favorable perceptions of college athletes. This study explored faculty members' perceptions of college athletes and the impact of team identification on faculty members' motivation to attend intercollegiate athletic events. The present study is two-fold in nature and strives to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Does faculty motivation to attend university athletic events differ by motivation type?

RQ2: Can identification with university athletic teams and/or attitudes/perceptions related to college athletes predict the level of motivation for faculty to attend university athletic events?

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Review of the Literature

Motivation

Athletic teams have generated revenue through various forms of sport consumption (e.g., ticket sales, media contracts, merchandise; DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2012). Funk and James's (2001) psychological continuum model (PCM) facilitated further understanding of spectator and fan interest in and connection to sport. The continuum began with low levels of knowledge or commitment to sport teams (awareness) and ended with high levels of emotional connection and a persistent connection to a team (allegiance). Funk and James (2001) defined *awareness* as knowledge of team existence, low levels of involvement, and lack of psychological connection. An individual moved to the second level, *attraction*, with the decision of a favorite team (Funk & James, 2001). For example, escape and social interaction acted as an attraction for individuals to attend sporting events (Trail, Robinson, et al., 2003). The third level, *attachment*, was characterized by a greater emotional connection to a team (Funk & James, 2001). One's identification led to feelings of attachment (Trail et al., 2000), and attachment motivated the purchase of season tickets, for example (Uhlman & Trail, 2012). Specifically, team and social identification motivated fan action, while sport identification motivated spectator action (Trail, Robinson, et al., 2003). The final level, *allegiance*, described individuals who remained committed to their relationship with the team despite other variables deemed less important (Funk & James, 2001). For example, highly identified sport fans exhibited team support regardless of game outcome (Yim & Byon, 2018).

Spectator Motivation

Earnhardt (2010) defined spectators as uncommitted individuals observing a sporting event. The interest in the sport motivated the behavior to attend. Spectators preferred quality, competitive games with teams of similar abilities over team athletic domination (Trail, Robinson, et al., 2003). Spectating allowed people more than entertainment and access to social interaction, which enhanced their social psychological lives (Melnick, 1993). Trail, Robinson, et al. (2003) found that spectator motives included aesthetics, athletic skill, drama, and knowledge. Drama and aesthetics were most closely associated with sport identification.

Identification

Individual motivations, achievement, and aesthetics for sport consumption correlated with identification (Trail, Fink et al., 2003). Trail et al. (2000) defined identification as an individual's self-orientation through objects, people, or

groups that result in a feeling of attachment. This understanding of consumer identification has allowed for effective marketing (Ratten, 2016). For example, Yim and Byon (2018) recommended sport marketers designate more time and resources to satisfaction and customer service-related departments because their study results indicated sport consumers disconnect from game satisfaction after losing and use service satisfaction regarding future consumption decisions. Psychology enabled sport marketers to effectively market toward the desired target market to maintain or grow their audience (Chalip, 1992).

Stereotypes of College Athletes

College athletes struggle with role conflict and often feel pressured to prioritize the athlete role over the student role (Fridley et al., 2023). The college athlete population is often stereotyped as unintelligent, unmotivated, and unable to succeed academically (Comeaux, 2011; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017; Stokowski et al., 2016, 2020). However, such stigmas are often contingent upon the characteristics of the athlete (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation; Anderson et al., 2019; Arthur-Banning, 2018; Comeaux, 2018; Gentile et al., 2018; Strehlow et al., 2021; Turk et al., 2019). Female college athletes are expected to be smart (Strehlow et al., 2021), while male college athletes are seen as “dumb jocks” (Comeaux, 2012; Cooper et al., 2017). Stigmas placed on male college athletes are often escalated for Black male college athletes, who have their intellectual capability questioned (Comeaux, 2011).

