

ROOT, ROOT, ROOT FOR THE HOME TEAM: THE PERSUASIVE ABILITY OF SALESPERSON PERCEIVED TEAM IDENTIFICATION IN THE BUYER-SELLER DYADIC EXCHANGE

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This manuscript investigates the previously under-researched impact of establishing similarity in team identification in the personal selling environment. This investigation into the influence of team identification on trust, satisfaction, gratitude, and purchase intentions in a personal selling context contributes to the literature on sales tactics and introduces the use of team identification to the personal selling literature. The results indicate that buyer purchase intentions, gratitude, trust, and satisfaction are affected by salesperson signaling of team identification. Furthermore, the level at which an individual identifies with their teams strengthens purchase intentions and satisfaction in the exchange. These results have important implications for sales managers, suggesting that using team identification as a sales tactic is likely to increase buyer perceptions of the sales representative resulting in increased purchase intentions.

INTRODUCTION

It has been well established that fans of a team establish a psychological connection to their team (Dietz-Uhler and Lanter 2008). These sports fans who identify strongly with their team tend to experience more extreme feelings than those who identify weakly with their team (Dietz-Uhler and Lanter 2008). Accordingly, the evident importance of these strong relationships between fans and their favorite teams and athletes has also begun to spur research in the field of marketing. For example, research by Gwinner and Swanson (2003) investigates the relationship between fan identification and the attitude towards the sponsor. Their findings indicate that the greater the individuals' connection to their team, the higher their opinions of the sponsoring company. Despite these findings, literature has yet to investigate other areas of a firm's strategic marketing initiatives which may also benefit from this connection. One such area, personal selling, relies deeply on building relationships as a basis of influence (Evans et al. 2012).

Surprisingly, minimal studies in the sales literature have investigated similarities in mutual interests or hobbies, and there exists no current study in the sales literature which looks at one of the most universal and beloved interests in today's society: sports. Accordingly, this paper looks to fill this gap in the literature by investigating how congruent identification with a sports team can help to build and strengthen relations in the buyer-seller dyadic exchange. More specifically, we discuss below how a salesperson's use of team identification as an indicator of similarity or in-group membership is likely to influence customer gratitude, trust in the salesperson, satisfaction with the relationship between the rep and their customer, and finally, the customer's intention to purchase.

This research aims to investigate a key component of building relationships, similarity, in terms of their attitude towards a topic very near and dear to many people's heart: their favorite sports team. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to investigate how fan-identification by the salesperson influences the consumer decision-making process. The arguments that follow provide evidence that the (in)congruence of team identification attributed to the salesperson may have an impact on buyer perceptions of the salesperson, and in-turn,

impact their feelings about the interaction and increase the ability for the sales representative to persuade the buyer to make a purchase. Using social identity theory and previous research from sports psychology and personal selling, this paper develops the idea that presenting a congruent fan identification with a buyer is likely to facilitate more positive outcomes in the buyer-seller dyadic relationship. This paper looks to investigate the following research questions:

1. Can signaling congruent team identification be useful in the sales-customer dyadic exchange?
2. Does how strongly an individual identifies with their team influence the relationship between congruent identification and customer perceptions of the sales exchange?

By answering these questions, this research makes several theoretical contributions to the literature. First, we answer a call for more specific understanding of the sales behaviors which occur within sales interactions (Evans et al. 2012). The findings of this study show that similarity in attitude towards a specific team can be used as a sales tactic to positively influence the buyer. Previous research in personal selling literature has investigated the effects of conspicuous consumption (Scott, Mende and Bolton 2013), salesperson pacing, smiling and appropriate attire (Wood, Boles and Babin 2008), and formal dress (Arndt et al. 2013). This research adds to that literature by suggesting that the use of sports team identification by indicating allegiance to a sports team can significantly impact important interpersonal selling outcomes. Secondly, our research extends the literature on social identity theory and fan identification by examining their effects on the buyer-seller-dyadic exchange in a non-sports team related sales decision. Previous research in this area has focused on the impact of team identification on purchasing products or tickets to events sold by the team itself (Kwon, Trail and James 2007; Wann and Branscombe 1993).

The findings of this research also have important practical implications for sales firms and their managers, as our results indicate that this intentional communication method by the salesperson can act as a strong influence tactic used in the buyer-seller dyadic interaction. It

may also provide initial evidence for customer facing organizations to develop relationships with local sports teams and target buyers with sales calls using CRM information on their interests in sports. Sales managers are interested in things that may give their salespeople a proverbial advantage over other store locations and competitors. With the importance of relationships and building credibility understood as a key determinant of sales success (Evans et al. 2012), these sales managers should look for different ways in which their representatives could build this credibility. One area in which sales employees could influence perceived credibility with their customers is in terms of their identification to a professional, collegiate, or local sports team. The sales literature finds that non-verbal cues used by a salesperson have been found to provide evidence of their credibility in terms of their similarity, likeability and intelligence (Scott, Mende and Bolton 2013). Accordingly, the idea of wearing a local professional or university team logo may provide avenues for instigating conversation surrounding team identification in hopes to increase sales performance in those customers who also support the local teams. The findings in the research which follows suggest that the salesperson's use of signaling congruent team identification with their customer can strengthen the perceptions of the sales representative in the eyes of customer.

