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Gaining the Perception of Oneness with a College Sport Organization: Examining the Antecedents of Sport Employee Identification

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Collegiate sport employees represent a unique collection of individuals who play an important role in supporting student-athletes. As such, it is valuable to study and thereby enhance the development of collegiate sport employees as doing so can enrich the experiences of student-athletes. The current study utilizes Social Identity Theory to examine how to engender Sport Employee Identification (SEI), a specific form of organizational identification for sport employees. To do so, individual, organizational, and leadership antecedences were tested for their viability as precursors to SEI. In the study, it was determined that Person-Organization Fit, perceived organizational distinctiveness, perceived organizational prestige, and transformational leadership were impactful antecedents of SEI, and the effects of relationships with other employees and the visibility of the team/department were insignificant. This study provides an improved understanding of the contributing factors to college sport employees' identification with their parent organization. Practical implications for college sport organizations and employees, as well as future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: social identification, organizational identification, sport employees, theory development, structural equation modeling

S port management scholars have begun to investigate mechanisms to develop and support sport employees in an effort to improve sport participants' experiences, which in turn can generate positive outcomes and a competitive advantage for sport organizations (Anagnostopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2017; Kim et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). A central tenet of this position is the interaction between service provider (i.e., employee) and participant in that the more engaged the relationship, the more meaningful of an impact the provider may have on the participant. Given the entwinement of athletics and academics in college sport (Weight et al., 2015), collegiate sport employees are a particularly relevant population to study due to their influence on student-athletes' academics, well-being, and athletic performance (Kim et al., 2020). Another distinctive aspect of the college sport industry are its employees' unique attitudes and perceptions towards their professional responsibilities and the teams of their organizations (Oja et al., 2018). As such, it is valuable to study the psychological experiences, perceptions, and aptitudes of college sport employees as they can create a lasting and direct impact on the management and coordination of collegiate sport organizations and student-athletes.

One pathway pertaining to the improvement of the psychological experiences and resources of sport employees is examining their unique process of identification with their sport organizations (e.g., Oja et al., 2015, 2020; Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009). The argument that sport employees have a distinctive identification process with their sport organization is grounded in the belief that *sport* is the instrument that supports a palpable connection with a sport organization. Todd and Kent (2009) hypothesized that sport employees might experience a distinct identification due to a sport organization's reputation and the public's willingness to celebrate their successes. In following studies, scholars have attempted to uncover the unique components of sport employees' identification processes, as well as their antecedents and outcomes (e.g., Oja et al., 2015, 2020; Swanson & Kent, 2015).

Building off of Todd and Kent's (2009) model of sport employees' positive social identities, Swanson and Kent (2015) argued that individuals have multiple points of attachment to their organizations and tested their position with a model that utilized organizational and team identification to represent the identification processes of professional sport employees. The results of the study indicated that distinctiveness and fit with the team and organization independently predicted their respective forms of identification. Further, both team and organizational identification predicted commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, and work motivation (Swanson & Kent, 2015). Although the Swanson and Kent (2015) study represents a significant advancement in the understanding of sport employees' identification processes, subsequent studies have been crafted to specifically examine how and why sport employees identify with sport organizations.

One such study argued for a distinct construct labeled Sport Employee Identification (SEI), which is similar to Swanson and Kent's (2015) model in that both organizational and team identification were thought to be components of sport employees' identification with their sport organizations. Utilizing qualitative methods to study collegiate sport employees, Oja, Bass, et al. (2015) constructed a definition of SEI and proposed antecedents and outcomes. In a succeeding study, SEI was further defined when the authors focused on the self-concept of sport employees as opposed to their team identification in response to the development of a psychometric measure of SEI (Oja et al., 2020). Instead, two forms of organizational identification that are distinctly related to sport were developed: sport affinity and collective enhancement. The psychometric

properties of the measure supported the scale's reliability and validity (Oja et al., 2020). However, the measure has yet to be employed to assess the antecedents and outcomes of SEI, which represents a significant gap in the literature.

The current study was crafted to provide an initial examination of potential antecedents of SEI. A critical step in developing a construct is to foster knowledge pertaining to its antecedents, as doing so provides scholars and practitioners with insights into eventual outcomes. Restated, exploring the viability of antecedents helps to contextualize and specify relevant and meaningful outcomes of a given variable. In terms of the present study, SEI could have significant impacts on variables that are central to optimal functioning of college sport employees. More so, college sport employees work closely with student-athletes and are likely to have an impact on their school satisfaction and psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2020). These circumstances underscore the usefulness of exploring means to advance the efficacy and welfare of collegiate sport employees, as doing so can have a positive impact on collegiate sport organizations and participants (Kim et al., 2020). Relatedly, scholars have explored the psychological processes of sport employees that influence their psychological well-being (e.g., Kim et al., 2019), and have proposed that SEI can play an important role in developing psychological capacities needed to perform effectively (e.g., Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja et al., 2019). As a result, this study serves to help extend the understanding of SEI by examining the construct's antecedents. In doing so, potential outcomes of SEI can be refined and examined, which can support collegiate sport organizations' performance via improved employee efficacy.