Faculty placed low importance, possibly annoyance, on the public recognition of athletic success above the success of non-athlete student peers (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom et al., 1995). Furthermore, they adversely perceived Black college athletes’ accomplishments (Comeaux, 2011), disapproved of full athletic scholarships, and believed athlete tutoring services, unavailable to non-athlete students, undermined the university’s academic integrity (Baucom & Lantz, 2001). More recently, Stem (2023) examined sport management instructors’ perceptions of students (including college athletes). Stem (2023) found a difference in how instructors perceived college athletes, particularly those students who participated in basketball. This perpetual negative perception of college athletes has led scholars (Comeaux, 2011; Stokowski et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2022) to express a need to develop methods for creating meaningful relationships among faculty and college athletes.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Tajfel (1969) defined prejudice as one having negative attitudes or perceptions toward one social group. Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact theory provided four situational conditions designed to reduce prejudice: (a) equal status within

groups, (b) active effort toward common goals, (c) intergroup or interdependent cooperation between groups, and (d) support of authority, law, or custom to establish norms of acceptance. Pettigrew (1998) suggested a fifth situational condition, friendship potential, centered on positive emotion that can be crucial to prejudice reduction. Allport (1954) found that contact fostered learning, which led to knowledge, and resulted in reduced prejudice.

While the original purpose of the intergroup contact theory involved the advantaged group learning about the disadvantaged group, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) found knowledge between groups allowed for the smallest reduction in prejudice. Intergroup contact eased anxiety and allowed empathy between groups; the reduction of anxiety and increased empathy allowed for more considerable reductions in prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Increased involvement between two groups allowed knowledge, trust, and understanding to build; anxiety and prejudices to reduce; and perceptions to change (Bruening et al., 2014; Stokowski et al., 2016).

As faculty would typically be considered the advantaged group within the faculty and student-athlete dynamic, this study flips the traditional roles and places athletes, with the cooperation of athletic department staff, in the advantaged group, or in-group. As such, the athletic department is being challenged to learn about faculty psychographics to establish communication and interactions that encourage athletic event attendance and/or positive perceptions of student-athletes. This study explored faculty members' perceptions of college athletes and the impact of team identification on faculty members' motivation to attend intercollegiate athletic events.

Methods

Utilizing a purposeful sampling method, this study surveyed faculty members across Power Five conferences (i.e., ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, SEC). The primary researcher used university websites to locate email addresses for all university deans employed by a university within the Power Five athletic conference. Emails were next sent to the deans, copying the dean's administrative assistant when accessible, and other faculty with an invitation to participate in the present study and a request to forward to other faculty at their university. A reminder email, including the survey link, was sent two weeks later. Four weeks after the original email, and two weeks after the second, data were retrieved for analysis.

Measures

The survey began with descriptive information such as age, gender, race, marital status, athletic division, and conference. It also included questions regarding the

number of college athletes they teach in a typical semester and the average number of athletic events they attend in a year. Next, three measures for the three predictors, motivation, identification, and perception, were adopted from existing scales.

Trail and James's (2001) Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) was used to measure faculty motives for attending athletic events. It has 27 items, nine factors, measured on a seven-point scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The internal consistency coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, for the overall scale in the original study included $\alpha = 0.87$ and ranged between $\alpha = 0.68$ to $\alpha = 0.89$ for each of the subscales (Trail & James, 2001). Similar to Trail, Robinson, et al.'s study (2003), the current study removed the physical attraction subscale, leaving 24 total questions.

Robinson and Trail's (2005) Points of Attachment Index (PAI) was used to measure faculty identification with university athletic teams. This scale contains seven subscales, 21 items in total, measured on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree). The original internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha, coefficients for the seven subscales ranged from 0.69-0.85 (Robinson & Trail, 2005). The current study utilized the Team Identification subscale with wording slightly modified to better address the research questions.

The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2007) developed the Perceptions of Athletic Departments Questionnaire (PADQ) through research, meetings, and interviews about faculty attitudes of athletic departments (see also Stokowski et al., 2016). Originally the subscale contained 24 questions; however, the authors removed seven items deemed not relevant to the current research, leaving nine total questions. The revised academics subscale of the PADQ was used to examine faculty attitudes about athletics on their respective campuses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through statistical software, SPSS. First, descriptive statistics were performed, including, when appropriate, means and frequencies. Second, a Pearson's correlation for the three scales was conducted to examine their relationship. Third, Cronbach's (1951) alpha for the scales or subscales was calculated to measure internal consistency reliability. Next, to address RQ1, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the motivation of faculty to attend athletic events. The independent variable, motivation type, was a categorical grouping variable with eight levels associated with the eight different subscales: achievement, knowledge, aesthetics, drama, escape, family, physical attraction, physical skills, and social.

