Explaining attendance through the brand community triad: Integrating network theory and team identification

Matthew Katz a,*, Rose Marie Ward b, Bob Heere c

a University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States
b Miami University, United States
c University of South Carolina, United States

ABSTRACT
In this study, the authors empirically test a model of sport behaviour that integrates both team identification and a network theory approach to understand attendance at intercollegiate ice hockey games. Grounded within the brand community triad, ego network data were collected among attendees to measure the fan-to-fan connections that constitute the horizontal relationships of brand community participants. Additionally, a multidimensional team identification measure was used to illustrate the vertical relationship between individual and team. Both measures were included in a structural equation model to test how both fan-to-fan and fan-team relationships explain attendance. The results from the model support the salience of both dimensions of the brand community triad, suggesting that understanding sport fan behaviour necessitates including both psychological and structural elements of behaviour. Future suggestions for extending the study of sport fans through structural networks are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Paramount to the financial success of any sport organisation is the formation and continued commitment of a passionate group of followers (Godin, 2008). Within the realm of sport, managers dedicate substantial time and effort providing myriad marketing activities aimed at enticing brand followers to engage in a variety of consumption behaviours, ranging from stadium attendance to purchasing team merchandise. In attempts to better understand the behaviours of sport fans, scholars in sport management and marketing have extensive lines of research measuring such psychological constructs as team identification (Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014; Katz & Heere, 2016), team loyalty (Funk & Pastore, 2000), fan passion (Wakefield, 2016), game satisfaction (Yoshida & James, 2010), and service quality (Murray & Howat, 2002). Yet, most of these authors focus exclusively on the individual consumer in isolation and fundamentally ignore the structural environment and social relationships that so strongly influence individual attitudes and behaviour (Prell, 2012).

Individual behaviour is inherently embedded within a network of interpersonal relationships (Granovetter, 1985). As recent research in sport management shows, the interpersonal relationships among fans may be more predictive of attendance behaviours than the well-studied individual-level attitudes (Katz & Heere, 2013; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). This growing inclusion of fan-to-fan relationships is part of a larger movement within the study of sport fan behaviour
that recognizes the salience of interpersonal connections (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2015; Lock & Funk, 2016). One such theoretical framework for integrating fan connections is the brand community triad (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), which highlights three relationships: (a) the relationship between Customer A and the focal brand; (b) the relationship between Customer B and the focal brand; and (c) the relationship between Customer A and Customer B. After aggregating the two different customer-brand relationships into a single typology, the brand community triad consist of two types of relationships: the brand-customer (vertical) relationship and customer–customer (horizontal) relationships that together comprise the brand community triad. Since sport fan groups are powerful examples of brand communities (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011), we argue that including both horizontal and vertical relationships in our examination of the brand community provides a more complete picture of the sport consumption phenomenon.

Attitudes towards the team itself are hardly predictive of continued game attendance, overshadowed by a fan’s attachment to other fans (Yoshida et al., 2015). Such a finding, though surprising in the sport marketing literature, is largely consistent with the fundamental theory driving brand community research and the foundational assumptions of network research: that one’s relationships and personal network structures are important for predicting performance, behaviours, and beliefs (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Congruent with the brand community triad, integrating both the individual-level attitudes (e.g., team identification) and network-level attributes (e.g., centrality) provides a more thorough understanding of sport fan behaviour. Using the vertical and horizontal relationships as complementary measures, then, is consistent with the brand community triad.

Whereas team identification is one of the most examined constructs in sport marketing, some researchers have more recently questioned whether there is a link at all between team identification and fan behaviour (Yoshida et al., 2015). Much of the foundational research that establishes the link between team identification and sport consumption behaviour uses behavioural intentions as a proxy for actual behaviour, and as a result, scholars note a strong relationship between team identification and behavioural intentions (e.g., Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). Yet, Yoshida et al. (2015) found no relationship between team identification and actual behaviour, and they also failed to identify a link between behavioural intentions and actual behaviour.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the multiple relationships within the brand community triad as they relate to sport consumer behaviour. More specifically, we integrate the concepts of team identification and network theory to understand sport fan attendance. By integrating both the vertical relationship (e.g., team identification) and horizontal relationship (e.g., centrality) into a single model, we are able to examine the brand community triad within a sport setting and offer a more comprehensive understanding of sport consumer by complementing the two consumer relationships.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Communal approaches to consumption

While most of the current and established research in sport consumer behaviour emphasize individual-level constructs (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; Trail & James, 2001), there are some noteworthy exceptions that emphasize the communal aspects of sport fan consumption (e.g., Holt, 1995; Melnick, 1993; Wann & Branscombe, 1992). As an extension to this line of research, scholars recently operationalized sport fan consumption within the brand community literature (Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011; Guimaraes, Stride, & O’Reilly, 2016). Defined by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) as specialized, non-geographically bound communities based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand, previous research demonstrates the appropriateness and benefits of conceptualizing sport teams as modern examples of brand communities (Heere et al., 2011; Katz & Heere, 2013).

What differentiates brand community research from traditional brand-consumer studies is the recognition that consumers interact and build relationships with fellow consumers while maintaining the brand as the focal point of such relationships (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2006). Accordingly, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) propose the brand community triad to illustrate these two different relationships, both of which lead to value creation for the organisation (Algesheimer, Dholakiya, & Hermann, 2005). Marked by characteristics such as consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility to the brand, brand community members create value for the focal brand through their own consumption practices as well as their interpersonal relationships with other consumers (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009).

Within the context of sport consumer behaviour, Katz and Heere (2013) proposed a model of sport fan brand communities whereby the horizontal relationships are more salient for the majority of fans than the vertical relationships. Though their model was constructed within the context of a newly formed sport team, the theoretical findings are consistent with research in other social sciences that emphasize the salience of embeddedness – the notion that one’s social relations significantly impact individual-level decisions – on individual behaviour (Granovetter, 1985). Whereas Katz and Heere’s (2013, 2015) work was exploratory in nature, Yoshida et al.’s (2015) larger quantitative study echoes and supports their findings. Specifically, one’s psychological attachment to the fan community is a stronger predictor of attendance than one’s team identification, satisfaction, or behavioural intentions. But Yoshida et al.’s (2015) measure of fan community attachment raises some concerns. They measure perceptions of group attachment, which is different from embeddedness – the existence of direct and indirect relationships between individuals that influence how likely individuals are to interact, to exchange information, or even trust each other (Granovetter, 1992). People could express a strong sense of group attachment, yet refrain from developing strong relationships with other fans, simply because they feel the fan community as an extension of...
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