The sections which follow will develop arguments which support this idea that the use of congruent sports team identification will influence specific sales-related outcomes. First, the literature review will define the constructs and supporting theory, followed by a proposal of the hypothesized relationships. Second, the methodological analysis, including research methods and data analysis, will be explicated. Following this analysis, the results and important theoretical and practical implications of this study for researchers, sales managers and representatives alike will be discussed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the context of a personal sales environment, the most salient and central component of the experience is the interpersonal interaction with the sales representative (Jiang et al. 2010). As

the boundary spanning agent for the firm, the sales representative serves as the organization's customer-facing connection. The modern sales environment can be difficult for both parties, as increased information and options available in our technology-rich world have increased the level of skepticism in organizational promotions (such as the sales representative) from the buyer (De Pechpeyrou and Odou 2012). Accordingly, it is the role of the salesperson to help navigate the complexities of the sales environment and reduce ambiguity for the buyer in hopes to establish a long-term relationship with them. In order for the sales representative to elicit a positive result from the interaction, they need the customer to attribute non-commercial motives to the interaction (DeCarlo 2005).

One of the first and most important things that is taught to sales representatives in any personal selling training is the idea that the salesperson needs to find some common ground between themselves and the customer with whom they are working. A common ground or similarity, also referred to as homophily, is one of the most effective relationship-building strategies (Palmatier et al. 2006). This is crucial because relationships between salespeople and their customers are important for a firm's survival, growth and future success (Reinartz and Kumar 2003). The majority of studies which look into similarities between the customer and their salesperson have investigated this similarity in terms of attitude. For example, studies have investigated the influence of similar birthdays (Burger et al. 2004), similar birthplaces (Jiang et al. 2010), similar first names (Burger et al. 2004), and similar first initials with a brand (Brendl et al. 2005) on compliance. Similarity has also been found to increase liking, persuasion, and cooperative behavior between individuals in social situations (Burger et al. 2004). Research in this field is fairly consistent, suggesting that identifying similarities of attitudes and opinions can help to build a connection in the dyadic buyer-seller exchange. Previous research in this area has also found that several personal and emotional factors, such as shared attitudes, lifestyles or values, can play a role in establishing rapport between these parties (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990). Even when the similarity is incidental, it can be interpreted as a signal that can promote social

connectedness (Palmatier et al. 2006), which means that similarity contributes to their effectiveness as a salesperson (Boles, Johnson and Barksdale 2000).

Social Identity Theory

The influence that relationship-building via similarity has on positive sales outcomes can be explained theoretically by social identity theory. Social identity theory is defined as a person's sense of self derived from their perceptions of membership in a social group (Tajfel 1978). For example, individuals who have a psychological attachment to his or her favorite sports team, deemed team identification, see themselves as part of the team and often refer to the team and its players as "us" or "we." Identification with certain groups is a natural occurrence, as humans have an innate need to belong and are driven to establish interpersonal bonds (Leary and Baumeister 2017). This concept, called belongingness, has multiple aspects, including companionship, affiliation and connectedness (Lee and Robbins 1995). Connectedness, or "the emotional distance between the self and other people" (Lee and Robbins 1995, pp. 239), is of specific importance in this research, as identification with a sports team can be a highly emotional and has even been classified as a secular religious experience (Burstyn 2005). Furthermore, in sales settings, connectedness is a primary driver of similarity effects (Jiang et al. 2010). This means that the mere act of categorizing oneself as a group member is sufficient in encouraging others in the group into responding favorably towards in-group positions (Turner 1975). This is because the desire to belong causes people tend to evaluate their in-group members as more trustworthy (Tajfel 1978). In the sales literature, research on customer-company identification by Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen (2005) finds that the sales representative has a major influence whether or not customers identify with the company. In this study, the authors also find that those who identify with a company are not only more likely to incur positive behaviors, such as word-of-mouth and proactive communication of anticipated problems, but also more likely to have positive judgment towards, utilization of, and responses toward the company's product.

Conversely, social identity theory tells us that in-groups cannot exist without out-group, and that in-groups define themselves in relationship to their out-group (Tajfel 1978; Abrams and Hogg 2006). In other words, individuals tend to use the out-group as a method for determining distinctiveness (Lipponen et al. 2003). Previous literature also indicates that out-group members tend to be on the receiving end of skepticism more so than their in-group peers (Johnson and Lowe 2015). Further, as a group identity becomes more firmly embedded, bias of out-group members becomes more and more entrenched (Stone and Crisp 2007). Hypothetically, this would suggest that for individuals who more strongly identify with their team, they will be even more critical or skeptical of the out-group member. This suggests that in the context of our research, the recognition of a congruent team identification is established with the idea that there are also those who are not in the group, and perceptions of the sales representative as an out-group member may increase skepticism and bias.

