Recognizing Rivals: Developing Oppositional Brand Loyalty in Division III Sport Fans

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Since Durkheim (1933) observed the decline in geographically rooted communities, individuals have been searching for alternative sources of communal structure to satisfy their inherent need to belong. Interest-based communities, ranging from trade guilds to book clubs, were often the selected substitute in many cultures, yet even these replacement organizations have become increasingly rare in modern society (Putnam, 2000; Warner, 2013). As a response to this decline, researchers have recognized the inherent power of communities based on consumption activities, more specifically Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) notion of brand communities. Defined as non-geographically bound communities among admirers of a brand, these new forms of communities have provided a new conceptualization for understanding the role of sport fanship in developing a sense of belonging among followers. While recent works have demonstrated the potential of sport organizations to serve as brand communities (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011; Katz & Heere, 2013), there remains a dearth of literature examining the behaviors of individual brand community members.

An important component of the brand community literature is the notion that consumers derive meaning and identity not only from what they consume, but interestingly they also define themselves in terms of what and how they do not consume (Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Englis & Solomon, 1997). Referred to as oppositional brand loyalty, the development of a “we-ness” is often dependent upon identifying a particular “they” as a rival group identity (Bender, 1978). Consumers often derive an important part of the community experience and meaning of the brand itself through opposition to particular rival brands viewed as outsiders, others, or in other oppositional language (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). These opponents often serve as threats to the very existence of the community itself, and often their existence leads to the creation of identity salience and increased commitment to the community itself.

While much is known regarding oppositional brand loyalty, there remains a gap in our understanding of how newcomers develop a sense of oppositional brand loyalty, especially in weaker brands lacking immediately recognizable or public rivals. For instance, Coke and Pepsi represent familiar rivals to consumers of those brands, yet weaker brands like RC Cola may have more difficulty identifying rival brands (Muniz & Hamer, 2001). In a sport setting, this same difficulty for weak brands may also impact a new fans’ development of oppositional brand loyalty. Without a geographical or historical rival, how do sport fans identify rivals and develop a sense of oppositional brand loyalty? The purpose of this study, then, was to understand the processes a new fan experiences in the development of oppositional brand loyalty.

To best develop a substantive theory of developing oppositional brand loyalty in weak brands among new fans, a longitudinal grounded theory study was initiated among incoming freshman of an NCAA Division III institution. Two freshman orientation groups (n=38) from a small, private, liberal arts college in the American Southwest were selected as research participants. This particular research setting was specifically chosen because Division III sports often lack the media attention and popularity associated with “big-time” college athletics, and thus represent an example of a weak sports brand in the sense that fan identification and commitment are lower than for most major sport brands. Incoming freshman were selected because they represented new sport fans, with little to no existing relationship with the sports teams prior to the arrival on campus.

As part of a larger longitudinal study, three-waves of interviews were conducted by the researchers during Fall 2012, Spring 2013, and Fall 2013, with the final round scheduled for Spring 2014. Thus far, 51 interviews have been conducted, recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researchers. Using a symbolic interactionist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2012), interviews were conducted without a specific list of questions but rather with points of departure aimed at learning about participants’ views, experienced events, and actions. Extensive memos were completed following interview sessions, allowing the researchers to constantly compare their research findings before conducting the next set of interviews (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with a grounded theory approach, coding
occurred simultaneously with the interviewing process and was conducted using a multi-phase coding technique. First, an initial line-by-line coding was used to develop lists and ensure the researchers were open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the data, followed by a round of focused coding to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories and themes in the data (Charmaz, 2012).

While the fourth and final round of data collection has yet to begin, the data analysis thus far has identified the initial stage in the development process leading to oppositional brand loyalty. Importantly, the first step in the development process of oppositional brand loyalties appears not to involve specific rivals, but rather a larger and more generic conceptualization of the team and brand. For instance, many of the research participants defined their connection with their team not in opposition to their on-field rivals, but rather in contrast to “big-time” college athletics. For instance, one participant called his connection with the sports “a different kind of fan, [big-time teams] fans are much more prototypical – they get drunk, go to games, are really loud and obnoxious, and are super invested in the how the team does…we have a very different relationship with our teams.” While some participants were unable to name the specific on-field rivals, each was quick to point out the differences, almost always in a positive light, between their sports teams and what they considered major college sport teams. Similarly, another important theme involved how the participants’ connection with the sports teams was defined by the personal relationships with the players on the team, which was framed as something impossible with most big-time sports. As one participant explained, at big-time sport schools fans “fans will almost never meet the actual player – they might as well be figments of their imagination”, while those personal relationships were crucial to fans in this particular research setting.

The notion that new sport fans may begin their development of oppositional brand loyalty with a broader conceptualization of “us vs. them” has important implications for sport marketers and managers. While sport rivalries are often thought to take place on the field between two competing teams, the research findings here suggest marketers of weaker brands may be better served framing their teams in opposition to other structures of sport. New fans may have trouble initially identifying specific rivals, thus they require a rival that is more visible and easy to understand. The research participants here were unable to truly view their on-field opponents as rivals; rather they strongly identified the “others” as those programs who represented a very different structure and style of college sports with which they were more familiar. Moreover, while oppositional brand loyalty has been linked to hooliganism, intragroup trash talking and potential conflict between brand followers (Hickman & Ward, 2007), better understanding how oppositional brand loyalty is created will help marketers and managers better control the process and prevent negative outcomes through such means as promoting positive rivalries and differentiation on the basis of positive, rather than negative, brand differences.