A Social Network Analysis (R)Evolution Within Sport Management Literature

Joshua Lupinek, University of Alaska Fairbanks

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Sport marketing is ever evolving and we must identify new and emerging routes within brand research to keep up with the $1.3 trillion USD global sport industry (Plunkett, 2018). One such route is the emerging social network analysis (SNA) methodology that is gaining sport brand research momentum, which provides an opportunity to examine the developing sport consumer with a different lens focusing on the structure of consumer relationships, ranging from casual acquaintance to close bonds. This conceptual work traces the emergence and trajectory of the SNA methodology within sport management literature, while proposing several brand community SNA sport marketing applications from a foundation of relevant literature.

Today’s sport marketplace is no longer geographically restricted based on fan group proximity and the emergent methodology of Social Network Analysis (SNA) should be utilized to establish stronger and more isolated consumer behavior research variables. Sport fans are now able to follow their favorite team anywhere in the world with Internet or cell phone service. As such, SNA is an effective interdisciplinary methodological tool to reveal Nixon’s (1993) underlying structures of the key players within sport social circles so that marketers can better understand large and small fan group dynamics when developing marketing campaigns. Without geographic barriers, fans are able to consume the products of the team on-demand through new media outlets and sport marketers should utilize innovative interdisciplinary research methodologies, such as SNA, to better understand the consumer decision-making process of these global sport fans that are blurring brand heritage through brand innovation.

This exploration does not intend to challenge the value of traditional marketing research or the effectiveness of the existing techniques within sport. Instead, the objective is to add to the theoretical knowledge on sport consumer behavior by suggesting that sport marketing can greatly benefit from more attention being paid relative to a “stripped-down level of social interaction and underlying structures” (Nixon, 1993, p. 315). SNA as an interdisciplinary methodology has started to be utilized in sport management research. These SNA areas will be discussed along with suggestions for future brand community research highlighting influential hub marketing actors (organizations, management, fans, etc.) in sport who have the opportunity to connect innovative sport marketing research with standard industry practice.