Conceptual Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory is predominantly utilized as a means to explain an individual's perceptions of their memberships to various groups and the emotional value the individual places on those memberships (Hogg & Terry, 2012). Defined, a social identity is the "…*part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [*sic*] knowledge of his [*sic*] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). As a function of one's social identities, individuals naturally compare their groups to other groups, which enables the positive aspects of social identities in that group differentiation and distinction allows one to draw significance and meaning from the groups to which they belong (Jenkins, 2008; Tajfel, 1978). Further, distinction fosters relationships between members as they recognize the similarities among themselves based on the unique properties of the group (Jenkins, 2008).

A product of social identification is the formation of a sense of oneness with the collective. Burke and Stets (2009) emphasized the depersonalization–a removal of individuality– and importance of the collective when describing the oneness that results from social identification. Essentially, the group becomes an extension of the self, and the group is therefore another means for an individual to evaluate themselves. In turn, favorable self-evaluations promote and improve their self-concept. This process, known as the *self-esteem hypothesis* (Abrams & Hogg, 1988) or *positive distinctiveness* (Tyler, 2012), emphasizes the relevance of social identities and their value for individuals. In other words, individuals desire to join groups as a means to improve their self-esteem, which establishes a positive social identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Improving an individual's self-esteem or self-concept is one potential benefit of

Social Identity Theory. Another related benefit is that a social identity helps one remove uncertainty about their self-concept. Hogg and Abrams (1988) explained that individuals use the salient features of the group to help define relevant features of themselves, which provides meaning and an improved understanding of the self.

Organizational Identification

A specific form of social identification is organizational identification (OID), which has been defined as "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Pratt (1998) added that "organizational identification is the process whereby an individual's beliefs about an organization become self-referential or self-defining" (p. 175). Tyler (2012) noted how the "attributes central to the organization" (p. 155) are what permits individuals to identify with the organization and consequently derive a positive social identity from the association. To this point, employees' self-concept is critical to forming an organizational identity as a congruence between the self and organization facilitates a sense of membership (Dutton et al., 1994). In sum, a shared similarity between employee and organization generates organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994, Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Pratt, 1998).

The concept of organizational identification has been further delineated with Pratt's (1998) descriptions of emulation and affinity processes. Emulation reflects how employees will adjust their own views to conform to those of the organization. Conversely, the affinity perspective represents how employees evaluate the belief systems of an organization and compare them with their own, and a resulting symmetry enables organizational identification. Pratt (1998) described this process and cognitive reasoning as "like seeks like" (p. 174). As a result of the similarity, a *goodness of fit* among employee and organization is established (Ashmore et al., 2004; Stoner et al., 2011). The formation of an organizational identity, then, supports a *shared fate* or a singularity between the organization and employee (Ashmore et al., 2004; Stoner et al., 2011). This is emblematic of a positive social identity; when one has a shared fate with an organization, they are able to experience improved self-esteem when the organization succeeds (Burke & Stets, 2009; Tajfel, 1978).

Sport Employee Identification

The SEI construct has undergone several developments since its inception. The original conceptualization was defined as the "psychological bond arising from both organizational and team identification between sport employees and the parent organization by which they are employed" (Oja, Bass, et al., 2015, p. 584). This perspective, representing both organizational and team identification, reflects the viewpoint of previous investigations of the identification processes of sport employees (e.g., Swanson & Kent, 2015). Subsequent empirical examinations refined and advanced the definition and operationalization of the construct (Oja et al., 2020). A significant alteration was the removal of team identification as a component of SEI, which was based on empirical results and theoretical considerations. The study resulted in the specification of two elements that grounded the construct within organizational identification properties (i.e., collective enhancement & sport affinity; Oja et al., 2020). In doing so, SEI was repositioned to reflect attributes that are pertinent to sport organizations (Tyler, 2012) and also mirror the self-

concept of sport employees (cf. Dutton et al., 1994) that instill a sense of belonging. SEI is thus emblematic of a sense of oneness with a sport organization (which enables self-esteem enrichment) and a shared similarity between sport employee and organization (i.e., sport and competition). Utilizing the elements of belongingness (i.e., oneness) and shared similarity also served to align SEI within organizational identification theoretical principles (Ashmore et al., 2004; Oja et al., 2020; Pratt, 1998; Stoner et al., 2011). The first dimension, collective enhancement, is the acknowledgement of membership or belongingness with a sport organization, and an ensuing improvement to the self-esteem as a result of the performance of the sport organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Oja et al., 2020). This conceptualization positions collective enhancement as similar to the shared fate concept of organizational identification (Ashmore et al., 2004; Stoner et al., 2011). The dimension was defined as "the degree to which a sport employee accepts that there is a shared fate between themselves and the sport organization due to a perceived oneness" (Oja et al., 2020, p. 278) and facilitates a positive identification due to improvements to self-esteem.

