Chapter 5

Those Who Rarely Attend Alone: Tribal Sport Fans

David P. Hedlund  
St. John’s University, USA

Rui Biscaia  
Coventry University, UK

Maria do Carmo Leal  
Universidade Europeia, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Sport fans rarely attend sporting events alone. While traditional consumer and sport fan behavior research frequently segmented 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. In this chapter, seven dimensions of sport fan tribalism are proposed and tested (membership; geographic sense of community; social recognition; shared rivalry; and shared knowledge of symbols, rituals and traditions, and people) with samples from top-level American college football (Division I American football) and the top level of professional Portuguese soccer (Primeira Liga). The results provide reliability and validity evidence in support of the seven-dimension scale. In addition, the structural testing of the scale highlights differences between tribal fans and their teams (relative to other teams) in terms of five behavioral intentions and two commitment-related outcome variables. The implications of labeling sports fans at tribal, the use of the seven-dimension scale and the structural results are all discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, from fans of music and movies to fans of particular types of food to fans of specific geographic places, fans are everywhere. Perhaps, however, there is no part of the current human existence that has more fans than sport teams, athletes and sporting competitions. From globally-known sports teams such as Real Madrid (Spanish soccer/football), the Dallas Cowboys (American football) and the
New York Yankees (American baseball); to athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer/football), Serena Williams (tennis), Phil Mickelson (golf), LeBron James (basketball), Ronda Rousey (mixed martial arts), Floyd Mayweather Jr. (boxing), 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. For example in 2009 when Cristiano Ronaldo was signed by Spain’s Real Madrid football club, approximately 80,000 fans attended a brief introduction ceremony at the Bernabéu stadium (The Guardian, 2009). More recently for the National Football League’s Super Bowl 50 on February 7, 2016, more than 71,000 people attended the game at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, California (Breech, 2016). In addition, according to the San Francisco Bay Area Super Bowl 50 Host Committee, more than 1.1 million people visited the surrounding San Francisco Bay area in the week leading up to the game specifically because of the game; total television viewership was estimated at 167 million people, and 3.96 million people live-streamed the event (2016). Clearly, athletes, teams and sporting events are watched by 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 little 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 tens of thousands 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 that co-consume (i.e., the process of actually experiencing the game and related activities with other fans) (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), little research has been undertaken to attempt to label consumption groups and to create a tool that can be used to measure and compare 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 may bring some clarity and insight to fan group and consumer (community) behavior research. Thus, the purpose of this research is to identify and measure components of tribal sport fans and to examine empirically the relationship between these fans and important outcomes such as being committed to the team, attending future games, buying merchandise in the future, telling others about the team’s games and reading about and watching games through media.