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## Affinity and Affiliation: The Dual-Carriage Way to Team Identification

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# Affinity and Affiliation: The Dual-Carriage Way to Team Identification

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## Abstract

This study examines if fan identification with a sports team is established through two similar yet distinct psychological processes: affinity and affiliation. The brand personality literature indicates consumers build an affinity with brands, or in this case teams, whose image is congruent with their own personality. On the other hand, consumers affiliate with and become attached to organizations they feel emulate and share their values. The current study examines the relative contribution team affinity and organizational affiliation, with the sponsoring university, play in forming student identification with an intercollegiate football team. Path analysis results confirm a proposed dual carriageway model but report the stronger role of affiliation in the context of college sports. Identification with a team was supported as a significant driver of fan intentions to attend games. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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The most visible thing in Portland, OR, is probably the Portland Trail Blazers on a national basis. This doesn't do our community any service. We're embarrassed. And we've got to work harder and do a better job. This needs to stop. — Trail Blazers team President Bob Whitsett after four Trail Blazer players were arrested in four days in 2002 (McAllister, 2002).

From Day One, the plan was to change the type of players we brought in. We were going to look at, not only talent, but also the character of the players. What a player could do off the floor was just as important as what he could do on the floor. We had to change on the floor, but we also had to get out into the community and allow them (fans) to get to know us. — Trail Blazers coach Nate McMillan on the team's response to rebuilding after the "Jail Blazer" years (Kelley, 2009).

Such quotes about rebuilding the image of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Portland Trail Blazers underscore how important a team's public persona is to management. In this case, management's goal

was to generate a positive impression of their product rather than have negative associations dominate their marketplace. When a team's personality or identity becomes tainted by ethical breaches as they did during the "Jail Blazers" years, fans tend to distance themselves from clubs. Other than a loss to an organization's morale, the downside of public embarrassment and negative publicity is that fans and sponsors want to disassociate and desert, cut their support and attend fewer games (Funk & Pritchard, 2006). In Portland, the Trail Blazers were forced to concentrate on rebuilding their public image so that they could reconnect with their fan base. Although research has explored how sport organizations might avoid or respond strategically to public relations "bombshells" like this (Burton & Howard, 2000, p. 44), questions still remain over the psychology of attachment and the attributes that enable fans to identify and continue with teams.

## Identification

As a rule, individuals derive "strength and a sense of identity" from their connections to social groups (Kelman, 1961). Public connections or associations with certain brand images or sport teams are often used for the purpose of self-presentation (Cialdini &