“Success begets coverage begets success” (MacGregor, 2013, ¶ 4). This quote underscores the challenge for niche sports to gain traction in an overcrowded sport media marketplace. Cultural monopoly sports (e.g., NFL, MLB, NBA, & NHL) crowd out the more exotic sports (e.g., Major League Lacrosse). As a result, niche sports are charged with finding their way to potential fans by differentiating themselves from the big four goliaths. These activities may create or attract a differentiated population of sport fans. Yet, little is known about the differences between niche sport fans and their mainstream counterparts.

Social identity theory suggests sport fandom represents an important vehicle for individuals to develop and manage a unique social identity (Cialdini et al., 1976). This theory has been widely applied to the field of sport, especially to highly identified sport team fans (Trail et al., 2012). Sport fandom, however, is not limited to teams. Among other facets, fans also identify with sports, communities, schools, and players (Robinson & Trail, 2005). Thus, the current research team wondered if the type of sport (niche or mainstream) was an additional group membership device used by sport fans to manage social identity? In particular, given the premise of niche sport as a distinctive sport enterprise, does one’s desire for uniqueness (DFU) differ between mainstream and niche sport fans? DFU has been found to be a fundamental personality trait used to accentuate one’s social identity, and it has been determined that distinct products are attractive options to communicate uniqueness and satisfy one’s DFU (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). Taken together, the purpose of the current study was to explore the attitudinal and behavioral differences between niche and mainstream sport fans. The following research questions (RQ) were developed to guide the study:

**RQ1:** Is there a statistically significant difference in DFU between niche and mainstream sport fans?

**RQ2:** Do statistically significant differences exist in the frequency of how sport fans evangelize their connection to their most preferred sport based on the interaction of the sport classification (niche or mainstream) and one’s DFU?

### Method and Results

The target population for this study was all sport fans. A sample was solicited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). To group participants as either mainstream or niche sport fans, respondents were asked to identify whether they considered their favorite sport to be “mainstream.” This response was validated and utilized as the independent variable for RQ1.

A total of 611 sport fans completed the survey, with 101 identifying their favorite sport as niche (16.5%), 480 as mainstream (78.5%), and 30 as unsure (4.9%). The unsure group was removed from the sample to avoid confusion, and to even out the cell size between niche and mainstream, 101 mainstream fans were randomly selected from the 480 to answer both RQs. The resulting sample of 202 sport fans was demographically and geographically diverse.

The dependent variable for RQ1 was DFU, which was measured using Wu, Lu, Wu, and Fu’s (2012) four-item DFU scale. In addition, Robinson and Trail’s (2005) sport attachment factor within the author’s Point of Attachment Index and Frank and Schreier’s (2008) perceived uniqueness scale were used as manipulation checks to confirm the self-selection of sport classification (niche or mainstream). The manipulation checks, in the form of group contrasts, validated the self-selection of sport classification, and it was deemed acceptable to move forward with the RQ analyses. An independent samples t test resulted in no statistically significant difference between niche and mainstream sport fans’ DFU.

To answer RQ2, the DFU scale score was dichotomized high and low around the median scale score of 4.75 (on a seven point scale). Three of Dwyer, Greenhalgh, and LeCrom’s (2015) four factors of Sport eFANgelism were...
utilized to measure evangelical sport fan behavior. The use of evangelical behaviors was built on the premise that individuals desire to share their sport affiliations as a means for developing and maintaining a unique social identity (Trail et al., 2012).

A mixed design MANOVA was performed to answer RQ2. The results of the targeted interaction effect between DFU and sport classification were statistically significant. The follow up test of simple effects for each dependent variable uncovered statistically significant interaction differences for the Advertise and Assimilate factors. There were statistically significant differences between sport classification groups (niche and mainstream) on the Advocate factor, but not between both DFU and sport classification. For the Advertise factor, niche sport fans with a high DFU (3.46) scored statistically significantly higher than mainstream fans with a high DFU (3.11). There was no difference at the low DFU level. Meanwhile, mainstream sport fans with a high DFU (4.09) scored statistically significantly higher than niche sport fans with a high DFU (3.59). Once again, there was no difference at the low DFU level.

Discussion

Knowledge of sport fan DFU represents an important segmenting psychographic for sport managers and marketers looking to match distinctive sport attributes with individuals that strive for uniqueness (Wu et al., 2012). However, the results suggested no DFU differences between niche and mainstream fans. The evangelical communication of sport attachment based on the combination of one’s DFU and sport classification was found to be statistically different. It was found that mainstream sport fan’s with high levels of DFU utilize their sport to assimilate with others, while niche sport fan’s with high levels of DFU are more likely to advertise their connection to the sport. The presentation, if accepted, will cover additional theoretical and practical implications as well as study limitations and opportunities for future research.

References


