An Egocentric Network Analysis of WNBA Fans: Examining IsoFans and Social Fans

Matthew Katz, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Aaron C. Mansfield, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Nicole Melton, University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Most consumption experiences occur alongside other consumers (Ramanathan & McGill, 2007). In fact, co-experienced consumption is considered ubiquitous for modern consumers (Kovacheva & Lamberton, 2018). This logic has often been extended to sport. Researchers have long noted the importance of ‘other fans,’ notwithstanding whether sport consumer behavior has been conceptualized as a socializing agent (James, 2001), consumption motive (Trail & James, 2001), or point of fan community attachment (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). Recently, sport researchers have emphasized the salience of co-consumption in sport consumer networks (Katz, Heere, & Melton, 2019), sport fan communities (Asada & Ko, 2019), and Twitter brand communities (Naraine, Pegoraro, & Wear, 2019).

But what happens in situations where finding such connections with ‘other fans’ proves challenging? How do sport consumers satisfy their desire to co-consume in contexts beyond the most popular sports? To engage with this question, we examined the egocentric consumption networks of Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) fans. Egocentric network analysis is based on the assumption that individuals exist in particular social contexts that affect their behaviors and attitudes (Perry, Pescosolido, & Borgatti, 2018).

Accordingly, we distributed an electronic survey that yielded 804 usable surveys from self-identified WNBA fans. We asked participants to list the individuals with whom they communicate or interact with related to their WNBA fandom. Next, we used E-Net (Borgatti, 2006) to create egocentric networks for eligible participants before transferring the dataset into HLM 7 (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2011). With tie strength as the dependent variable, we ran four different models with appropriate predictors: an unconditional model, alter-level model, ego-level model, and combined model. Following model deviance testing and base model comparisons, each model was shown to be significant, indicating that tie strength is explained by both ego- and alter-level attributes. Full results will be discussed in the presentation.

During HLM modeling, we were surprised to see that 227 participants (29%) indicated they consumed with no one. These were not blank responses; participants explicitly stated they interacted with no one in ways related to their WNBA fandom. There were mean differences between what we termed “Social Fans” and “Isolated Fans,” or “IsoFans.” Social Fans reported higher levels of team identification (4.37 vs. 3.96), games attended (3.88 vs. 2.2), and games watched (12.45 vs. 9.5).

In addition to co-consuming, individuals are also increasingly engaging in solo consumption behaviors such as dining out alone at restaurants (Her & Seo, 2018; McKeown & Miller, 2019) and solo traveling (Laesser, Beritelli, & Bieger, 2009; Yang, Yang, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). Though less common than social consumption, solo consumption appears to be gaining prominence and warrants examination. Sport scholars have argued that it is “entirely plausible” a fan will consume and follow sport alone (Lock & Funk, 2015, p. 4). The results of our inquiry support this assertion, and this work should open the door for additional examinations of IsoFans in different contexts. From a sport marketing perspective, the implications of this work may be considerable.