Socializing New Fans: Venn Diagrams, Subcommunities, and New Member Adjustment

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Individuals need to belong – yet the traditional structures that promote and supporting meaningful connections are diminishing (Putnam, 2000). As a result, individuals are forced to reexamine the mechanisms through which they find interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging. Sport fanship, through its ability to create shared experiences, rituals, traditions, and a moral responsibility towards something larger than oneself, represents one potential replacement as a mechanism to find and develop belongingness. Sport fanship is consistent with the emerging popularity of loose communities – social groups marked less by the formal and hierarchal structures that dominated American culture throughout much of the twentieth century (i.e., church groups, political societies) and more by their porousness and fluidity (Wuthnow, 1998), which some refer to as “looseness.”

The notion that sport can help individuals find belonging is not a new claim (e.g., Warner & Dixon, 2013), and sport marketers have recently begun to conceptualize sport fanship as a fundamentally communal activity (Katz & Heere, 2013). Yet the very “looseness” that marks these modern communities also presents their inherent weakness: participants are free to enter and leave the community on their own accord. As a result, the long-term sustainability of any fan community is fundamentally dependent on the ability of the community to recruit, socialize, and maintain new members. Surprisingly, however, there has been an overall lack of literature examining how consumers join fan communities and the processes that mark their transition from outsider to insider within the communal entity. The goal of this research, then, is to explore the underlying processes through which new members join existing communities.

With the goal of developing a substantive theory explaining a specific phenomenon, this research employed a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory explores patterns in social processes and is an advantageous methodological approach when existing theory does not adequately explain the process (Charmaz, 2012). This research derives from a longitudinal study of two freshman orientation groups (n=38) at a small, private, liberal arts college in the Southwestern United States. This school participates in the NCAA’s Division III athletics and largely lack media exposure outside of their immediate community. Newcomers to this institution had no prior association with the intercollegiate athletic teams and making them “new members” entering an existing community. The data collection entailed semi-structured interviews collected in four-waves between Fall 2012 and Spring 2014. 31 different newcomers participated in the interview process, resulting in 73 with an average length of 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The data analysis included both memo writing and constant comparison of the data (Charmaz, 2012). Once theoretical saturation was reached for each wave of interviews, a two-level coding technique ensued beginning with an initial line-by-line coding technique that stuck closely to the data. Next, a focused coding process grouped the initial codes into overarching categories that became the stages of the proposed Newcomer-to-Member model.

The proposed Newcomer-to-Member model consists of three distinct phases: 1) Initial Entry; 2) Developing Membership; and 3) Full Member. In the Initial Entry phase, newcomers suggested differing experiences based on whether or not they entered with a pre-existing networks already established within the community versus those who entered the community without any existing social connections. The transition from the Initial Entry phase to the Developing Membership phase was, according to the participants, a matter of involvement. Newcomers recognized that overcoming the difficulties of the newcomer process was a matter of “Branching Out” into the community – a term used independently by several participants. Rather than viewing the community as some cohesive whole, participants identified the community as an aggregation of smaller groups that together created the larger community, something referred to as “subcommunities” by the participants. As part of Branching Out, newcomers
established weak ties in a number of different subcommunities before “Consolidating” their involvement into one or two subcommunities with leadership positions and strong ties.

The participants explained the final phase, Full Membership, as the transition from the periphery of the community into its center. Participants spoke of connecting the multiple subcommunities they were a part of – a phenomenon that multiple participants explained with the metaphor of a Venn diagram. For the newcomers, the process of Venn Diagramming was creating overlaps between the subcommunities and strengthening the social structure of the larger community as a result. Once this process was complete – or more specifically once a newcomer had played an active part in this phenomenon – the newcomers conceptualized themselves no longer as newcomers but as Full Members. There are several implications of the Newcomer-to-Member model for sport marketers and the development of sport fans. First, sport fan communities should be conceptualized not as some coherent whole, but rather as a collection of smaller subcommunities. Understanding sport fan communities, then, needs to be a bottom-up approach since that is how newcomers join and become socialized within the larger community. The importance of involvement in the Newcomer-to-Member model, suggests the most effective way to socialize new sport fans is to empower them to become active participants within the sport fan community.

Recent research has suggested that the horizontal relationships fans feel towards the larger fan community are significant predictors of continued attendance and loyalty among sport fans (Yoshida et al., In Press). Therefore, socializing new fans into a fan community is a pressing matter for sport marketers and sport organizations since solidifying a new fan’s place within a sport fan community has important long-term financial consequences for the organization. There is still more work to be done in order to understand the experience of newcomers so organizations can assist in the newcomer adjustment process, but the Newcomer-to-Member models offers a novel conceptualization of how new sport fans join sport fan communities.

Select References


Yoshida, M., Heere, B., & Gordon, B. (In Press). Predicting behavioural loyalty through community: Why other fans are more important than our own intentions, our satisfaction and the team itself. Journal of Sport Management.