

Chapter 15

Classifying Sport Consumers: From Casual to Tribal Fans

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ABSTRACT

Sport fans rarely attend sporting events alone. While traditional consumer and sport fan behavior research often examines fans based on demographic characteristics, recent advances in understanding how sport fans co-create and co-consume sporting events provides substantial evidence that sports fans should be examined as tribal groups. Tribal sport fan groups can be identified based on seven dimensions, including membership; geographic sense of community; social recognition; shared rivalry; and shared knowledge of symbols, rituals and traditions, and people. In this research, these seven dimensions are used to classify sport fans (n=1505) through hierarchical and k-cluster analyses. The results of the cluster analyses using the seven dimensions suggest six unique clusters, labelled as (1) casual fans, (2) moderate remote fans, (3) moderate local fans, (4) local developing tribal fans, (5) remote tribal fans, and (6) tribal fans. A discussion of these six fan groups and the implications regarding associations with demographics and other important variables are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Fans are commonplace in today's world. Ranging from fans of music and movies to fans of specific types of food, almost every conceivable area of human existence has fans of one type or another. What is more, there is no area that has more fans than sport teams, athletes and sporting competitions. From

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globally-known sports teams such as Real Madrid (Spanish soccer/football), the Dallas Cowboys (American football) and the New Zealand All Blacks (rugby); to athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer/football), Serena Williams (tennis), Phil Mickelson (golf), LeBron James (basketball), Yuna Kim (figure skating), and Usain Bolt (track and field); and to sports such as football (soccer), American football, rugby, tennis and golf; each team, athlete and sport respectively boasts of millions of fans watching competitions in-person or through media.

As examples of the passion and large numbers of fans, first, during the summer of 2018, Real Madrid's tweet announcing Cristiano Ronaldo's move to Juventus football club had 92,000 retweets and 127,000 likes (ESPN, 2018). Juventus also reportedly sold \$60 million worth of Ronaldo jerseys in 24 hours, representing almost half his transfer fee (Business Insider, 2018). As a second example, for the National Football League's (NFL) Super Bowl LII on February 4, 2018, approximately 67,600 people attended the game at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and more than one million people attended game-related events during the 10-day pre-game festival (Minnesota Super Bowl Host Committee, 2018). In addition, Super Bowl LII averaged 103.4 million television viewers, and there were 3.1 million people concurrently live-streaming the event at its peak on the internet (Otterson, 2018). Clearly, athletes, teams and sporting events have the attention of millions of fans.

Being a fan is generally not an individualistic pursuit. Sports fans, for example, rarely attend sporting events alone (Hedlund, 2014). After arriving at the sporting event location, often as a group, sport fans interact with each other, cheer on athletes and teams in the venue, and co-create and co-consume the sporting event with other fans. For many sport fans, it is the simultaneous process of co-creating and co-consuming the fan experience with other fans at sporting events that holds the most significant meaning and value (Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014). While the volume and propensity of cheering and yelling can provide an advantage for the home team (Jamieson, 2010; Schwartz & Barsky, 1977), generally speaking, fans have only a minor effect on the outcome of the competition, because they are not directly involved in the on-field/court play. Without fans in attendance, however, professional sporting events would be immensely different and more akin to recreational activities. Thus, the process of creating, developing, maintaining and motivating a large fan base, comprised of large numbers of individuals who come together at a sporting event to be part of a unique experience is a challenge for all sporting event owners and managers.

Over the past 25 years, experiential consumer researchers have identified a multitude of different types of groups that co-create (i.e., the process of sports fans, the teams, coaches and athletes coming together and creating a unique experience at the event location) and co-consume (i.e., the process of actually experiencing the game and related activities with other fans) events (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). While many consumption groups provide substantial value to a variety of business and entertainment-related goods and services (e.g., users of Apple products, bikers who ride Harley-Davidson Motorcycles, fans of the Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers rock band, viewers of the "Xena: Warrior Princess" television show) (Schau et al., 2009), relatively little research has been undertaken to identify and examine different types of sport fan consumption groups. Because athletes and teams have the power to draw large numbers of fans to a sporting event, examinations of sports fans and their relationship to one another and their favorite team, not to mention attempting to classify different types of fans into groups composed of like-minded fans may bring some clarity and insight to fan group and consumer (community) behavior research. Thus, the purpose of this research is to utilize Hedlund, Biscaia and Leal's (2018) seven-dimension tribal sport fan scale to classify sport fans into different types of consumption groups

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