Crossover Loyalty: What Social Media Analytics Indicates About How Teams Share Fans

Bradley Baker, University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Scholars have extensively studied fandom, including antecedents leading to, consequences of, and the process of consumer attachment to sports teams (e.g., Funk & James, 2001, 2006). Sports teams are symbolic representations of social groups (Heere & James, 2007) and fandom is associated with high levels of passion (Wakefield, 2016) and membership in a particular interest community (Asada & Ko, 2019). Yet, the vast majority of these studies focus on a single team in isolation, leading to gaps in understanding how fandom operates across networks of teams. Sport entities are extensively connected both directly and indirectly and greater understanding of consumer behavior in a complex environment where multiple sport brands co-exist and interact is needed (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2018). Simultaneous support for multiple sports teams is common among fans (McDonald et al., 2010) and understanding multiple team preferences represents a critical aspect of consumer behavior in sport (Baker et al., 2016).

The current study examined how sports teams share fans on social media. Specifically, complete follower lists were collected from the Twitter accounts of 15 New York City-area professional sports teams (MLB, NBA, WNBA, NFL, NHL, NWHL, MLS, NWSL, OWL). The number of followers (total N = 14,351,113) ranged from 15,918 (Riveters) to 3,452,617 (Yankees). The extent of crossover fandom was determined by examining the proportion of shared followers and lift (ratio of shared followers to those expected based on raw follower counts) between each pair of teams. Crossover patterns provide insight into how teams share fans, which fans are most exclusively-loyal, and which fanbases are most (dis)similar (Wezerek & Roeder, 2019).

Crossover fandom was greatest for teams within the same league (e.g., NHL) or sport (e.g., hockey). Contrary to assumptions in the academic literature and popular media narratives that teams offer distinctive associations and meaning to consumers that should lead to differentiation between fanbases and highly-exclusive loyalties, some teams extensively shared fans with other teams (e.g., 67.7% of Islanders followers followed the Rangers; 62.6% of Nets followers followed the Knicks). The team with the least crossover was the Excelsior, an esport team playing in the Overwatch League, which shared less than 2% of their fans (n = 118,676) with any other team. Many fans appear to follow a particular sport over a particular team, leading to high levels of crossover support between teams in the same league. One exception is Yankees fans who follow the Giants or Rangers more often than the Mets. Greatest lift was observed among followers of the three women’s teams (SkyBlueFC, Liberty, and Riveters), between MLS teams, and between NHL teams.

Results move beyond looking at team fanbases in isolation and thus provide insight into how fandom operates within dynamic multi-team environments. Understanding how teams share fans has theoretical implications related to consumer loyalty and the meaning of fandom, as well as practical implications related to cross-promotion between teams or leagues and how teams should characterize loyalty. Consumers are rarely exclusively loyal to a single team and the most extensive crossover loyalty is observed between teams that directly compete in the same league.