Team Identification

Team identification can be defined as the individuals' perception of the link between themselves and the sports team (Wann 2006). Team identification is so powerful that those who identify with a team are willing to attend the team's competitions, regardless of the success of the team (Wakefield and Sloan 1995). It has been well established that fans of a team establish a psychological connection to their team (Dietz-Uhler and Lanter 2008) and that this connection can have a positive influence on an individuals' psychological well-being (Wann 2006). It is important to note here that the positive influence of outcomes associated with team-identification has been more consistently related to social measures of well-being, as opposed to personal well-being (Wann 2006; Wann et al. 2003). This means that the effects of team-identification are stronger in protecting their perceived group identity than that of their personal identity. More interestingly, research by Fisher (1998) tells us that perceived similarity with the group (as opposed to attractiveness of the group) is the most important factor in determining which team an individual identifies with. More recent research on team-identification also tells us that

identifying as part of the same team motivates helping behavior (Van der Borgh et al. 2017). Further, team identification has been found to be a moderator on the influence of consumers' word-of-mouth on their intentions to purchase in the future (Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou 2018). Accordingly, it is expected that in a personal selling context, perceptions of similar team identification will have a strong influence on the buyer-seller dyadic exchange.

Buyer-Seller Congruent Team Identification

Returning to the sales context, we remember that the purpose of the sales representative is to be a boundary spanning agent for the organization whose role is to reduce the uncertainty for the buyer (Julian and Ramaheshan 1994). In this setting, although the buyer and seller may have had no previous interactions, humans in general are "cognitive misers" who find ways to save time and effort while making assessments and coming to conclusions (Taylor and Fiske 1978), and therefore, tend to use heuristics and schemas to make judgments. Signaling theory states that when two parties have access to different information, signaling occurs which conveys some information about oneself to the other party (Spence 1973). When information is ambiguous, communications that assist the second party act as cues signaling a message to the receiver that helps them to evaluate the source. For example, a salesperson wearing an armband identifying their loyalty to a certain team, may signal to another individual that they are in or out-group members. Further, communication discussing their team in a knowledgeable way is likely to signal to the customer the similarity (or difference) that exists between them.

With this in mind, those who are similarly perceived in-group members should be seen in an even more positive light as they are likely to receive the in-group favoritism effect that is a result of team identification (Wann and Branscombe 1995). Furthermore, when asked to evaluate others, sports fans often exhibit biased evaluations of both in and out group fans, providing more positive evaluations of fellow in-group fans than those who are rivals (Wann and Grieve 2005). This means that

customers who perceive themselves similar in terms of team identification are also more likely to give a positive review of a person who is a fan of the same team than those who are a fan of a rival (Wann and Dolan 1994), and more likely to treat others who are fans of the same team with a positive bias (Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease 2001). Furthermore, findings that team identification has been found to increase feelings of belongingness (Branscombe and Wann 1991) and have shown that being a fan of the same team can assist individuals in gaining and maintaining relationships (Wann et al. 2011). This is important because rapport building is one major determinant of sales success (Clark, Drew and Pinch 2003). Finally, since social identity theory suggests that the strength of the identification is bound in the idea that those outside the group either don't identify with the same team, or more strongly, identify with a rival, we suspect that in an incongruent situation an opposite effect will occur.

Congruent Team Identification and Trust. Returning to social psychology, we know that the simple act of categorizing oneself as an in-group member can influence perceptions of trust (Tajfel 1978). This is consistent with findings that team identification has a positive relationship with trust (Wann and Polk 2007), and given that fans can hold strong negative perceptions of supporters of rival teams (Wann and Grieve 2005) one could reasonably expect that the inverse is true for in-congruent team identification. From a sales perspective, research supports this idea as similar attitudes, beliefs and values cause the perception of a more trustworthy salesperson in the eyes of the customer (Doney and Cannon 1997; Palmatier et al. 2007). It can reasonably be expected then, that previous relationships between similarity in terms of shared attitudes and beliefs will hold true in the buyer-seller dyadic relationship. More specifically, we suggest that congruent identification with a favorite sports team should signal to the customer that they are both in-group members with similar attitudes, values, and beliefs resulting in higher levels of perceived trust.

H_{1a}: In an interpersonal sales context, (in) congruent team identification shared between the salesperson and a

consumer strengthens (weakens) the level of customer trust.

Congruent Team Identification and Satisfaction. Research in the sports marketing domain tells us that those higher in team identification were more satisfied from positive game outcomes (Madrigal 1995) and that team identification strengthens the influence of satisfaction on loyalty to the team (Bodet and Bernache-Assollant 2011). Also, there is empirical evidence to suggest that similarity among individuals influences relationship satisfaction in a relational context (Byrne 1969). In other words, it can be reasonably expected that similarity in team identification can positively impact satisfaction with the relationship between the buyer and the seller. From a social identity theory perspective, this means that if a sales representative highlights congruent team identification with the buyer, it is likely that their perceptions of the salesperson as an in-group member will cause them to be more satisfied with the relationship.

H_{1b}: In an interpersonal sales context, (in) congruent team identification shared between the salesperson and a consumer strengthens (weakens) the level of customer satisfaction.

Congruent Team Identification and Gratitude. As boundary spanners, sales representatives are in a position where they have the ability to develop powerful emotions within their customer (Mangus et al. 2017). One of those emotions, gratitude, "stems from the perception of a positive personal outcome, not necessarily deserved or earned, that is due to the actions of another person" (Emmons and McCullough 2003, pp.5). In other words, gratitude results from an appraisal where the customer attributes their actions to another agent's actions and not themselves (Brock et al. 2016). When we consider that the customer with a perception of congruent team identification is more likely to exhibit positive bias toward other in-group members (in this case the sales representative), it is likely that their evaluation of the actions of the salesperson are positive. As a result, it is expected that the perception of a similar team identification with the sales representative will elicit greater levels of gratitude than if the representative was not a perceived in-group member.