RQ2 was addressed using a regression model to determine the proportion of variance in athletic event motivation accounted for by faculty identification for university teams and their attitudes or perceptions related to college athletes.

The independent variables included university team identification, measured by the Team Identification subscale of the PAI, and perception of athletes, measured by the revised academics subscale of the PADQ. The dependent variable was the level of motivation to attend university athletic events, calculated by averaging item responses on the overall MSSC scale.

Results

Descriptive statistics showed the participants ($N = 238$) were white (88.2%), married (78.6%), tenured (42.0%), health professions (21.0%), and business (20.6%) faculty from the SEC (53.4%). Following the SEC, the athletic conference breakdown included the Pac-12 (16.0%), Big Ten (10.9%), ACC (10.5%), and Big 12 (6.7%). Participants ranged between 25 and 76 years of age with a slight female majority (52.1%), with 70% teaching one or more college athletes per semester.

Faculty Athletic Event Motivation

After data were cleaned and requirement checks were determined tenable, internal consistency reliability scores were analyzed for the MSSC and its eight subscales. Scores ranged between Cronbach's $\alpha = .800$ and $.951$, suggesting adequate scale and subscale item interrelatedness. A repeated measures one-way ANOVA was used to answer the first research question: Does faculty motivation to attend university athletic events differ by motivation type? The results revealed a significant difference in motivation scores from faculty participants (Wilks's $\Lambda = .281$, $F_{7, 231} = 84.281$, $p < .001$). The large effect size indicated motivation type had a meaningful effect on faculty motivation scores ($\eta^2 = .935$). Means and standard deviations of faculty motivation grouped by motivation type are shown in Table 1.

Faculty Identification and Perceptions

Internal consistency reliability scores were analyzed after all requirement checks were determined tenable for the revised MSSC, PADQ, and team identity subscale of the PAI. Internal consistency reliability estimates suggested adequate item interrelatedness, ranging between Cronbach's $\alpha = .783$ and $.943$. A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict faculty motivation to attend university athletic events based on faculty identification with their university athletic teams and their perceptions of college athletes. Results indicated a significant regression equation ($F_{2, 177} = 157.61$, $p < .001$), with university athletic team identification and perception of student-athletes accounting for almost two-thirds ($R^2 = .64$, $p < .001$) of the explained variance in athletic event motivation scores.

Table 1. Motivation Subscales Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach’s Alpha for Faculty Participants

	Mean	SD	Significant Differences		Number	Cronbach’s α
			Higher	Lower		
1. Physical Skills	5.5157	1.28479	-	2 3 4 5 6 7 8	238	.913
2. Drama	4.7561	1.36614	1	5* 6 7 8	238	.800
3. Aesthetics	4.6792	1.64836	1	6 7 8	238	.951
4. Family	4.5068	1.80054	1	6* 7 8	238	.929
5. Achievement	4.3571	1.59803	1 2*	7 8	238	.893
6. Social	4.1275	1.64700	1 2 3 4*	8	238	.910
7. Escape	3.8781	1.69723	1 2 3 4 5	8	238	.881
8. Knowledge	3.1190	1.66469	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	-	238	.853
Total Scale	4.3679	1.15730			238	.943

Note. Significant differences indicate which MSSC subscales result in significantly higher or lower scores compared to the subscale identified in the first column.
 * $p < .05$. Numbers without * $p < .001$.