The other dimension of SEI, sport affinity, was specifically developed to embody the symmetry between a sport organization and employee (Dutton et al., 1994; Oja et al., 2020). Specifically, sport employees who recognize a shared similarity, in the form of sport and competition, between themselves and their sport organization experience a stronger sense of membership to the sport organization (cf. Pratt, 1998). The sport affinity dimension is supported with the goodness of fit concept whereby sport employees recognize the resemblance between their values and their organization's values or belief systems (Ashmore et al., 2004; Stoner et al., 2011). Furthermore, the shared similarity of sport and competition serves to distinguish the sport organization from other groups or organizations, which supports a positive social identification (Tajfel, 1978). Utilizing sport affinity, as opposed to team identification, also maintained SEI's theoretical consistency by applying organizational identification doctrines such as goodness of fit (Ashmore et al., 2004; Stoner et al., 2011) and affinity (Pratt, 1998), and retained an emphasis on sport employees' self-concept as it relates to their organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 1998). Due to the modification of the components of SEI, the construct was redefined as "the psychological bond arising from an affinity for sport and a sense of oneness between sport employees and their parent organizations" (Oja et al., 2020, p. 279). This reconceptualization also offers a sport-specific description of the organizational identification processes of sport employees.

Hypothesis Development

There have been previous conceptual and empirical models of antecedents of sport employees' organizational identities. Todd and Kent (2009) proposed two forms of antecedents. One being focused on construed external image in that working in a prestigious and well-known organization would lead to a positive social identity and thus improve an employee's self-esteem. The authors utilized reputation, popularity/familiarity, and prestige to constitute construed external image. The other form was centered on member attraction to the sport organization, which consisted of member benefits and person-organization fit (PO Fit). Both of the proposed antecedent categories are based in organizational identity theory literature. Swanson and Kent (2015) tested an empirical model and found that distinctiveness and fit predicted their respective form of identification (i.e., team and organizational). In a separate model, Oja, Bass, et al. (2015) suggested that individual, organizational, and leadership antecedents would contribute to one's

SEI. The individual antecedents included variables such as PO Fit and relationships with fellow employees. The organizational antecedents included variables like perceived organizational prestige, perceived distinctiveness, and perceived visibility of the team or department. These antecedents are similar to Todd and Kent's (2009) positive social identity model. The last section of Oja, Bass, et al. (2015) model is entailed in transformational leadership, which utilized three of the four dimensions of Bass' (1990) conceptualization of the construct. Those three dimensions are charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. In light of the previous models and in an effort to better understand how to develop the organizational identification of sport employees, the current study utilized the three categories from the Oja, Bass, et al. (2015) model, but also included specific constructs such as popularity/familiarity (i.e., visibility; Todd & Kent, 2009) and distinctiveness (Swanson & Kent, 2015).

The first proposed individual antecedent is PO Fit, which is generally thought of as the alignment of values between the member and the organization and supports an attraction to the organization and results in uniformity (Follmer et al., 2018; Kristof, 1996). Kriener and Ashforth (2004) argued that individuals become more identified with their organization when they feel an alignment with the organization. Cable and DeRue (2002) noted a strong relationship between organizational identification and PO Fit and posited that when members of organizations do not share in the same values as their organization, such employees will find it difficult to identify with the organization. Further, Oja, Bass, et al. (2015) suggested that sport employees and sport organizations will have different sets of values, and when those value sets align, then a sport employee is likely to identify with that sport organization due to value congruence. Additionally, fit with organization and team has been found to influence identification with sport employees (Swanson & Kent, 2015).

Hypothesis 1 (H₁):   Person-organization fit will positively influence SEI.

The second proposed individual antecedent of SEI is relationships with other employees. Muchinsky (1997) noted the connection between communication amongst organizational members and positive organizational identification. Cognitive organizational membership is greatly aided by interpersonal relationships (Brown et al., 1986). Bartel and Dutton (2012) explained "the need to form and maintain interpersonal relationships with others is a fundamental human motivation that drives identification with social groups" (p. 116-117). Consequently, "Social interactions constitute another mechanism through which individuals may come to perceive themselves as organizational members" (Bartel & Dutton, 2012, p. 118), and thus spur organizational identification. Bass et al. (2013) posited that the regularity and strength of friendships between university alumni would likely improve university identification. Moreover, the participants in Oja, Bass, et al.'s (2015) study suggested that the relationships between sport employees aided in their identification with the organization. For example, one sport employee explained, "If you love what you are doing, you love the people around you, it will kind of become a part of you" (Oja, Bass, et al., 2015, p. 591). Restated, as one builds social relations within an organizational network, they are likely to feel more connected and part of an organization, which is a key tenet of social identification (Bartel & Dutton, 2012).

Hypothesis 2 (H₂):   Relationships with other employees will positively influence SEI.

The third proposed antecedent of SEI is organizational prestige and is the first of the organizational antecedents. Prestige is particularly noteworthy in the sport industry, as sport organizations engage in visible displays of organizational performance (i.e., sport competitions). Prestige is the accumulation of past success over significant periods of time, while success is more short-term in nature and is derived from single moments (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Sport employees, much like non-sport employees, are more likely to identify with their organization because the prestige of the organization will produce increased self-esteem (cf. Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Reade, 2001; Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009). This is a result of one comparing their prestigious organization to another less prestigious organization and the resulting self-esteem improvement as they perceive themselves to be prestigious because of the association.

Hypothesis 3 (H₃):   Perceived organizational prestige will positively influence SEI.

