The Strength of Fan Ties: A Multilevel Model of Egocentric Consumption Networks

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Abstract 2019-030 Room: Maurepas

Consuming sport is largely a social activity where one’s network of interpersonal relationships affects individual consumption (Katz, Ward, & Heere, 2018). Sport scholars are increasingly conceptualizing sport fans as members of larger collectives (i.e., brand communities); yet individual relationships form the building blocks of even the largest fan communities. Understand fan communities begins with examining the interpersonal relationships upon which the community is constructed.

Guided by group marketing, I use an egocentric network approach to examine fan consumption relationships over the course of an entire season for NFL fans. Group marketing is a theoretical framework whereby the psychological mechanisms of group influence propel customers to engage in behaviors beneficial to some brand when individuals are psychologically affiliated with the group and exposed to group norms through social interaction (Harmeling, Palmatier, Fang, & Wang, 2017). Egocentric network analysis focuses on individuals and their immediate social surroundings based on the assumption that individuals exist in a particular social context that affects their behaviors and attitudes (Perry, Pescosolido, & Borgatti, 2018).

Most egocentric studies are concerned with outcomes directly related to ego; but egocentric studies can also explore outcomes related to alters (i.e., those with ties to ego). Multilevel modeling is necessary when exploring alter-level outcomes because alters are nested within egos and violate assumptions of independence. In the present study, I aim to examine tie strength as a dependent variable nested within both Level-1 (alter) and Level-2 (ego) variables. Tie strength generally refers to the intensity and duration of a bond between egos and alters (Perry et al., 2018). Tie strength, based on group marketing theory, may be the result of ego characteristics, alter characteristics, or an interaction between the two.

Prior to the start of the 2018-19 NFL season, self-identified NFL fans were recruited from team message boards to participate in a longitudinal study. Each participant completed a preseason survey including the Team*ID scale (Heere & James, 2007), and several behavioral questions. After each game of the season, participants have reported if (and how) they consumed the game, and then completed an egocentric name generator based on with whom they communicated during/after the game. Alters, alter attributes, and alter-alter ties have all been collected. Data collection will continue through the full NFL season (including postseason).

Sixty-eight participants representing a wide variety of NFL fan bases have actively participated in the study. At the conclusion of the season, I will use E-Net (Borgatti, 2006) to create ego networks for each participant. Next, I will create a series of multilevel models (i.e., null, random intercepts, random coefficient, and two-level) examining alters nested within ego using HLM 7 (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2011). With tie strength as the outcome variable, I will examine the variance components using Level-1 predictors (i.e., gender, relationship type, alter centrality), Level-2 predictors (i.e., team identification, ego network size/composition/density), and potential interactions. As data collection is ongoing, we cannot provide results. Potential results should contribute theoretically to our understandings of group marketing in sport and fan consumption relationships.