H_{1c}: In an interpersonal sales context, (in) congruent team identification shared between the salesperson and a consumer strengthens (weakens) the level of buyer gratitude.

Congruent Team Identification and Purchase Intentions. Previous research on team identification has shown that those who identify with a team are more likely to purchase more team-related merchandise, sponsors' products, and tickets to the teams matches (Wann and Branscombe 1993), and team-related memorabilia (Kwon, Trail and James 2007). It can be expected, then, that these effects should translate into a personal selling context, as well. Furthermore (as discussed above), similarity is also a component of credibility (Simons, Berkowitz and Moyer 1970) and consumer-perceived credibility has been empirically demonstrated to be an important antecedent to consumer compliance (Sharma 1990), purchase intentions (Grewal, Gotlieb and Marmorstein 1994), and an important determinant of sales success (Evans et al. 2012). Accordingly, it can reasonably be expected that a sales representative's signal of congruent team identification should influence customer purchase intentions.

H_{1d}: In an interpersonal sales context, (in) congruent team identification shared between the salesperson and a consumer strengthens (weakens) customer purchase intentions.

Moderating Effect of the Level of Customer Team Identification

Although the term identification is used above, identification can mean many different things to different people. The hypothesis above is based on the premonition that simply identifying with the same sports team should help to build a stronger relationship between the consumer and sales representative. However, this does not take into consideration the strength of the customers' identification with that team.

Research by Murrel and Dietz (1992) indicates that as identification with a team increases, so does the level of support from the individual. This is true because not all those who watch or attend sporting events are fans committed to the teams that they are watching (Mahony,

Madrigal and Howard 2000). Furthermore, in-group favoritism and out-group derogation have been found to be stronger when individuals highly-identify with their team (Wann et al. 2001).

The expectation is that the stronger the team identification, the stronger the psychological connection the consumer feels they have with their team. Consistent with these ideas, research on team identification points out that sports fans who identify strongly with their team tend to experience more extreme feelings than those who identify weakly with their team (Dietz-Uhler and Lanter 2008). This is important because even though it is expected that simple congruent team identification between the customer and their sales representative should impact the consumers' attitude favorability, the consumers' level of team identification could affect the relative weight they place on that similarity in team identification.

Therefore, it is also believed that the stronger the individual's team identification, the greater the impact of congruency of team identification on our aforementioned measures of consumer attitude favorability (gratitude, trust, satisfaction), as well as their intentions to purchase from the sales representative. Accordingly, we propose the following moderation hypotheses:

H_{2a}: The customers' level of team identification moderates the relationship between the (in) congruent team identification and trust, such that when identification is high the impact of (in)congruent identification is strengthened.

H_{2b}: The customers' level of team identification moderates the relationship between the (in) congruent team identification and satisfaction, such that when identification is high the impact of (in)congruent identification is strengthened.

H_{2c}: The customers' level of team identification moderates the relationship between the (in) congruent team identification and gratitude, such that when identification is high the impact of

(in)congruent identification is strengthened.
H_{2d}: The customers' level of team identification moderates the relationship between the (in)congruent team identification and purchase intentions, such that when identification is high the impact of (in)congruent identification is strengthened.

A visual representation of the expected direction of effects for each of the hypothesis can be found in Figure 1.

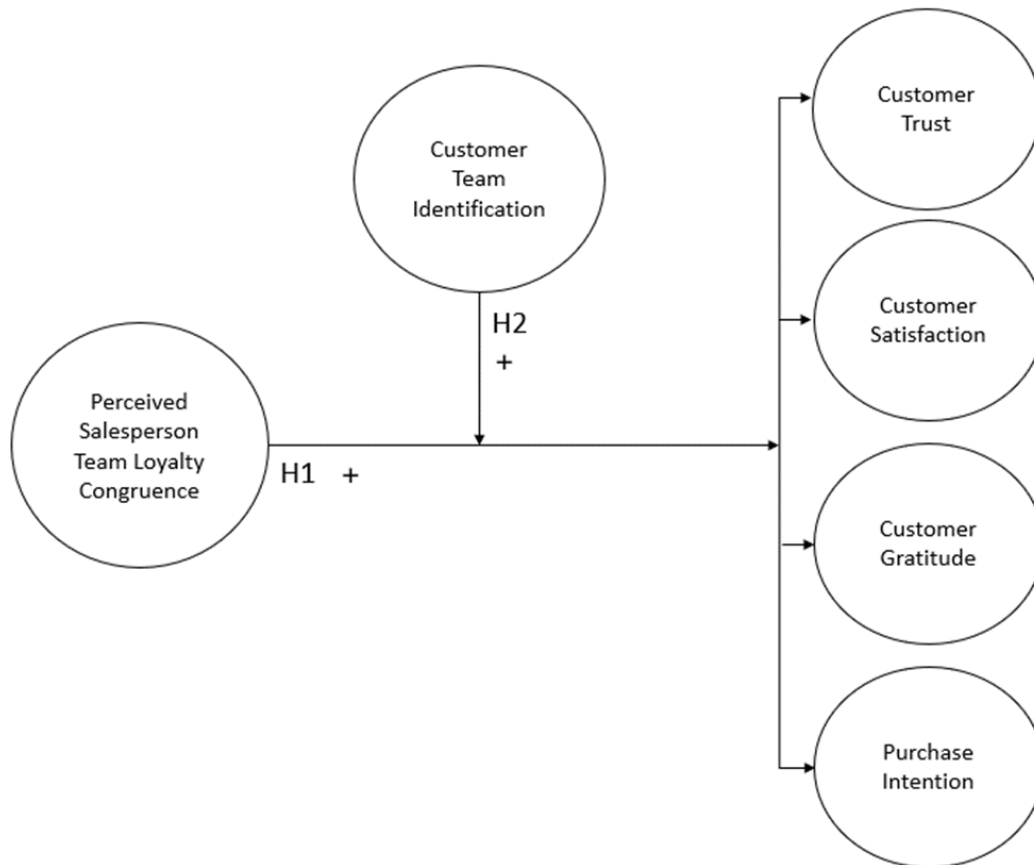
METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was performed using the convenience sampling method in a local