Distinctiveness is the next proposed organizational antecedent of SEI. Sport is an ideal environment for distinctive organizations due to specific colors, logos and geographic locations (Swanson & Kent, 2015). Distinctiveness allows employees to better recognize which organizations they belong to. Put another way, if employees are uncertain as to which organization or department they work for (due to a lack of distinction), identification processes will be impaired (Tajfel, 1978). In general, distinctiveness supports the central foundations of organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Mael and Ashforth (1992) found that distinctiveness was an antecedent of organizational identification and further explained that distinctiveness "differentiates the organization from other organizations and provides a sharper and more salient definition for organizational members" (p. 107). More so, distinction is necessary to transfer meaning from the group to the self-concept (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel, 1978). In a past empirical study, distinctiveness has been found to predict the identification of sport employees (Swanson & Kent, 2015).

Hypothesis 4 (H₄):   Perceived organizational distinctiveness will positively influence SEI.

Visibility is the final proposed organizational antecedent of SEI. Visibility is construed as an indication of the volume of organizational accomplishments and consequently their notoriety. This position is based on Fisher and Wakefield's (1998) advice that those organizations that enjoy a significant amount of success and notoriety should emphasize their accomplishments to foster identification. Todd and Kent (2009) proposed that popularity/familiarity would support sport employees' organizational identities, and visibility is positioned as a proxy for popularity/familiarity. Potentially the most concrete connection between identification and visibility of an organization resides in the ethnographic study done by Oja, Bass, et al. (2015). The participants noted how the importance of visibility for their specific department within the organization.

Hypothesis 5 (H₅):   Visibility of the team/department will positively influence SEI.

The final antecedent of SEI is transformational leadership, as initially proposed by Oja, Bass, et al. (2015). Transformational leadership is considered to be "the process of influencing

major changes in attitudes and assumptions of organizational members and building commitment for the organization's mission and objectives" (Yukl, 1989, p. 204). Restated, transformational leadership is thought to motivate employees in their daily activities at work. Further, transformational leadership might invoke higher expectations, create higher ideals and values, and improve effort and performance of followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bryman, 1992; Tichy & Ulrich, 1984; Yukl, 1989). The variable is based on Bass's (1990) conceptualization of the construct, which includes four dimensions: charisma, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and inspiration. However, Kent and Chelladurai (2001) warned of reliability issues due to multicollinearity with the inspiration dimension.

Transformational leadership was specifically selected as an antecedent of SEI due to past empirical relationships with organizational identification (Carmeli et al., 2007) and theoretical rationale (Oja, Bass, et al., 2015). More so, transformational leadership influences employees' psychological assumptions, which can be used to integrate employees within an organization (Yukl, 1989). Thus, transformational leadership is a seemingly relevant construct by which to examine the influence of leadership on SEI. In terms of the individual dimensions of transformational leadership, charismatic leadership has previously been connected to organizational identification whereby organizational leaders who devise a value system or standards that are accepted by the employees will spur identification with the organization as the values or standards are then internalized which produces improved identification (Carmeli et al., 2007). Leadership influences identification as the leadership improves the individual's sense of belonging to the organization. This occurs through the specific attention paid to the employee by the supervisor. Previous studies have noted the link between intellectual stimulation and individual consideration and improvements to identification with the collective (Shamir et al., 1993; van Knippenberg et al., 2004) and organization (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Martin & Epitropaki, 2001).

Hypothesis 6 (H$_6$):   Transformational leadership will positively influence SEI.

In all, the six hypotheses represent the potential pathways to SEI. The hypotheses represent three forms of potential predictors of SEI in the form of individual, organizational, and leadership antecedents. Each group of antecedents is tested separately, but with hypotheses of the same group tested concurrently to provide a distinct analysis of the impact of each hypothesis on SEI. Below is a description of the methods used to examine the hypotheses.

Methods

In order to test the hypotheses quantitative methods were utilized. The sample consisted of collegiate sport employees who were solicited to take an online survey. Antecedents were divided into individual, organizational, and leadership categories to better identify the specific influencers of SEI. Additionally, separate models were constructed and tested with structural equation modeling to determine the effect of the various antecedents on SEI.

Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval was granted before data collection began. Potential participants' emails were gathered with a simple random sampling procedure that involved

randomly selecting collegiate sport organizations' publicly listed email directories (Jones, 2015). Participants were provided a link to the survey, and their responses were stored within Qualtrics' online platform. After the initial email was sent to the sample population, two more reminder emails were sent out approximately one week apart. In order to limit common method bias, the items within the survey were randomized (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Participants

All participants were employees of American intercollegiate athletics departments. Following the guidelines of Oja, Bass, et al. (2015), participation in the study was regulated to those who are full-time sport employees and do not have *Athletics Director* in their title. A total of 2,000 sport employees were invited to participate in the study. Of the 2,000 invitees, a total of 528 sport employees responded. After reviewing the data for incomplete responses, the sample was reduced to 516 ($N = 516$) usable responses. Of the participants 295 ($n = 295$) were males, 216 ($n = 216$) were females, and five ($n = 5$) chose to not identify as a male or female. There were 428 ($n = 428$) Caucasian, 19 ($n = 19$) Hispanic, 33 ($n = 33$) African American, four ($n = 4$) Native American, one ($n = 1$) Pacific Islander, 11 ($n = 11$) Asian, 11 ($n = 11$) Multiracial, one ($n = 1$) Other, and eight ($n = 8$) participants chose not to identify their ethnicity. Participants' level of college sport was 404 ($n = 404$) at the FBS level, 28 ($n = 28$) at the FCS level, 71 ($n = 71$) at the Division I (no football) level, and 12 ($n = 12$) at a different (other) level. The tenure of the participants ranged from less than a year to 40 years. Lastly, when asked if they were an alumnus of their sport organization 326 ($n = 326$) were not, 88 ($n = 88$) were as an undergraduate, 61 ($n = 61$) were as a graduate student, and 41 ($n = 41$) were as both an undergraduate and graduate student.

