The Influence of Social Network Structure on Sport Participation and Consumption: A Case of Chinese Amateur Tennis Club

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Social network analysis is a rapidly growing area of research and has been increasingly adopted to help understand and explain human behaviors across disciplines (e.g., Mertens, Charles, & Mergler, 2012; Webster & Morrison, 2004). In the sport brand community context, research has suggested that characteristics (i.e., size and strength) of sports consumers’ social networks are critical predictors of their consumption behaviors (Katz, Baker, & Du, 2019; Katz & Heere, 2015; Katz, Ward, & Heere, 2018; Yoshida, 2017). Yet, there exists a gap in the research on social networks in sport communities concerning examinations into the impact of social network traits on sport participation and sporting goods purchase. Understanding sports consumers’ social networks is of particular relevance as sports brands expand into new and international markets. It is specially the case when western brands move into Asian markets where social norms are rooted in collectivism (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015).

In this study, we endeavor to gain a better understanding of how people’s networks affect sports consumption and participation in a Chinese amateur tennis club (N = 21). This club served mainly as the social hub for tennis practices and competitions. Specifically, the current study attempts to investigate the instrumental and expressive relationships (Ibarra, 1992) and their influence on club members’ behaviors. Using a network design, club members will be surveyed regarding their ties in the network (e.g., who they know, who they play/watch game with, how often they interact with other members), community involvement, sports participation (frequency, intensity, and duration), and sports consumption (game attendance, media consumption, and sporting goods purchase). Data will be analyzed using UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2014), and then exported to the Netdraw software (Borgatti, 2002) to visualize the structure of the club’s interaction network. The test of network centrality, betweenness, and transitivity will be conducted to calculate the values of the network attributes (Akhtar, & Ahamad, 2018). Moreover, we will employ Girvan–Newman algorithm (Girvan & Newman, 2002) to determine the impact of the club’s community structure embeddedness on members’ behaviors.

The present study is one of the preliminary attempts to decipher the relationships among social networks, sports participation, and sports consumption through the lens of a community network. Previous researchers have examined how networks influence sport consumption (Katz, Baker, & Du, 2019; Katz et al., 2018, Katz, & Heere, 2013, 2015), but not sport participation. Given the intersection of participating and watching sport in the sport communities, introducing sport participating adds to our understanding of sporting communities and sport networks. Findings resulted from this study will help inform both scholars and practitioners regarding the role community structure plays in a Chinese amateur sports club. Due to the pronounced differences in consumer culture, preference, and behavior, sports brands must have an appropriate understanding of local consumers and their social networks or they risk the misplacement of limited marketing resources.