

New York or New York: Ascertaining Fan Choice Behaviors in a Multi-Franchise Market

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Because sport presents a tremendous avenue for civic pride, there is a strong connection between fan and geographic identities (Heere & James, 2007). Studies have shown that fans see teams as being representative of their geographic area, which spurs identification and support for these entities and their topographical landscape (Hyatt, 2007; Kothe & James, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Lock, Taylor & Darcy, 2011).

These research results warrant investigation into the decision-making process of fan identification for consumers presented with multiple teams in their geographic area. These fan decisions can be more definitive, for instance, when examining loyalties in Chicago, as the Cubs and White Sox tend to represent the north and south sides, respectively. The same could be said in New York with the Yankees (Bronx) and Mets (Queens). Conversely, for example, Hartford's proximity to both Boston and New York can give sport fans that wish to root for "home" teams a choice of 11 different professional organizations amongst the four major sports, as team boundary lines are rather gray. In particular, each sport presents numerous teams for fan attachment purposes.

Considering these affection alternatives, it is crucial to ascertain the qualities an organization possesses that may entice or deter fandom. Knowing these influences can improve a team's connection with its current fan base and also prove to be beneficial from a business standpoint. Understanding this information is pertinent for sport operations that are continuously geographically competing with others to expand their brands and consumer bases. While teams frequently compete with outside entertainment for consumers (Mason, 1999), the same challenge exists when sharing target markets with other sport organizations, specifically when promoting the same product. Previous studies have looked into the economic effects of multiple, competing sport entities in a singular market (Rascher, Brown, Nagel, & McEvoy, 2009; Winfree, McCluskey, Mittelhammer, & Fort, 2004). Though relevant, it is important to examine what piques their fan bases, which are the sources of the organizations' economic streams. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the procedures and factors for organizational attachment in a market that offers several options for the same sport, provided geographic identities play a role in fan identification.

The procurement and continuity of team devotion is important, as studies have shown that loyal fans are less likely to leave one team for another (Heere & James, 2007; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Loyal fans are also an organization's most reliable consumer, as 20 percent of a fan base tends to account for 80 percent of team consumption (Fink, 2010; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). As a result, organizations are at a constant drive to develop and maintain fan loyalty (Funk & James, 2001).

According to Trail and James (2010), the geographic location of one's upbringing can play a role in the development of sport fandom. However, it is often in conjunction with other socializing agents, such as family, friends, and to some extent, the media. This relationship connects to social learning theory (SLT) as an explanation for the commencement of sport fandom. SLT posits that, through the observation of role models, individuals are inclined to imitate and act accordingly (Bandura, 1977). Supporting this notion, further evidence has shown that family and friends exert a great deal of influence toward the development of fandom amongst youth (James, 2001). Specifically, Trail and James (2010) found that family members have the greatest influential effect between the ages of 6 and 15, after which, peers, community, and the media become larger catalysts for persuasion.

Social identity theory (SIT) has also been connected to fan development, as interests are matched with groups that characterize those concentrations (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). The individual's choice to become a fan of the team based on such a match is a fundamental concept of the theory. As a result, teams become symbols of the fan's identity (Here & James, 2007), making fandom a reliable representation of SIT. Because highly identified fans see the team as a connection of their social group, an onus is put on organizations to embody those social characteristics. Thus, this study proposes the following research question:

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RQ: If consumers have geographic loyalties that drive their fandom, what drives them to choose one team over another in the same sport if there are several within their regional market?

Qualitative analysis techniques will be employed in this study to justly ascertain the foundational influences toward choosing one team over another in a multiple-franchise market. Snowball sampling will be used to recognize sport fans that reside in a market that hosts multiple same-sport professional franchises within a three-hour radius. A team identification measure, developed by Trail and James (2001), will be utilized to confirm that the participants selected are acceptable fans of a team in that specific multi-team market. Only fans averaging a 6-or-above (out of 7) on this scale will be interviewed for this study.

A semi-structured interview guide will be used for this study, with questions seeking to capture the decision-making process of fandom for an avid fan living in an area with a myriad of team options. Because a basic inductive analysis will be used to examine the data collected, the interview protocol will not be guided by concepts of one specific theory, rather a combination of social learning and identity.

Discussion will be based on the theoretical connections derived from the data and will be associated with current fan identification literature. In addition to theoretical advancement, results will be applicable for sport organizational practice. Results will also be instrumental toward generating questions for future research in the shifting metropolitan geographic fan battle.