

A Qualitative Look at the Role Social Networks Play in Sport Consumer Behavior

Catherine Quatman, Texas A & M University
Annemarie Farrell, Ithaca College
Heidi Parker, The Ohio State University

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Presentation (25-minute)**

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Although die-hard fans may like to believe that they were born with the colors of their favorite team running through their bloodstream, it is not likely that having an affinity for a particular sport team is solely a biological or psychological trait passed down from parent to child. Nor is it likely that simply by virtue of being a resident of a particular region, hundreds of thousands of people randomly woke up one morning and decided to invest their time, money, and emotions into following a particular team. While somewhat exaggerative in nature, these examples epitomize some of the fundamental deficiencies in many of the research approaches toward studying consumer behavior in sport: 1) the failure to incorporate the time it takes to develop an allegiance toward something and 2) the social interactions and processes of influence that take place between people.

Studies within the domain of sport consumer behavior have often concentrated on the personal attributes and perceptions of individual consumers and variables such as involvement, attitude, and team identification to explain patterns of consumption (e.g., Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Madrigal, 1995; Madrigal, 2001; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2002). From a different perspective, studies have also implemented frameworks in which social norms (i.e., gender, race or ethnic variables) are used as explanatory schema for consumption behaviors (e.g., Dietz-Uhler, End, Jacquemotte, Bentley & Hurlbut, 2000; James & Ridinger, 2002; Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003; Wann, Waddill, & Dunham, 2004). Consequently, two common limitations can be identified in many of the traditional studies: 1) an overly static assumption of attitudes, involvement, identification, etc. and 2) an over-reliance upon psychological forces and conformance to social norms.

Although past studies have alluded to the role that social interaction plays in attitude formation and team identification, the authors contend that an empirical analysis addressing the complex nature of the social aspect of sport consumption is absent from the literature. While the distinctions and assertions that have been made from the conceptual and empirical explorations in sport consumer behavior thus far have provided much insight into our understanding, the focus of this presentation is to highlight some of the deficiencies of the traditional approaches and provide empirical support for the theoretical framework presented by Fink, Farrell, Parker, and Quatman at the NASSM conference in 2006. The ideas and assertions suggested by both the theoretical grounding for the study as well as the results produced by the study are derived from the literature in social network theory and analysis, and in particular, the line of literature pertaining to social contagion (e.g., Marsden, 1998; Rogers, 2003).

To support the framework, the authors draw upon data collected from a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. The choice of using qualitative interviewing methods was of particular value in exploring both the elements of time and social influence in the socialization process because as defined by Kvale (1996) qualitative interviewing "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p. 8). Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the revelation of participants' thoughts, feelings, experiences and reactions.

The purpose of this study was to delve into the processes of an individual's decision to consume products related to a specific sports team. The researchers sought to include subjects who were already fans of a particular organization and sport, but not of a related sports team. In this regard, the sport of basketball at a large Midwestern university with a longstanding tradition of success for both the men's and women's basketball programs was chosen as the context for study. The sample of participants was selected with the intent to capture people who were fans of the men's basketball program but not of the women's basketball program.

Because this study was actually part of a larger study investigating why women do not watch women's sport, the participants were limited to females only. Nevertheless, although the sample selected was through both convenience and purposive approaches like most qualitative studies, the researchers employed the use of maximum variation within the sample. Consequently, for the purpose of the current study, maximum variation sampling included the incorporation of students, community members and season ticket holders, as well as individuals of various age, ethnicities, races and sexual orientation. In addition, to build trustworthiness in the data collection and interpretation processes, the following methods were employed:

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negative case analysis, member checks, the use of a reflective journal, a panel of experts, and an outsider researcher review.

Ultimately, this presentation will address the role of the dynamic and social influence processes in the construction of sport fans and spectators. In particular, the researchers will discuss how a person's social networks can exert tremendous influence on fan identification and sport consumption patterns. The findings of the study suggest multiple strategies for advances in both marketing research and marketing practices and the discussion will include descriptions in these regards.