Instruments

Within the survey, all items were measured with a seven-point Likert-type scale. The eight items from Oja et al. (2020) were used to measure sport employee identification. The measure includes two dimensions, collective enhancement and sport affinity, each with four times. Sample items include "Being involved in a competitive sport environment is important to me", "Sport is a fundamental part of who I am", "My sport organization's success are my success", and "When someone praises my sport organization it feels like a personal compliment". The scale has previously been demonstrated to have acceptable reliability and validity statistics (e.g., Oja et al., 2020).

Individual Antecedents. Person-organization fit was measured with Judge and Cable's (1997) instrument and has demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity figures in the sport setting (e.g., Hazzaa et al., in press; Oja, Schaeperkoetter, et al., 2015). These items measure the fit between the organization and the employee by comparing values, goals, and personalities. Relationships with employees were evaluated with the Sampson et al. (1997) Social Cohesion and Trust instrument. This measure has five items and was found to have an acceptable reliability level (Sampson et al., 1997). The items reflect the degree of unity and meaningful relationships between employees of an organization.

Organizational Antecedents. Perceived organizational prestige was measured with Mael and Ashforth's (1992) instrument, which has shown acceptable reliability statistics. The scale consists of eight items, with half of the items being reverse coded. Due to the problematic nature of reverse coded items and their poor performance, only the non-reversed coded items were retained (Weems & Onwuegbuizie, 2001). These items measure the degree to which sport employees perceive that their organization is respected and admired by others. Perceived distinctiveness was evaluated with a three-item instrument based on Carlson et al.'s (2009) and Jones and Volpe's (2011) work on the construct. These items are meant to quantify the uniqueness of the organization when compared to others. Team/department visibility was assessed with two items from Fuller et al.'s (2006) measure of visibility, which was demonstrated to have acceptable reliability. These items quantify others' degree of familiarity with the specific department and teams of the organization as perceived by the employee.

Leadership Antecedents. Bass's (1985) scale was used to measure the three dimensions of transformational leadership (i.e., charismatic, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation). The items were derived from Bass's (1985) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, with each dimension having three items. These dimensions have previously demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity statistics (e.g., Kent & Chelladurai, 2001).

Data Analysis

Before conducting confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modeling, the data were inspected for missing data. To account for the degree of missing data, Little's missing data test was performed. This test determines if the missing data is to be considered missing completely at random (MCAR). Such a designation allows the researcher to assume that there is not a systematic causation for the missing data thus removing a potential source of bias in the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). From there, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed. Mplus version 7.4 was used to assess the CFAs and structural models. The model included two higher-order factors (i.e., sport employee identification and transformational leadership), which called for Brown's (2015) two-step approach for appraising higher-order factors. This involved conducting separate measurement models that independently evaluated each high-order factor. Once the high-order factors were deemed appropriate, the next step involved creating measurement models with the higher-order factors and the other antecedent variables within a given category (e.g., individual antecedents). Measurement models serve to assess the fit and appropriateness of the model and are used before examining the relationships between latent variables in a structural model. For example, individual indicators were reviewed for their theoretical congruence and their statistical performance. Indicators with a factor loading of less than .5 were reviewed and their theoretical importance and congruence with other indicators were given careful consideration (Hair et al., 2010). Each model of antecedents (i.e., individual, organizational, leadership) were estimated separately. After proper model fit and theoretical congruence was attained, the correlations between latent variables were transformed into regression paths to create structural models. Structural models allow for the comparison of latent variables and were utilized to evaluate the hypotheses. Also, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) statistics were used to evaluate reliability and validity statistics (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Results

Before examining the results of the hypothesis testing, the data were reviewed for missing data. Little's test revealed that the missing data should be considered MCAR with an insignificant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(2207, N = 516)} = 2091.14$, $p = .96$. Due to the presence of non-normal data the MLR estimator in the Mplus version 7.4 statistical program was utilized, which accounts for non-normal data and adjusts the estimations accordingly (Yuan & Bentler, 2000). The fixed factor method was used for estimation. The measurement models were either just- or over-identified. In line with Brown's (2015) procedure for analyzing higher-order factors, independent measurement models for SEI and transformational leadership were created. After those measurement models demonstrated adequate statistical performance and maintained theoretical congruence, separate measurement models for each group of antecedents (i.e., leadership, organizational, and individual) were formed and various statistics were examined (i.e., composite reliability, validity, and fit statistics). All constructs demonstrated an acceptable composite reliability score (i.e., above .60; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), and AVE levels were all above .50, which signifies convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Lastly, the squared correlations between latent variables in each antecedent category were less than their respective AVEs, which indicates discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Sport Employee Identification

The measurement model of the SEI construct was found to have an acceptable fit. The model fit indices included a significant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(19, N = 516)} = 46.93$, $p < .001$, a close Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .98, a close Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .97, an acceptable Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .053 (.034 - .073), and a close Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .04. Composite reliability of each dimension of SEI was also satisfactory with SA at .81 and CE at .85. The items also demonstrated convergent validity with AVE scores of .53 and .58, respectively. Statistical performance for the SEI items and constructs can be found on Table 1.

