Distance Matters: A Comparison of Socialization, Motives, and Group Identities between Distant Fans and Local Fans

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Sport fandom is considered an extension of place identity and an instrument to connect with a community (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Wise & Harris, 2010). Various scholars have written about geography as a factor influencing an individual's identification with a sports team (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). Wann et al. (1996) reported geographic-based reasons such as the town, city, or state a team represents; further, living in or around the area that is home to a team is believed to be a salient factor driving the formation and continuation of fandom. Jones (1997) maintained that locality was the most important factor for identification with an English soccer team. Even though geography has been found to impact sport fandom, previous researchers rarely address the impact of being geographically distant. The dominant predisposition in sport fandoms studies has been focused on local fans of professional or college-level teams (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Kolbe & James, 2000; Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005).

In our media-saturated society, however, physical borders appear to be increasingly transparent and less salient. Real (2006) described the “disappearance” of borders as “the death of distance in sports fandom” (p. 191). Silk and Chumley (2004) observed that global communication networks had compressed and disassembled the traditional geography-based boundaries and restructured the fan's experience of spatiality. Ingham and McDonald (2003) explained that fans did not necessarily reside in a shared geographical space to form a sense of belonging and community. However, the evolution of the means of connection does not suggest a homogenous fandom experience among people living in different places (Friedman, 2005).

Building on previous studies that included geographic location as a variable of interest influencing fandom (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Wann, 2006), we classified sport fans into three categories: local fan, displaced fan, and distant fan. The local fans are those who support a team in the geographic region in which they reside (Wann, 2006; Wann & Martin, 2008); the displaced fan is defined as one who previously lived in proximity to a favorite team, but subsequently resides outside that team's geographic market (Wann, 2006); the distant fan is defined as those who follow a favorite team to which they are geographically distant, and have not previously resided near or even been in physical proximity (Pu & James, 2015). In this study, we focus on comparing distant fans and local fans on multiple variables including socialization agents, consumption motives, and group identities.

Socialization
Socialization is a process through which people learn the attitudes, values, and actions that are considered appropriate to a particular society (Casper & Menefee, 2010; Kenyon & McPherson, 1973). Previous researchers of local fans have identified that influence from socializing agents-especially the family-had an essential role in influencing the formation of fandom (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). However, for distant fans who most likely grow up without strong familial influences in relation to be fans of a distant team, family members are expected to register as less salient compared to other socialization agents. Accordingly, with the first question we aim to compare the salience of socialization agents:

RQ1: Is there a difference regarding the importance of socialization agents between local fans and distant fans?

Motives
A variety of studies have been conducted to examine the motives of sport consumption (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; McDonald, Milne & Hong, 2002; Trail & James, 2001). No study to date, however, has examined the impact of various motives on sport consumption related to the consumers’ geographical residence. One conclusion from
previous studies is that fans who are identified with nonlocal teams are likely to possess distinctive motives compared to their local counterparts (Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Pu & James, 2015; Hyatt, 2008). In this study, we are interested in comparing distant fans with local fans to see whether there are differences in consumption motives:

RQ2: Are there differences in the motives for following a favorite team between local fans and distant fans?

Group Identities
Team identity as the focal object of sport consumer studies refers to the extent to which an individual perceives a sense of belonging with or connection to a particular team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Scholars have demonstrated that multiple objects (e.g., coach, athletes, facility) may comprise the focal team (Delia, 2015), and that a sports team may be representative of other group identities (e.g., state, university) (Heere & James, 2007a). Heere and James refer to the different group identities as external and internal groups. External group identities include identification with external communities such as geographic places (e.g., city, region, nation) (Heere & James, 2007b). Internal group identities consist of a sub-section of a team such as an online community and fan club. Lock and Funk (2006) suggests that consumers are able to use multiple levels of group identities to satisfy different social and psychological needs. In this study, we suggest that the distant fans possess a relatively weak identification with external groups compared to the local fans, because they generally occupy a direct while relatively simple and exclusive superordinate identification with team. Moreover, we suggest that an individual’s identification with external groups is influenced by the degree to which he or she is identified with the team. Heere, James, Yoshida, and Seremin (2011) indicate that team identification can be explained by external group identities such as university and city identity. In this study, we suggest that external group identities can positively affect team identity, and vice versa, even for distant fans who initially had no identification with the associated external communities, they could still have developed external group identities through strengthened team identification, which can be explained by the “Halo Effect” (Hunter et al., 1999). For example, a fan of the New York Yankees might later encompass the city of New York as part of its self-concept. Based on the aforementioned literature, our third research questions include:

RQ3a: Are there differences in the external group identities between distant fans and local fans?

RQ3b: Is there a positive relationship between team identities and external group identities across both distant fans and local fans?

The data will be collected via an online survey from individuals who are identified with a focal sports team. One sample will include local fans that live in the geographic area that is home to the team. A second sample will include distant fans that have not, and do not, live geographic proximity to the focal team. The survey instrument will be derived from previous studies of external group identity (Heere et al., 2011) and fan socialization (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). The survey will also include the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption to examine the motives and team identification (Trail & James, 2001). Consumption behavior including media usage and buying behavior in relation to the participant’s favorite distant team will also be measured. The data will be analyzed using SPSS 21.0. The results of this project will be included in the conference presentation.