Among the many salient characteristics of brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), few prove more impactful in the context of sport fans than their non-geographically bound nature. Sport fans need not live in a specific geographic location as major sport brands (e.g., Real Madrid) leverage communication technologies (e.g., fan websites, social media channels, international broadcasting) to cultivate fans in countries all over the world. While a sport brand’s reach can extend across borders and timezones, the strength of the brand’s connection to distant fans requires more than just a psychological attachment between the fan and the foreign team. Localized relationships with other remote fans of the same team may be more important for growing team identification than other links for attachment.

Studies on brand communities in sport have found that consumer interactions with fellow fans significantly influences sport consumption (Katz & Heere, 2015). For instance, a study by Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (2015) found that a fan’s attachment to other fans predicted future attendance for Japanese soccer fans. Similarly, a recent study by Katz, Ward, and Heere (In Press) found that ego networks of fans significantly explained variance in attendance. Seemingly each year, new research adds to the growing narrative that other fans matter in examining and understanding sport fan behavior.

For fans located hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of miles away from a team’s official stadium or arena, finding and maintaining fan-to-fan relationships may prove challenging. While online communities of sport fans provide some degree of fan interaction, the relationships developed online do not provide remote fans with the same sense of belonging that results from more interpersonal relationships (Keller, 2007; Libai et al., 2010). To compensate, remote sport fans have developed fan clubs in their own communities (e.g., Kraszewski, 2008). Previous studies have examined strategies for maintaining fan identity for remote or displaced fans (e.g., Collins, Heere, Shapiro, Ridinger, & Wear, 2016), but those studies did not investigate the structure of fan relationships within remote sport fan clubs. If fan-to-fan relationships are important factors in explaining sport consumption behavior, then we posit that a much deeper understanding of the relationships that sustain both the fan club and individual fans is needed.

In this study, we hope to extend the developing discourse on fan networks explicitly into the realm of sport fan clubs. Lock and Funk (2015) proposed a framework for incorporating multiple identities of sport consumers, the Multiple-In Group Identity Framework, whereby groups within and beyond the team identity influences consumption. For instance, tailgaters may identify with both the focal team and the tailgating groups (Katz & Heere, 2013) and American soccer fans with both the national team and the American Outlaws fan club (Tyler, 2013). We position the current study as an extension of those previous works by incorporating network theory (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011) and brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) within the context of an official fan club of a European soccer team.

Network theory refers to the mechanisms and processes that interact with network characteristics and yield particular outcomes for individuals or groups (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). A fan’s ties with other fans and their structural location in fan group network theoretically impacts a wide spectrum of behavioral and attitudinal outcomes for the individual fan. Moreover, the brand community triad (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) suggests that a fan’s relationship with the brand and a fan’s relationship with other community members both influence consumption behaviors towards the focal brand. From a theoretical perspective, the present study allows for an integration of network theory, the brand community triad, and Lock and Funk’s (2016) MIIF.
To understand how the multiple identities of fan club members interact with fan-to-fan relationships, we designed a network study of a particular European soccer fan club (the Club) located in the southeastern United States. We have permission and an assurance of assistance from the executive council of The Club to conduct this study in the coming months. The Club has approximately 70 registered members who consistently meet to watch competitions of the focal team. The Club organizes other events for its members, sells merchandise specific to the local chapter of the group, and fosters a sense of belongingness for its membership. The Club, in many ways, is a distinct community and perhaps a distinct brand extension of the focal team.

The overarching goal of this research endeavor is to examine the network structure of The Club to illustrate and empirically measure the structure of relationships that characterize this particular fan chapter. Through an online survey, we will utilize a roster approach to create two distinct networks. First, a friendship network where participants will rate their level of friendship with all other members of the group. Second, a co-consumption network whereby each member rates how often they interact with other members in ways related to the team (watch games together, communicate digitally, etc.). These two questions will be used to create two distinct network matrices – one based on friendship, one on consumption related to the soccer team. In addition to the network questions, each participant will complete a modified version of Heere and James’ (2007) Team*ID scale related to both the soccer team and the Club. We will also collected relevant demographic information on each participant and specific consumer behaviors.

Network studies by nature require high response rates for accuracy, so multiple incentives are planned to encourage participation by group members. Additionally, the group officers agreed to distribute the survey and occasional reminders to help promote higher response rates. The survey is scheduled for distribution in December with a two-week window for data collection. Once the data are collected, the responses will be inputted into UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) and analyzed using multiple regression quadratic assignment procedures (MR-QAP) common in network analysis (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2011; Krackhardt, 1993). MR-QAP procedures allow researchers to use network data, which violate the assumption of interdependence of observation required of many statistical techniques, to test hypothesis as traditional regression methods allow. QAP techniques utilize data in actor-by-actor matrix form only, and essentially correlate multiple matrices and then compare the observed correlation with thousands of permutations of randomized similar matrices. Correlations and p-values are then provided in a similar fashion to traditional regression techniques.

We propose two different MR-QAP models with different measures of consumption as the dependent variable. In Model 1, the total number of games consumed by the individual will serve as the dependent variable, while Model 2 will include the number of Club events attended. Dependent variables for both studies include In-Degree, Out-Degree, and Betweenness Centrality for both friendship and consumption networks in addition to Team Identification and Group Identification scores. Additionally, we will include age, gender, years in the group, and nationality as control variables.

Though we do not yet have the data collected and analyzed, we are excited about the possible implications of our research. Scholars in sport management are increasingly noting the important role that fan-to-fan relationships play in consumer behavior (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2015) and the presence of multiple social identities that influence fan behaviors (Lock & Funk, 2016). Through our network analysis, we hope to shed light on the interplay between fan network variables and multiple identities within the context of a sport fan club. We anticipate that our findings will enhance academic and industrial understanding of sport fan networks, the multiple identities produced therein, and the influence that those networks and identities have on sport consumption.