Transformational Leadership

The measurement model for transformational leadership also had an acceptable fit. The model fit indices included a significant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(24, N = 516)} = 96.13$, $p < .001$, a close CFI = .97, a close TLI = .96, an acceptable RMSEA = .076 (.061 - .093), and a close SRMR = .02. One indicator, LIS2 fell below the .5 threshold. However, the item was deemed theoretically critical and surpassed the minimum factor loading of .3 to maintain significance and was thus retained (Hair et al., 2010). All constructs surpassed convergent validity and composite reliability thresholds. Statistics for the transformational leadership items and constructs can be found on Table 2.

Table 1
Sport Employee Identification Statistics

Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
Sport Affinity		.531	.814
Working in sport allows me to at least partially retain my identity as an athlete	.515		
I consider athletics to be an important part of who I am	.850		
Being involved in a competitive sport environment is important to me	.667		
Sport is a fundamental part of who I am	.832		
Collective Enhancement		.582	.847
If my sport organization wins a big game, I feel personal success	.814		
My sport organization's successes are my successes	.786		
Assisting in the success of my sport organization makes me see the organization as part of who I am	.718		
When someone praises my sport organization it feels like a personal compliment	.729		

Note. AVE = Average Variance Extracted
Note. CR = Composite Reliability

Table 2
Leadership Antecedent Model Statistics

Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
Charismatic		.811	.928
My supervisor is a model for me to follow	.921		
I have complete faith in my supervisor	.902		
My supervisor makes everyone around him/her enthusiastic about assignments	.878		
Individualized Consideration		.689	.869
My supervisor finds out what I want and tries to help me get it	.885		
You can count on my supervisor to express appreciation when you do a good job	.822		
My supervisor gives personal attention to members who seem neglected for individualized consideration	.780		
Intellectual Stimulation		.565	.787
My supervisor has provided me with new ways of looking at things which used to be a puzzle for me	.865		
My supervisor's ideas have forced me to rethink some of my own ideas which I had never questioned before	.494		
My supervisor enables me to think about old problems in new ways	.839		

Note. AVE = Average Variance Extracted
Note. CR = Composite Reliability

Individual Antecedent Models

The individual antecedent measurement model consisted of the latent variables: SEI, PO Fit, and relationships with others. The measurement model had acceptable fit statistics. The model fit indices included a significant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(99, N = 516)} = 191.52, p < .001$, a close CFI = .97, a close TLI = .97, an acceptable RMSEA = .043 (.033 - .052), and a close SRMR = .04. All latent constructs demonstrated adequate reliability and validity statistics, which can be found on Table 3. The next step involved a structural model to test hypotheses one and two (i.e., PO Fit and relationship with others predicting SEI). The structural model's fit statistics did not change from the measurement model. PO Fit did have a significant impact on SEI ($\beta = .59, p < .001$), but relationships with others did not have an impact on SEI ($\beta = -.13, p = .377$). Thus, H$_1$ was confirmed, but H$_2$ was rejected.

Table 3
Individual Antecedent Model Statistics

Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
Relationships with Employees		.584	.875
People around here are willing to help coworkers	.777		
This is a close-knit organization	.787		
People in this organization can be trusted	.823		
People in this organization generally don't get along with each other	.754		
People in this organization do not share the same values	.670		
Person-Organization Fit		.564	.789
To what degree do your values, goals, and personality 'match' or fit this organization and the current employees in this organization	.857		
To what degree do your values and personality prevent you from 'fitting in' this organization because they are different from most of the other employees' values and personality in this organization	.531		
Do you think the values and 'personality' of this organization reflect your own values and personality	.822		

Note. AVE = Average Variance Extracted
Note. CR = Composite Reliability

Organizational Antecedent Models

The organizational antecedent measurement model contained the SEI, distinctiveness, perceived organizational prestige, and visibility of department/team latent variables. The measurement model had acceptable fit statistics. The model fit indices included a significant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(111, N = 516)} = 237.38, p < .001$, a close CFI = .96, a close TLI = .95, an acceptable RMSEA = .047 (.039 - .055), and a close SRMR = .05. All latent constructs had acceptable reliability and validity statistics, which can be found on Table 4. A structural model was then crafted to test hypotheses three, four, and five (i.e., distinctiveness, prestige, and visibility predicting SEI). The structural model's fit statistics did not change from the measurement model. Prestige predicted SEI ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), which confirms H$_3$. Distinctiveness also had a significant impact on SEI ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), confirming H$_4$. Visibility did not predict SEI ($\beta = .13, p = .053$) and so H$_5$ was rejected.