Higher levels of identification with university athletic teams ($b = .45, p < .001$) and more favorable perceptions of student-athletes ($b = .31, p = .001$) contributed to increased athletic event motivation scores. The participants’ predicted motivation score equaled $1.78 + .45$ (identification) $+ .31$ (perception), where identification is measured by faculty scores on the PAI team identity subscale and perception is measured by faculty scores on the PADQ. For every one unit increase in faculty university team identification, the predicted motivation score increases by .45 units, and for every one unit increase in faculty perception of college athletes, the predicted motivation score increases by .31 units. Means and standard deviations of university athletic team identification and perception of student-athletes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Faculty Perceptions of Athletes and Identification with University Teams Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alpha

	Mean	SD	Number	Cronbach's α
Perceptions of Athletes	3.2407	.53494	180	.783
University Team Identity	3.8648	1.83750	180	.938
Total Motivation Scale	4.5328	1.09912	180	.943

Discussion

This study explored faculty members' perceptions of college athletes and the impact of team identification on faculty members' motivation to attend intercollegiate athletic events. The repeated measures ANOVA indicated a significant difference in motivation scores from faculty participants. Descriptive statistics suggested the *physical skills of athletes* as faculty's strongest motivator. This is contrary to the findings of Trail, Robinson, et al. (2003), which indicated football spectators' average variance explained for physical skills was the lowest of the seven MSSC subscales utilized in their study. While this suggests faculty are motivated differently than other potential fans, Fridley et al. (2023) found college students also favored physical skills as a top motivator for athletic event attendance. As such, Power Five sport marketers should consider designing innovative marketing efforts specifically for faculty members.

The multiple regression analysis provided evidence to conclude higher levels of both faculty university athletic team identification and their perceptions of college athletes contributed to increased athletic event motivation scores. Results from the current study indicate utilizing marketing techniques to increase faculty's positive perceptions of college athletes may, in turn, increase faculty motivation to attend athletic events. Additionally, interaction between faculty and college athletes was positively correlated with athlete academic success (Rankin et al., 2016).

Similar to prior literature (Abeza et al., 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Nufer & Buhler, 2009), the researchers recommend sport marketers employ intergroup contact efforts directed at establishing, enhancing, and maintaining successful relationships between faculty and athletics. Athletic and academic departments should have open lines of communication to encourage this relationship development. With increased interaction between the departments, faculty and athletic staff will have the opportunity to bond and form more profound and trusting relationships. Based on the results of this study, sport marketers should emphasize

the physical skills of university teams when marketing to faculty members. For example, marketers could highlight physical skills with video of past athletic events on campus video monitors or utilize social media to display the athleticism of teams and/or individual athletes. Alternatively, athletic departments could email faculty directly to inform them of individual success of students in their class that semester to highlight the athlete achievement but also in seeking to continue to reduce the stigma and stereotype.

Similar to Pettigrew and Troop (2008), the results of the present study suggest intergroup contact may ease anxiety and allow faculty to feel comfortable integrating with athletic culture and play a role in encouraging athletic event attendance. Developing faculty team identification and positive perception of student-athletes may lead to increased involvement between athletes and faculty. This is particularly important as prior research has indicated that such involvement allowed for the expanding of knowledge, trust, and understanding while reducing anxiety and prejudices (Bruening et al., 2014; Stokowski et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research, several limitations are included within this study. First, faculty receive an excessive amount of emails and invitations to complete surveys, which may have contributed to the small sample size. Further, the dissemination of the survey link relied on academic deans' forwarding the study invitation to their faculty. As such, it prohibited determining the number of faculty the survey reached, thus preventing calculating the response rate. This study only included faculty from the Power Five conferences, and respondents were primarily from SEC institutions. Last, the sample size decreased for the second research question analysis as many participants bypassed the PADQ. However, it is unknown whether this was informative or noninformative dropout.

Faculty motivation for attending university athletic events is understudied. Future studies should be conducted to investigate if athletic divisions or various demographics influence motivation intentions to change. Further research may benefit from examining faculty motivation to attend their alma mater's athletic events to expand upon the findings from this study. Qualitative analysis could be conducted to see if there is an alternative motivation for faculty to attend athletic events, as faculty may not be typical consumers. Researchers should also investigate faculty motivation for different university teams, such as football, soccer, and tennis.

Conclusion

Intercollegiate athletic departments should consider targeting their marketing efforts toward college faculty. Athletic departments would benefit from increased

faculty identification with university teams as they can seek to organize faculty nights or faculty sections at athletic events to increase their attendance. Such identification would provide faculty with a sense of belonging and encourage a sense of community.

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