shopping mall in a college town in the Southeastern United States. Participants answered the paper and pencil instrument survey on a voluntary basis. College football fans were chosen as the research target as college football fandom is very prevalent in the Southeastern United States. Of the 210 completed interviews, 16 of those did not completely finish the survey, leaving 194 usable surveys. The final sample was a male majority (61%) and most respondents were under the age of 35 (70%). The majority of our survey respondents also had a college or above degree (71%). Surveys were conducted by student volunteers who were trained and received extra course credit for their involvement, but were unaware of the reason for the survey.

**FIGURE 1:
Proposed Framework**



Measures and Manipulation

Respondents were first asked priming questions to allow respondents to begin thinking about their favorite college football team and their rivals. Questions asked who their favorite team was and who the top rival of that team was. Next, they were asked a general set of questions in relation to the levels at which they identify with their favorite team using a 7-point Likert Scale, ranging from “1-strongly disagree” to “7-strongly agree” drawn from the items contained in the Sports Spectator Identification Scale by Theodorakis et al. (2010), as well as items from the Team Identification Scale by Wu, Tsai and Hung (2012).

Following the initial survey, respondents were then given one of two scenarios in the form of a vignette to read before answering the final set of data. Ninety four (94) of the respondents in our final sample received the congruent vignette while the remaining 100 received the incongruent team identification vignette. An example of the vignette can be seen in Appendix A. Both scenarios involved a knowledgeable, no pressure sales representative going through his regular sales routine. In order to manipulate team identification, respondents were either given a scenario in which the sales representative happens to be wearing an armband displaying the logo of their favorite team, or where the sales representative is wearing the armband of a rival team. In the congruent vignette a conversation ensues that makes it clear to the reader that the sales representative is a huge fan of the same team. Respondents who received the incongruent vignette were given the exact same conversation, with the exception that the conversation is about the rivalry. In this scenario it is made very obvious by the scenario that the sales representative is a fan of the rival team. The words in each manipulation were exactly the same, with the exception of the addition of the word “rival” in the second vignette, so as to eliminate any issues with fatigue or other bias inducing cognitive load concerns.

Following the vignette, respondents are asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the salesperson and their likelihood of purchasing from them. Customer purchase

intentions were measured using 3-items indicating the buyer’s willingness to buy from the salesperson, adapted from similar measures of behavioral intentions present in the service quality literature (Palmatier et al. 2009). Customer gratitude was measured using an adapted version of an existing 3-item scale (Palmatier et al 2009). Buyer’s satisfaction with the salesperson was also measured using 3-items adapted from the study by Friend, Hamwi and Rutherford (2011). Customer trust was measured using 3-items also from previous studies (Palmatier et al. 2009). All of these questions were measured using the 7-point scale anchored by “1-strongly disagree” to “7-strongly agree.”

Analysis

Measurement Model. All procedures within the measurement model were generated using SmartPLS version 3.0. The results presented in Table 1 suggest that the measures for the constructs were reliable and valid. Cronbach’s alpha scores ranged from .67 to .97 and our composite reliabilities ranged from .79 to .98, suggesting that the measures were reliable. The average variance extracted for the constructs ranged from 55% to 94%, showing some support for the reliabilities of the constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity was assessed using Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt 2015), specifically with the usage of $HTMT_{inference}$ criterion. The usage of the $HTMT_{inference}$ criterion was used due to the inherent difficulty of distinguishing the constructs empirically from one another. Using the $HTMT_{inference}$ criterion, the ratios ranged from .07 to .94, all of which are below the 1.0 threshold used by the $HTMT_{inference}$ criterion.

Factor Analysis. A CFA was ran to determine the factor loading and model fit of the data using MPlus (Muthan and Muthan 2019). The model fit statistics provided evidence of good model fit (SRMR .044; CFI =.98; RMSEA=.05) based on the standards noted by Hu and Bentler (1999). The standardized loadings can be found in Table 2.

