Predicting Fan Behavior: Expanding the Network Approach

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Human behavior is inherently embedded in networks of interpersonal relations (Granovetter, 1985) – yet the salient influence of social networks on individual behavior has remained largely ignored in the sport fan literature. In academic fields of study ranging from mental health to terrorism (Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010), the importance of networks has been extensively studied over the past two decades (Prell, 2012). Disciplines that once focused solely on individual attributes to explain behavior now see that embeddedness in networks is a determinant of such individual outcomes as job attainment, creativity, obesity, and happiness (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Rivera, Soderstrom, & Uzzi, 2010). The Western World is increasingly developing into a society of networks (Raab & Kenis, 2009) and the influence of networks and relationships on individual behavior is only increasing. To truly understand sport fan consumption behavior, we must develop a stronger understanding of the role of networks within sport fan behavior.

Recent research in the sport fan literature demonstrates that sport fan consumption outcomes such as attendance, word-of-mouth marketing, and psychological commitment to the team are related to an individual's social ties with friends, family members, or coworkers (Katz & Heere, 2013; Katz & Heere, 2015; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). Quatman and Chelladurai (2008a) first introduced Social Network Analysis (SNA) into the sport management literature as a promising yet underutilized lens of inquiry to better understand the social phenomenon of sport. In the years since, scholars in sport management have turned to SNA to study myriad topics related to sport, ranging from team cohesion (Warner, Bowers, & Dixon, 2012) to the Twitter behavior of sport fans (Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012) to knowledge transfer within Olympic anti-ambush marketing legislation (Ellis, Parent, & Seguin, 2016).

Network studies begin with the assumption that individual actors are always entangled in meaningful relationships that regulate and influence social phenomena (Bellotti, 2014). One such prominent example within sport marketing is sport fan communities, an area of increasing study by sport marketing scholars. Currently, researchers have examined the strength of sport fan communities by asking respondents how strongly they identify with their team (Heere et al., 2011). By doing so, scholars have focused on the vertical relationship between team and individual – largely ignoring the meaningful relationships between fans that influence individual behavior and decision making. While this research is valuable and has shown to be able to explain consumer behavioral outcomes such as attendance, media consumption and merchandise, it has not taken into account how the relationships between fans (horizontal relationship) affect said behaviors.

Therefore, in this research, we integrate both the traditional team identification approach to examining sport consumer behavior and an ego network approach to account for the social relations that influence social phenomena. More specifically, we use both the vertical team-fan relationship (team identification) and the horizontal fan-fan relationship (network analysis) to predict the likelihood of a season ticket holder renewing season tickets during the subsequent season of play. Such an approach can improve our understanding of the link between team identification, social relationships among sport fans, and actual attendance behavior of sport fans.

Method

Our study began with a list of all current season ticket holders for a Division I FBS university. With the assistance of the athletic department, a list of 765 existing season ticket holders served as the potential participants for the study. All participants received an email from the researchers requesting their participation in the study immediately

following the conclusion of the football season. As an incentive, a small monetary prize would be awarded to 30 randomly selected participants.

Each participant was asked to provide the necessary information to create ego networks based on the previous season's attendance, as well as items to measure their level of team identification from the Team*ID scale (Heere & James, 2007). The ego network questionnaire followed the name generator procedure popular in ego network research (Crossley, Bellotti, Edwards, Everett, Koskinen, & Tranmer, 2015). Essentially, each participant was asked to provide names of everyone with whom they attended a game during the season that just ended. After each provided alter, participants were also asked follow-up information regarding the alter attributes and about alter-alter relationship. Consequently, we collected the three elements (alters, structure, alter attributes) necessary to utilize all statistical methods within ego network analysis. In addition to team identification and ego network analysis questions, participants were asked a few basic consumer behavior items, including how many games they attended in the most recent season and if they planned on purchasing season tickets again next year.

With the assistance of the athletic department, the final outcome variable for the study is whether each participant repurchased season tickets for the next season. Because the window to repurchase tickets is still ongoing, we do not yet have these data. However, once repurchase (framed as a binary variable) information is received from the athletics department the data collection will be completed and data analysis can begin. We plan to analyze the data through logistic regression to examine how strongly team identification and various ego network variables predict the decision to renew season tickets. This data will be collected by September, which will allow us to report the results at the conference. Besides the season ticket repurchasing, the rest of the data are already collected. After removing incomplete responses, we have a total of 149 usable responses representing a response rate of just under 20%.