Conceptualizing and Measuring Tribal Sports Fans

David P. Hedlund, St. John’s University
Rui Bisciaia, Coventry University
Maria do Carmo Leal, Universidade Europeia

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Sport fans rarely attend sporting events alone (Hedlund, 2014). While marketers traditionally segment fans based on demographic characteristics, recent advances in understanding how sport fans co-create and co-consume sporting events provide substantial evidence that sports fans should be examined as groups of fans rather than as individuals (Mason, 1999; Woratschek, Horbel & Popp, 2014). While numerous labels have been used to describe consumer groups, including consumption communities (Boorstin, 1973), cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001), subcultures of consumption (Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996), brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), and brand cults (Belk & Tumbat, 2005), recent advances in understanding how sport fans engage in co-creation and co-consumption suggest that sport fan groups may be best described as tribal (Canniford, 2011; Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008; Moutinho, Dionísio, & Leal, 2007). Following this line of thought, and because of the fundamental difference in the process of marketing and managing relationships with individual fans versus groups of connected fans, the purposes of the current study were to (1) better understand how group (tribal) consumption works for fans of sports teams and (2) develop a scale which can be used to ascertain how “tribal” a particular fanbase may be. Based on both of these purposes, it is expected that results of this research may help sport managers and marketers better understand the types of fans their team has and identify ways to improve the relationships and positively impact important outcomes (e.g., attend the team’s games, buy the team’s merchandise, etc.).

For many years, marketers and researchers have attempted to understand fan behavior through demographic segmentation and analysis (Greenwell, Fink & Pastore, 2002). In other words, sport fans were categorized based on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socio-economics, etc.). More recently, scholars have begun to examine sport fans as groups or communities of fans (see the 2014 ESMQ 14 [1] issue on “Value co-creation in Sport Management”). Because sport fans generally go to sporting events with others and frequently create temporal relationships with those around them before, during and after the sporting event, increased examinations of how and why these relationships are formed and what are the different components which bring fans together would be beneficial for sport managers and marketers to understand.

After reviewing previous studies of tribal communities, there are two important aspects which can be used to define and identify tribal sport fans, including (1) a sense of community (a psychological feeling of belonging, a feeling of connection to the geographic area the team represents, and a social recognition from others of their connection to the team) and (2) shared knowledge (with other fans) of the rival teams and the symbols (e.g., logos, colors, rituals, traditions, players, coaches and heroes) of the team (Dionísio et al., 2008; Morris, 1981). It is the sport team, its athletes, and the games which are played that provide reasons for these fans to connect. In the same ways that human beings came together and occupied distinct geographic areas (as tribes) in early human history, a similar process continues to occur at sporting events based on the relationships between sports fans, the team they support, the geographic area represented by the team, etc. For important events early in human history, members of the tribes would come together. In today’s modern times, on games days, tribal sport fans come together in the same way to co-create and co-consume the sporting events and activities which occur at and around the game.

Based on a review of interdisciplinary literature, seven dimensions of tribal sport fandom were identified, including (1) a feeling of membership in the tribe, (2) a connection to the geographic area represented by the team, (3) the ability to be recognized as a “real” fan by other fans of the team, (4) knowledge of which teams are rivals, (5) knowledge of symbols of the team (e.g., colors, logo), (6) knowledge of the rituals and traditions of fans of the team, and (7) knowledge of the important people related to the team (e.g., players, coaches, heroes). Using data collected from four teams, including one Division I college football team’s fanbase in the United States (n=707) and three
professional soccer teams’ fanbases from Portugal (n1=270, n2=682, n3=423), CFA procedures were used to develop the seven-dimension scale, while SEM procedures were used to quantitatively analyze the relationships between the seven-dimension scale and five behavioral intentions outcome variables, including (1) intentions to attend games in the future, (2) intentions to buy team merchandise in the future, (3) intentions to recommend to other that they attend the team’s games in the future, (4) intentions to watch the team’s games on television in the future, and (5) intentions to read stories in the media about the team in the future. All items were measured using 11-point (0-10) Likert-type scales. In order to conduct the CFA, a random sample (n=500) of respondents from the four fanbases was created. To measure the seven constructs, based on an extensive review of previous literature and related scales, 28 items were identified to be included and tested. After utilizing CFA procedures, 18 items were retained to measure the seven constructs, and the model showed a good fit to the data (chi-square=199.95, df=114, p<.001, CFI=0.97, TLI=0.96, RMSEA=0.04, SRMR=0.04). Evidence of reliability and validity of all items, constructs and the seven-dimension scale overall were also found as all construct reliability and AVE values were above .70 and .50, respectively. Discriminant validity was also accepted given that the AVE value for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other. The remaining data from all four fanbases were then separately subjected to examination via SEM procedures. The model fit for all four SEM models (one model for each fanbase) ranged from acceptable to good fit to the data (Team 1: chi-square=477.58, df=213, p < 0.001, CFI=0.93, TLI=0.92, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.08; Team 2: chi-square=649.96, df=213, p < 0.001, CFI=0.93, TLI=0.92, RMSEA=0.06, SRMR=0.09; Team 3: chi-square=383.82, df=213, p < 0.001, CFI=0.92, TLI=0.90, RMSEA=0.06, SRMR=0.09; Team 4: chi-square=372.87, df=213, p < 0.001, CFI=0.96, TLI=0.95, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.05). For Teams 1 and 4, the path coefficients from the tribal sport fan constructs to the five behavioral outcome variables ranged from 0.59-0.67 and 0.30-0.57 respectively with all being statistically significant. For Team 2, the path coefficients ranged from 0.08-0.16, however, the path to watching the team’s games on television in the future was not significant. For Team 3, all five coefficient paths were not significant.

The results of the CFA and SEM analyses indicate that the seven-dimension tribal sport fan scale is reliable and valid, and for the fanbases of the American Division I college football team fanbase and one of the three Portuguese fanbases, all structural relationships are positive and significant. While it was hoped that all four fanbases would show evidence of positive and significant relationships for all examined relationships, it is possible that the lack of significance in the relationships for two of the Portuguese teams may be related to team success. That is, data were collected from the fanbases of the three top teams in Portugal after the end of the season, and only one of the teams won the championship. Therefore, the lack of some statistically significant relationships with the items measuring behavioral intentions may be related to the fact that some of the fans were “upset” because their team did not win the championship. Said differently, some fans of those two teams may be indicating that, at the time of the data collection, they were less willing to, for example, attend games and buy merchandise in the future due to not winning the championship. While the results are encouraging, the implications for some of the lack of relationships in two Portuguese fanbases may also be that the tribal sport fan scale is working as intended, however, some fanbases, while they are still tribal in nature, may be upset about a (recent) lack of success on the field.

In this research, a seven-dimension scale to measure tribal sport fans was created, developed and tested with four separate samples from one American Division I college football fanbase and three fanbases of professional soccer teams in Portugal. While more research on the relationships amongst fans of sports teams is needed, this research represents an important initial step toward identifying and understanding different important aspects of tribal sport fans and begin to lay the foundation for how the co-creation and co-consumption group processes work for these types of sports fans.