Test of the hypotheses. The structural model provides support for all of the main effect

TABLE 1

	Scale	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	L-HTMT	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Congruence	0 - 1	-	-	-	-	-	-					
2. Customer Team Identification	1 - 7	5.31	1.48	0.95	0.77	0.27	-0.07	0.96				
3. Customer Trust	1 - 7	4.02	1.16	0.67	0.55	0.91	.26**	0.06	0.79			
4. Customer Satisfaction	1 - 7	5.36	1.36	0.93	0.88	0.74	.31**	-0.07	.48**	0.96		
5. Customer Gratitude	1 - 7	4.77	1.55	0.97	0.94	0.45	.31**	-0.09	.65**	.71**	0.98	
6. Purchase Intention	1 - 7	5.14	1.38	0.95	0.92	0.96	.31**	-0.07	.49**	.88**	.74**	0.97

Scale are the endpoints used to assess the constructs. S.D. is standard deviation. AVE is the average variance extracted. HTMT is the upper limit confidence interval of the heterotrait-monotrait inference criterion using a bootstrapped sample. Values below the diagonal are the construct correlations. Composite reliabilities are presented along the diagonal. ** indicates a correlation that is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

hypotheses. Specifically, we find that perceived salesperson team loyalty congruence increases customer trust (H_{1a} , $b=.33$, $p < .01$), increases customer satisfaction (H_{1b} , $b=.30$, $p < .01$), increases customer gratitude (H_{1c} , $b=.31$, $p < .01$), and increases purchase intention (H_{1a} , $b=.31$, $p < .01$). The SRMR for the model is below the cutoff of .05 at .047, indicating good model fit (Hu and Bentler 1999).

To investigate the moderation predicted by Hypothesis 2, interaction effects were included in the SmartPLS program. Interaction effects were significant for our outcome variables of customer satisfaction ($b = .18$, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$) and purchase intention ($b = .22$, $t = 2.80$, $p < .01$), supporting hypotheses H_{2b} and H_{2d} . The interaction effects for the other two outcomes, trust ($b = .06$, $t = 0.78$, $p > .05$) and gratitude ($b = .11$, $t = 1.42$, $p > .05$), were non-significant, failing to support hypotheses H_{2a} and H_{2c} . The interaction coefficients can be found in Table 4. The two significant interactions with hypothetical values are displayed graphically in Figure 2.

Further discussion of these results and their implications can be found in the discussion section which follows.

DISCUSSION

Research on salesperson similarity generally agrees that it is important for organizations that use a salesforce in their marketing plan as their final customer contacts before purchase to consider using similarity as a rapport-building technique. With this in mind, the endlessly evolving role of the salesperson in the buyer-

seller interaction (Wotruba 1991) has caused sales managers to constantly look for new ways to increase their sales employees' influence over their customers, and in turn, sales performance. The findings in this paper, not only support existing literature, but expand upon it in a sports marketing context, suggesting that a signal of employee who identifies with a similar favorite sports team may be one way in which a salesperson can develop credibility between themselves and their customers.

The findings from this research are twofold. First, our results from H_1 indicate that congruent team identification has an influence on how much gratitude the customer has for their help in the interaction, how trusting they are of the representative, how satisfied they were with the interaction and how likely they will be to purchase a product in the dyadic exchange.

Second, the results from our moderation analysis (H_{2c} and H_{2d}) tell us that the stronger the customer identifies with their favorite team, the stronger the influence of team identification on the customer's level of satisfaction and their likelihood to purchase. The insignificant findings for H_{2a} and H_{2b} may indicate that team identification congruence alone is enough to influence trust and gratitude in the customer-salesperson dyadic exchange, regardless of the level at which a customer identifies with their team. In other words, as long as the customer is in the same in-group as the sales representative, they will be trusting and grateful for their help. These findings have implications for sales

**TABLE 2:
Construct and Citation**

Customer Team Identification (Theodakis et al. 2006; Wu et al. 2012)

	Estimate	S.E.
Being a fan of my favorite college football team is very important to me	0.96	0.01
During the season, I closely follow my favorite college football team	0.93	0.02
Being a fan of the team is important to me	0.94	0.01
I really dislike the greatest rival of my favorite college football team	0.70	0.05
I will regularly display the name or insignia at my place of work, where I live, or on my clothing	0.87	0.03
My friends know that I am a fan of the team	0.86	0.03
I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my favorite college football team	0.90	0.02

Customer Trust (Friend et al. 2011; Palmatier et al. 2009)

Alex gives me a feeling of trust	0.94	0.02
Alex is trustworthy	0.97	0.02
Alex would NOT make false claims	0.50	0.08

Customer Satisfaction (Friend et al. 2011)

In general, I am satisfied with my relationship with Alex	0.95	0.01
Overall, Alex is a good person to do business with	0.95	0.01
Alex provided me with satisfactory service	0.93	0.02

Purchase Intention (Palmatier et al. 2009)

I would be very likely to buy something from Alex	0.93	0.02
I would come back to this store	0.92	0.02
I would likely buy from Alex in the future	0.95	0.01

Customer Gratitude (Palmatier et al. 2009)

I would likely buy something today based on my gratitude for Alex's effort to help me	0.92	0.02
I would likely ask for Alex in the future because I owed it to him	0.96	0.01
Alex would likely receive the opportunities to sell me additional products in the future as payback for the help he provided today	0.91	0.02