Table 4
Organizational Antecedent Model Statistics

Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
Perceived Organizational Prestige		.542	.825
People in my community think highly of my organization	.783		
It is considered prestigious in the community to be associated with my organization	.749		
My organization is considered one of the best in its field	.738		
Employees of other organizations would be proud to have their children work here	.671		
Perceived Distinctiveness		.650	.846
I feel that this sport organization is unlike any other sport organization	.708		
I believe that this sport organization is very unique as compared to other sports organizations	.931		
This sport organization has unique characteristics compared to other sport organizations	.763		
Visibility of Team/Department		.623	.768
When I tell people where I work, most are familiar with my department	.818		
Most people in this area have heard of my department	.760		

Note. AVE = Average Variance Extracted
Note. CR = Composite Reliability

Transformational Leadership Antecedent Model

The transformational leadership antecedent measurement model contained the SEI and transformational leadership (i.e., charismatic leadership, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration) variables. The measurement model had acceptable fit statistics. The model fit indices included a significant chi-square, $\chi^2_{(113, N = 516)} = 227.33, p < .001$, a close CFI = .97, a close TLI = .97, an acceptable RMSEA = .044 (.036 - .053), and a close SRMR = .04. All latent constructs had acceptable reliability and validity statistics. A structural model was then created to test hypothesis six. The structural model's fit statistics did not change from the measurement model. Transformational leadership predicted SEI ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), which confirms H_6.

Discussion

The results of the study offer evidence of several mechanisms that enable sport employee identification as defined by Oja et al. (2015, 2020). As noted, sport employees (and by extension the benefits of their organizational identification) have the potential to enable an overall organizational competitive advantage (Anagnostopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2017; Kim et al., 2019). Consequently, understanding the psychological resources and processes (e.g., organizational identification) of sport employees is valuable to sport organizations. Further, there is significance in not only exploring sport employees' organizational identities but also the internal and external systems that can induce identification processes. Within the current study, internal (i.e., individual antecedents) and external (i.e., organizational and leadership antecedents) pathways to sport employee identification were evaluated. Specifically, PO Fit,

perceived organizational prestige, organizational distinctiveness, and transformational leadership all demonstrated evidence of being antecedents of SEI. While each of these antecedents offer different perspectives of sport employees' identification processes, several proposed antecedents did not statistically influence SEI (i.e., relationships with other employees & visibility of team/department). Below, each of the hypotheses are further elaborated upon, as are the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

Supported Hypotheses

In H_1, PO Fit was found to influence SEI. This aligns with past theory involving PO Fit and organizational identification (e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002), and speaks to the internal processes of SEI. Sport employees seemingly recognize the similarity or "fit" between themselves and their sport organization, and so they are more likely to identify with their sport organization. This finding can be described by Pratt's (1998) affinity perspective of organizational behavior, in that members feel a part of an organization when they realize that the belief systems of the organization mirror their own. Resultingly, there is further evidence that PO Fit does have a significant influence on the organizational identification processes of sport employees.

H_3 was also supported, which insinuates that the prestige of an organization will positively influence SEI. This is seemingly a function of self-esteem feature of SEI and organizational identification in that identified individuals perceive a sense of oneness with their sport organization and the perception of prestige transfers to the individual (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Tyler, 2012). Thus, when identified with a prestigious organization, a sport employee is likely to assume that the prestige of the organization becomes their own. Specific to this study, the value of being or working to be a prestigious organization would seemingly transfer to strengthening their employees' identification.

For H_4, organizational distinctiveness was found to positively influence SEI. Distinctiveness has been viewed as a fundamental antecedent of organizational identification as it serves to differentiate and create explicit borders between groups and organizations (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel, 1978). This reasoning also appears to be true for sport employees given the results of the current study. One aspect that likely supports the distinctiveness of sport organizations is the nature of sport with specific team colors and mascots (Swanson & Kent, 2015). While distinction may not be a difficult endeavor for sport organizations, it is still valuable to propagate the organizational identification of sport employees.

H_6 was also supported, as transformational leadership had a significant influence on SEI. Leadership, specifically transformational, can influence the dissemination the belief and value systems of organizations (Carmeli et al., 2007). As such, leaders play a crucial role in supporting organizational members' identification processes by enabling the recognition of membership. In a sense, transformational leaders can facilitate an acknowledgement of membership by helping sport employees to feel welcome and a part of the organization. Consequently, sport organizations that place an emphasis on and develop positive and transformational leaders are likely to benefit by having employees with a stronger identification to their sport workplace.

Unsupported Hypotheses

Hypotheses two (i.e., relationships with others) and five (i.e., visibility of team/department) were rejected as neither statistically influenced SEI. One of the benefits of the study design was the simultaneous measurement of all individual and organizational antecedents. Doing so allowed for the ability to ascertain what constructs were truly influencing SEI. To this point, the results of this study indicate that PO Fit stimulates SEI despite the presence of the relationships with others variable. The same is true for prestige and distinctiveness influencing SEI despite the existence of the visibility construct. Although relationships with others and visibility were predicted to enhance SEI, the current study positions organizational prestige, distinctiveness, and PO Fit as meaningful influences on SEI. This study does not indicate that relationships with others or visibility of team/department are of no consequence to SEI, as had each antecedent been tested individually, they may have been found to be significant. Rather, when grouped with similar variables, their impact was not statistically significant (e.g., organizational prestige may have limited visibility's influence). Yet, the grouping of similar variables allowed for impactful antecedents of SEI to emerge. In other words, the results of this study offer a nuanced interpretation of how SEI can be fostered by differentiating effects among similar antecedents. Consequently, sport organizations might consider the implementation or emphasis of PO Fit, prestige, and distinctiveness in order to generate strongly identified sport employees.

