Steelers in Kansas: Why Distant Fans Join and Continue to Participate in a Pittsburgh Football Viewing Party

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The means of consumption for sport have grown over the past decades, and sport organizations and sport leagues are constantly faced with the challenge of addressing fan bases that live outside of the team vicinity. These distant fan bases continue to increase as fans move from state to state at an alarming rate. Specifically, in 2011, nine million people moved from one state to another, indicating the significant mobility of United States residents. Professional leagues have addressed their mobile fan bases with sport packages such as NFL Sunday Ticket, NBA League Pass, and MLB TV, which allow these distant fans to continue to follow their favorite teams. As television revenues are increasingly high, and these contracts are based in part on ratings, distant fans are increasingly important (Collins et al., 2016).

These distant fan groups, driven by increased mobility and technology, represent modern society and future trends. Within the sport realm, allegiances are tested as residences change and individuals assimilate to their new environment. In such an environment, psychological benefits of temporary connections may emerge when a distant fan consumes his or her favorite team on television while in the vicinity of other distant fans (Wann, 2006a; Wann et al., 2011). Kraszewski (2008) found examples of this phenomenon while studying professional football fans in football bars located in Fort Worth, Texas. Specific team bars have been known to offer a communal setting where fans are able to recreate former identities through mutually interacting and consuming the televised game (Kraszewski, 2008).

Even though the distant fan has received some empirical attention, these studies primarily focus on how distant fans maintain their allegiance through sports and the use of new media to continue these connections. While focusing on technology and new media has added to our understanding of the distant fan, understanding why these fans stay engaged with their favorite team and how they celebrate and attach meaning to their connection in a communal setting represents a void in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to look at distant fan’s points of attachment and how their psychological well-being is impacted by watch party groups. The authors also desire to explore how a specific Pittsburgh Steelers watch party group impacts the individual’s fandom.

Review of Literature

Using social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), authors have focused on the construct of team identification and “local fans” that identify with a team because of their geographical proximity (Hunt, Bristol, & Bradshaw, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Going beyond just geographical location, Kolbe and James (2000) found in a study on fans of the Cleveland Browns, that the factor of being their “hometown” team was one of the strongest reasons for why they continued to be a fan. This concept was directly applied to distant fans, and similar results were found regarding “hometown” teams (Collins et al., 2016). Continuing with previous research conducted on distant fans, the Team Identification-Psychological Health Model has been used to addresses psychological well-being. This model has been utilized to discover ways fans of distant teams may still receive social benefits despite the geographical distance (Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011).

Another area of literature that was utilized in the current study was points of attachment. Sport spectator’s level and type of attachment has been shown to ultimately influence an individual’s emotional identification to sport (Bowlby, 1969). Within sport, this emotional identification is viewed as multidimensional and scholars have recognized the possible existence of different points of attachment (Kwon, Trail & Anderson, 2005; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Woo, Trail, Kwon, & Anderson, 2009). In regards to distant sport fans, several factors have been used when describing
how an individual exhibits attachment in sport. These factors are: player, coach, community, university, level of
sport, sport itself, team, and fan community attachment (Robinson & Trail, 2005; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere & James,
2015). In relation to our specific study, we anticipate that fan community attachment (Yoshida et al., 2015) will be
vital in identifying the emotional connection distant fans experience with their favorite sport team.

Methods and Anticipated Contributions
A qualitative research design will be implemented to discover the prevalent themes behind joining and continuing to
participate in Steeler watch parties with other distant fans. Distant fans who participate in Steelers watch parties at a
sports bar in a suburb of a major metropolitan area will be interviewed until data saturation is achieved. Distant fans
are viewed by the authors as any fan who lives more than 100 miles away from their favorite team, regardless if they
have ever lived in the city. Social identity theory (SIT), psychological well-being, and points of attachment literature
will be used to guide the semi-structured interview prompts. The results of this study will have theoretical and
practical importance to the emerging line of research on distant sport fans. Theoretically, discovering similarities and
differences between the previous research conducted on local fan’s psychological well-being to the current research
on the psychological well-being of distant fans has importance. Practically, the results will provide administrators
with an understanding of what impacts a distant fan’s attachment to a sport team. Future research opportunities will
be discussed regarding distant fans and social identity theory, psychological well-being, and points of attachment.