Ego Networks and Sport Consumer Behavior: Using Social Network Analysis for Ego Networks within Sport Brand Communities

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Perhaps the most salient topic in the current sport consumer behavior discourse centers on the inclusion of fan-to-fan relationships. Though scholars have long noted the social dimension to consuming sport (Holt, 1995), only recently have sport management and sport marketing scholars explicitly examined the impact of fan-to-fan relationships. Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (2015), for example, found that only a consumer’s attachment to the sport fan community significantly predicted attendance later in the season. Katz and Heere (2013) noted that the fan-to-fan relationships were stronger drivers of consumption for many fans than one’s psychological attachment to the team. And Lock and Funk (2016) developed a theoretical framework whereby ones interpersonal relationships with friends and family enhances consumption and commitment to the team.

In a larger sense, these recent research endeavors highlight the growing recognition of conceptualizing sport fans as members or brand communities. First noted by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) in their study of Harley Davidson Riders, brand communities are specialized, non-geographically bound communities centered on a set of structured social relations among admirers of a brand. Though much of the brand community research takes place outside of sport in settings ranging from Apple enthusiasts (Muniz & Schau, 2005) to Winnebago drivers (Peters, 2004), scholars in sport management have suggested sport fans rank among the most prominent example of brand community (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011).

Within brand communities, consumers connect with the brand not only through a form of psychological attachment but also through their relationships with other fans. Katz and Heere (2015) referred to these relationships as vertical (fan-to-team) and horizontal (fan-to-fan) in the sport setting based on the brand community triad proposed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). Within this conceptual model, I argue that sport management researchers have done an excellent job exploring and understanding the nuances of the vertical relationship through the study of identification, but have overlooked the horizontal. From Wann to Trail to Funk to Heere to Lock, few subjects have garnered the level of attention in sport management as team identification. Yet the focus of scholars on the vertical relationship has left a blind eye towards the “other” relationship with the brand community triad: fan-to-fan.

This particular study aims to guide the larger sport consumer behavioral literature towards a greater appreciation of the intricacies of the fan-to-fan relationship within sport. Building on the foundation of Yoshida et al. (2015), Katz and Heere (2013; 2015), Lock and Funk (2016), and other brand community studies in sport (Grant, Heere, and Dickson, 2011; Guimaraes, Guilherme, Stride, & O’Reily, 2016; Popp, Woratschek, 2016), the present articles takes an ego-network approach to understanding the contextual, relational, and structural dynamics of sport consumption. More specifically, in this study I take an ego network approach to explore the underlying characteristics of sport fan’s ego networks and the relationship between said ego networks and sport fan consumption. In other words, using ego networks as a proxy for measuring fan-to-fan relationships within the brand community triad.

Ego network analysis is one of the most popular methodological techniques within social network analysis (Crossley, Belloti, Edwards, Everett, Koskinen, & Tranmer, 2015). Unlike whole-network studies common in social network analysis, ego network studies are concerned with a node’s local environment rather than global network and focus more on the individual than the population as a whole (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Ego network, also called personal-network designs, are particularly popular in the social sciences because of the three distinct advantages over whole network studies: 1) the ability to analyze big networks; 2) compatibility with most statistical techniques; and 3) less stringent definitions of boundaries that can include multiple domains (Crossley et al., 2015).
For the study of sport fans and sport consumption more generally, the great benefit of ego network research is the ability to study larger groups without requiring access to entire populations. Whole network studies require researchers to define a population and the borders of such a population – for example, researchers would have to identify all fans of a particular team to study a whole network of fans, or all spectators in an arena to study a network of attendees. Moreover, whole network studies require an exceptionally high response rate (e.g., 75%) to accurately interpret a whole network. Based on these methodological considerations, the present study incorporates an ego network design as a means to further exploring the fan-to-fan relationships within the sport consumption process.

As other studies currently in progress, in review, or previously presented at conferences by the researcher have investigated the basic relationship between ego network size (i.e., tie central tendency) and attendance, this particular study is more interested in the structure of ego networks measured through alter-alter relationships and alter attributes. In the present study, alters were collected by asking ego with whom he/she interacted with during the game. This could include direct social interaction inside the stadium (if ego attended the game) or outside the stadium (if ego consumed via some technological medium) or interaction via digital means (e.g., Twitter, Snapchat, Text, etc.)

After each game during the 2016-2017 basketball season, participants in this study will receive a brief survey from the researcher asking two general questions. First, if they “consumed” the game and through what means (in-person attendance, television, live streaming, etc.). And second, participants will complete a name generator popular in ego network data collection (Crossley et al., 2015). Name generators ask ego, through an open-ended approach, to list all the individuals with whom ego interacted during the game and to indicate how they interacted with each alter (in-person, text, etc.). Next, name generators elicit information about ego network structure by asking about alter-alter relationships; essentially, if two names listed by ego also interacted during the game. And finally, alter attributes are collected regarding basic information for each alter. Participants were recruited from the larger student body at a Northeastern university, and each participant was incentivized with gift cards for participating in the study. Thus far, 30 participants have agreed to participate in the study and data collection begins in November, 2016.

At the end of the season, all data will be aggregated by participant to create an ego network for each participant. The ego network will consist of all the ties between ego and alter valued based on the number of games with a reported interaction. Alter-alter relationships will also be included to generate valued sociograms for each participant using Ucinet (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). The inclusion of ego-alter ties, alter-alter ties, and alter attributes allows for the full use of ego network measures and analysis, including the structural shape of each network, ego-alter similarity, alter desperation, alter-central tendency, tie dispersion, and tie-central tendency (Borgatti et al., 2013; Crossley et al., 2015).

Though data has not yet been collected, the method used to design this study is consistent with ego network analysis as described by Crossley et al. (2015) and Borgatti et al. (2013). Moreover, the focus on fan-to-fan relationships is supported by the recent research findings in sport management highlighting the salience of fan relationships in the sport consumption process. And finally, the particular focus in this study of ego network structure is a novel contribution to the sport consumer behavior literature. I am unaware of any research that has included ego structure within the study of sport fans, which should enhance our understanding of the overlooked horizontal dimension of the brand community triad.