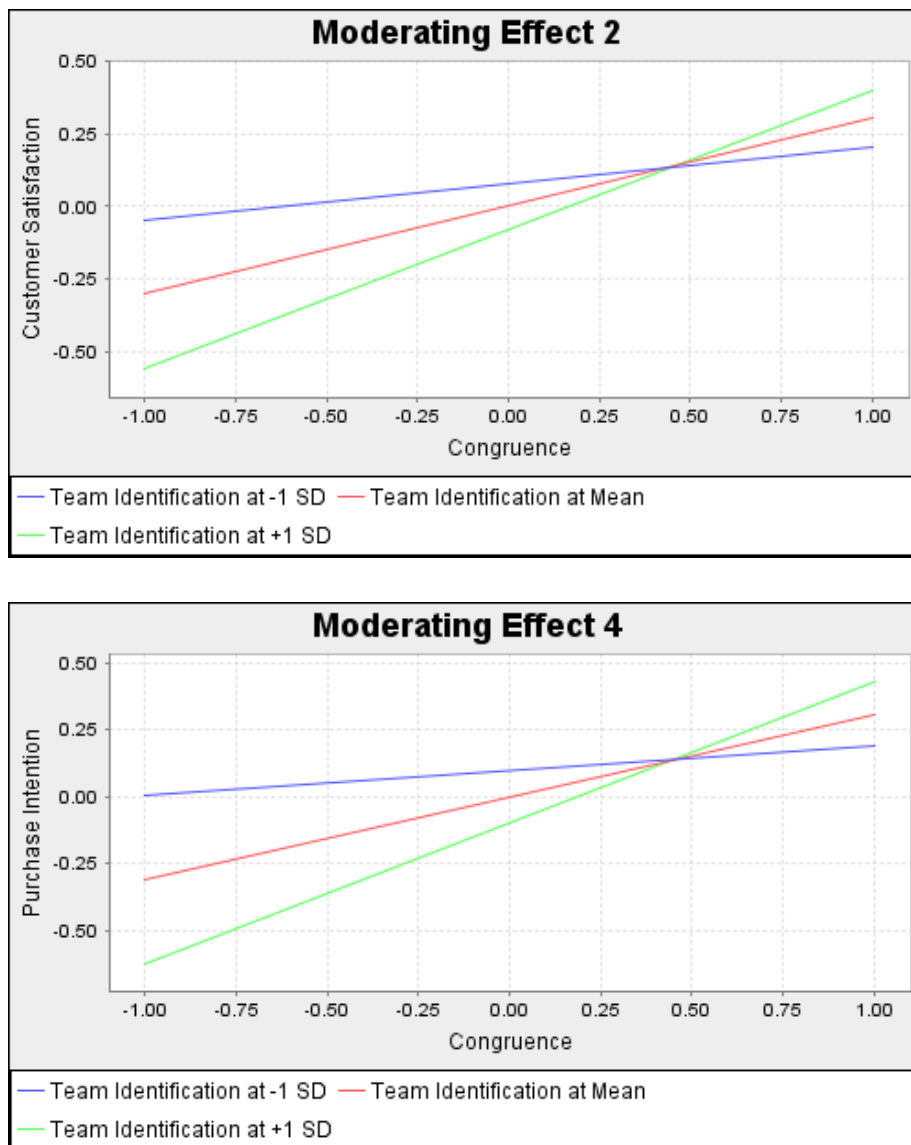
TABLE 3

	Standardized Coefficient	t-stat	p-value
Perceived Salesperson Team Loyalty Congruence - > Customer Trust	0.33	5.35	<.01
Perceived Salesperson Team Loyalty Congruence - > Customer Satisfaction	0.30	4.75	<.01
Perceived Salesperson Team Loyalty Congruence - > Customer Gratitude	0.31	4.49	<.01
Perceived Salesperson Team Loyalty Congruence - > Purchase Intention	0.31	4.61	<.01
SRMR		0.047	

TABLE 4

	Coefficient	Mean	Std Dev	t-stat	p value
Customer Team Identification and Customer Trust	0.06	0.065	0.077	0.775	0.439
Customer Team Identification and Customer Satisfaction	0.176	0.171	0.075	2.36	0.019
Customer Team Identification and Customer Gratitude	0.107	0.105	0.076	1.417	0.157
Customer Team Identification and Purchase Intention	0.219	0.213	0.078	2.792	0.005

FIGURE 2:
Interaction Effects of Team Loyalty Congruence and Team Identification on Customer Satisfaction and Purchase Intentions



managers, as they suggest that there is both a positive and negative side to using sports team identification to signal similarity and build credibility. Sales representatives should use this knowledge to their advantage when interacting with customers who voluntarily share information with them about their favorite sports team. By aligning themselves with congruent identification, the sales representative should gain credibility in the eyes of the consumer. Conversely, those who have incongruent team identification should avoid conversation about their team, as they may significantly influence their ability to build credibility with the customer. Our findings also suggest that sales managers should include this knowledge in their training, and their organizations should make a note of their team identification in their CRM systems. Further, the advent of social media and its use as a communication tool in the sales realm (Agnihotri et al. 2012) means that sales representatives could use this information to signal their allegiance to a sports team through additional channels, expanding the reach of this medium.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the significance of our findings, we regress that there are some limitations to this research. In this paper, the team identification of the salesperson has been manipulated using a vignette. The use of vignettes in research is a highly debated topic due to doubts on realism; however, its strength is in the ability to control any other outside influences on the situation (such as gender or race effects of the salesperson). Research using manipulation and scenario methods have, however, been shown to produce converging results for measurements of emotion (Robinson and Clore 2001). However, findings from this study should be considered with this in mind. Further, the mall intercept approach taken to collect our survey results may have had an impact on our findings, as those who are shopping in the mall may have some things in common that have caused them to go to the store in person as opposed to shopping online. With that said, the environment that the individuals were in when taking the survey may have also increased the generalizability of our study, as the respondents were more able to visualize the vignette in this