Theoretical Implications

Social Identity Theory has a long history of utilization in the sport management literature. However, sport organizational behavior scholars have begun to adapt the theory for use with sport employees (e.g., Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja et al., 2015, 2020; Oja et al., 2019; Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009). The current study extends the knowledge of a specific form of organizational identification, known as SEI, by examining the antecedents of the construct. The results of this study offer insights into the mechanisms that can strengthen SEI as well as devaluing the influence of other proposed antecedents. Broadly, individual, organizational, and leadership antecedents were found to positively influence SEI, which signifies multiple options for sport administrators and employees to build organizational identities within the collegiate sport context. More so, variables were grouped together in order to determine which variables uniquely influenced SEI. This study offers an improved understanding of sport employee organizational identification theory by exploring and ascertaining the antecedents of SEI. Although subsequent studies are needed, the current study provides an initial estimation of the antecedents that influence SEI, which has the potential to support the fulfillment of a multitude of consequential organizational and individual outcomes (e.g., well-being, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, psychological capital; Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja et al., 2019). Also, sport employees are thought to influence the school satisfaction and psychological well-being of student-athletes (Kim et al., 2020), and by enhancing sport employees' organizational identification, there is the possibility for improved student-athletes' experiences. Moreover, by examining the antecedents of SEI, an important first step has been taken to identify and then test possible outcomes of SEI.

Practical Implications

As college sport organizations seek a competitive advantage, one pathway to such advances are sport employees who are firmly identified with their sport organization (Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017). The results of this study provide several means for college sport managers to cultivate identified sport employees via internal and external sources, which could contribute to promoting valuable outcomes (e.g., well-being; Oja et al., 2019). Employee well-being is thought to represent a sustainable competitive advantage for sport organizations (Kim et al., 2019; Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017), and this study ascertained initial antecedents of SEI, which could eventually lead to improved organizational performance via employee well-being. For example, college sport managers might seek to increase their efforts to improve the prestige and distinctiveness of the organization. Undoubtedly, sport leaders desire to establish, maintain, or strengthen the prestige and distinctiveness of their organizations in order to increase revenues, but doing so also seemingly has a positive impact on their employees' SEI. Sport leaders might also seek to emphasize positive approaches in their leadership style, such as transformational leadership. Relatedly, positive leadership styles have seen an increase in scholarship (e.g., Kim et al., 2019; Kim, Kim, et al., 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015) and could also be beneficial in engendering SEI. Lastly, sport organizations might consider altering their human resource hiring practices in order to identify and hire applicants who would seemingly fit in well with the college sport organization, as it would likely help to infuse the organization with employees who would be expected to identify with the organization.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations, the first being that additional antecedents remain untested in terms of their relationship to SEI. Consequently, future studies are needed to explore other potential antecedents of SEI. Possible antecedents include other leadership styles such as authentic, servant, transactional leadership and political skill, as well as emotional perspectives (e.g., passion and pride). Also, other scales of antecedents that were not statistically significant could also be utilized, this is particularly relevant for the relationships with others measure which has not seen extensive usage. One item, "Working in sport allows me to at least partially retain my identity as an athlete", should also be further evaluated due to a less than ideal statistical performance–although still meaningful (Hair et al., 2010)–in the current study and in Oja et al. (2020) as well as considerations for sport employees who have never identified as an athlete. Another limitation is the focus on antecedents and not outcomes. Currently, the outcomes of SEI have only been proposed and have yet to be empirically examined. Future studies should be undertaken to explore the efficacy of SEI in crafting meaningful organizational and individual outcomes such as organizational citizenship behaviors, job engagement, job satisfaction, and psychological capital (Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja, Bass, et al., 2015; Oja et al., 2019). Specifically, SEI could be an impactful construct in the sport workplace as it has been viewed as a potential antecedent to psychological capital, which represents employee growth and improved psychological functioning (Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja et al., 2019). Lastly, this study marks one of the first utilizations of the SEI scale, and while the scale continues to demonstrate promising psychometric properties, more studies are needed to continue establishing the construct as appropriate for use in academic studies.

Conclusion

This study discovered several viable antecedents to increasing sport employee identification. The antecedents range from individual to organizational to leadership antecedents. Moreover, the different groups of antecedents were examined together, which provides a deeper understanding of which antecedents have a significant influence and those that do not. This study contributes to the paradigm of sport employee identification by detecting the antecedents of SEI. Identified sport employees are particularly important for college sport organizations, as having identified sport employees could lead to a competitive advantage (Kim, Perrewé, et al., 2017; Oja et al., 2019). Finally, this study serves as a starting point for future studies to better determine the impact of SEI in the sport industry.

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