

## 2018 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVI)

### Conceptualizing Sense of Membership in a Sport Fan Community

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**50-minute poster presentation**

**8:00-8:50 AM, Main Conference Atrium**

Professional sports have grown exponentially throughout the 20th century even although fan communities largely remained limited to a geographic region. However, with advanced technology and a changing global landscape in the 21st century, fan communities are no longer geographically bound. Sport fans are connected to each other through social media, podcasts, online forums, and other communication tools that can be accessed easily and inexpensively from all over the world. The shifting global landscape requires sport organizations to elevate their efforts for community engagement. While the globalization of the sport industry has been increasing for over a century, the largest growth in global sport production and consumption has occurred over the past 20 years due to the advancement in modern technology (Pitts et al., 2013). With this rapid growth, sport managers need to delve deeper and better understanding of sport fan communities and how and why individuals identify as members of the sport fan community.

The notion of community has been studied in different contexts from a variety of cross-disciplinary perspectives. One thing these perspectives have in common is that a sense of community refers to a perception of belongingness, interdependence, and mutual commitment that link individuals in a collective unity (Kloos, Hill, Thomas, Wandersman, & Elias, 2012; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Sport fan communities provide opportunities for individuals to gain a sense of belonging, resulting in a positive effect on self-esteem and mood (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). With the intensified competitions in the sport marketplace, many sport organizations face the challenge to reach a new generation of consumers under a drastically different social, cultural, and global environment than it used to be for an earlier generation. A viable strategy has been to build a fan community by surrounding and focusing on a particular product brand. A brand community is “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In the case of sport fan communities, the product to which individuals are attached can be a team, sport, and/or athlete. Research findings on brand communities have revealed that a strong brand community positively leads to increased consumer-brand identification (Cova & Pace, 2006; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to develop a conceptual framework to examine a sense of membership in a sport fan community, its antecedents, and its subsequent influences on fan behavior through addressing four research questions: (a) what leads to someone feeling like they are a member of the community? (b) how does a sport fan know they are part of the fan community and what are the key features that confirm sense of membership? (c) once membership is achieved, how is that individual involved in the community? and (d) what are the benefits of membership in the fan community? A case study was designed to study fans of National Hockey League (NHL) teams and aimed to identify factors that constituted membership in the fan community from a mix of fan-initiated and team-initiated perspectives in an effort to have a good understanding of the fan community as a whole, which was carried out by conducting a thorough review of literature, one-on-one interviews with NHL fans and sport managers, open ended surveys of NHL fans, and an element of ethnographic analysis. Qualitative data obtained from these sources revealed the following themes for a sense of membership in the sport fan community, including connection with other individuals in a hockey team’s fan community, collective unity, positivity, inclusiveness, social opportunities, and knowledgeable members. Four themes emerged as antecedents to membership in the sport fan community, including Quest for Knowledge, Need for Social Interaction, Share Opinions, and Cope with Success or Failure. A sense of membership in a NHL team’s fan community leads to more active engagement in fandom in the forms of discussions with others online and offline, purchasing merchandise, and evangelism. All of these contributed to an increased social capital, further attachment to a hockey team’s brand, and elevated consumption behavior. Based on these findings, a preliminary structural model for testing the proposed Sport Fan Community

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Membership Theory is formulated that should be tested in future quantitative studies.

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