setting. Further, it could be argued that the decision to collect data in a retail sales environment may have limited our findings to retail sales and caused them to not be generalizable to B2B sales environments. However, regardless of the environment, the internal processes of building and establishing rapport is effective in the B2B seller-buyer interaction (Kaski et al. 2018). This is more eloquently stated in work by Mier (2016) in his aptly titled paper “Business Buyers are People Too...” Finally, we have not included a neutral reference group in our findings. This means that our study does not consider the situation where team identification does not enter the conversation. These limitations also offer some important direction for future research, explained in the section below.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is recommended to confirm the findings in this research, despite most of our findings being consistent with the hypothesized expectations. First, this study may have been limited by using the survey-based vignette as opposed to a real-life buyer-seller interaction. This compromise was made to control for the many confounding situational influences that can be had in a more realistic environment. Further research should look to implement this study in a retail sales location to confirm the findings. Furthermore, research suggests that many consumers have made up their minds about an individuals’ credibility within the first 30 seconds of an interaction (Ambady, Krabbenhoft and Hogan 2006). This means that future studies could look at the implications of differences in the timing of the release of information or signals of the sales representative’s team identification congruency during a sales interaction. The timing of the interaction may also be investigated by looking at recency to the most previous game played by the team which the consumer identifies with. Previous research by Wann, Royalty and Rochelle (2002) looked at post game positive effect and found that team identification played a role. Perhaps customers who interact with a sales representative following a competition may have higher levels of positive effect during the dyadic exchange. Future research should investigate post game emotions as a moderator. The location and topic of the collection of

survey data being positioned in a retail location in the Southeastern United States and using football as the chosen sport may also bring forth some interesting future research adaptations for this work. Looking at other sports, different leagues, geographical preferences, and different levels (professional vs. college) may be interesting future research direction. Further, investigating this relationship in a B2B setting may also offer further clarity to the use of team identification as a rapport-building tactic.

Secondly, team identification has been associated with two different forms of social connections: enduring and temporary (Wann 2006). This suggests that it can have differing influence on those where social connections are readily available (fans who live in the same city as the perceived in-group) and those where connections are more temporary (fans who find themselves with in-group members in other cities). With these different social connections as a basis, future research should investigate if the positive impact of team identification on the buyer-seller dyadic exchange is consistent in temporary vs. enduring environments. It would also benefit future researchers to look for potential individual characteristics, such as gender, to determine if there are other personal differences that could be moderators.

Thirdly, research could also consider manipulating the salesperson's perceived knowledge with more up-to-date information about their team and/or more long-term knowledge of the team (i.e., Can talk about historical names related to the sports team, like past Hall of Famers, as well as current results and news regarding the sports team's current games and players) as fans high in team identification tend to be more knowledgeable about the sport and team-related information (Wann and Branscombe 1995). Including the knowledge level as a moderator may provide some interesting results. Studies which investigate these differences should make sure to account for any consumer skepticism, as the differencing levels of team knowledge may result in a skeptical consumer as they don't truly believe the sales representative is actually a loyal fan as they proclaim. Future research should investigate the perceived team identification level of the salesperson to

determine if this is the reason why the other two consumer attitude favorability measures were insignificant in the moderation models. Fourth, the lack of a neutral setting does not allow for an understanding of the comparison between our two existing situations (congruent/incongruent) as compared to a situation where team identification does not come up. Future research may investigate this to gain further understanding of whether it is viable for a sales representative to bring up this topic, as opposed to using it more naturally in a conversation when brought up by the customer. Finally, this study only investigates attitudinal measures of consumer behavior. Future research would benefit from further investigation into the actual behavior of purchasing a product in a real-world application.

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APPENDIX

Congruent Vignette

You're shopping at a large retail store for an expensive electronics product. Unfortunately, you know very little about the product that you need to buy. You are hoping to find a knowledgeable salesperson. Alex, a salesperson that works on commission, comes over to help. You notice that Alex is wearing an armband that displays the logo of your favorite college football team. You spend a few minutes discussing the upcoming college football season with Alex. It is obvious that Alex is a big fan of the team. Alex proceeds to tell you a lot of valuable information about the different brands of the electronic products. You are happy that Alex did not pressure you to make a decision today. After you get home Alex sends you a thank you note via email which has his social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) contact information on it.

Incongruent Vignette

You're shopping at a large retail store for an expensive electronics product. Unfortunately, you know very little about the product that you need to buy. You are hoping to find a knowledgeable salesperson. Alex, a salesperson that works on commission, comes over to help. You notice that Alex is wearing an armband that displays the logo of the rival of your favorite college football team. You spend a few minutes discussing the upcoming college football season with Alex. It is obvious that Alex is a big fan of the rival team. Alex proceeds to tell you a lot of valuable information about the different brands of the electronic products. You are happy that Alex did not pressure you to make a decision today. After you get home Alex sends you a thank you note via email which has his social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) contact information on it.