

DIMENSIONS OF SENSE OF MEMBERSHIP IN HOCKEY FAN COMMUNITIES:
FACTORS, OUTCOMES, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IMPLICATIONS

by

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(Under the Direction of James J. Zhang)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors that constitute a sense of membership in a sport fan community, behavioral and psychological outcomes of membership, and the creation and maintenance of social capital through membership in the sport fan community. Sport fans ($N = 525$) were surveyed and data were analyzed through a two-step Confirmatory Factor Analysis and subsequent Structural Equation Model analyses. Findings revealed that five factors - Collective Unity, Positivity, Inclusivity, Social Opportunities, and Knowledgeable Members are the key dimensions that contribute to a sense of membership in a sport fan community. Findings also showed that membership in the sport fan community significantly ($p < .05$) contributed to psychological outcomes such as cognitive and affective benefits, as well as behavioral outcomes of increased game attendance, merchandise sales, and positive word of mouth. Membership in the fan community also contributed to the bridging and bonding of social capital. The results build on previous conceptualizations of sport fan communities and develop a scale to measure one's sense of membership in a fan community. The findings allow for sport organizations to identify areas in which they can create stronger communities and for researchers to further theoretical understanding of sport fan communities.

INDEX WORDS: Sport Marketing, Fan Community, Consumer Behavior, Social Capital

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DEDICATION

For Allie (and Miga & Penny):

None of this would be possible without you.

Thank you for your constant love, support, and endless adventures.

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It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From a cultural standpoint, communities play a large role in a society. As they constantly evolve, it is important to understand how interconnected communities affect society economically, socially, and culturally. According to Putnam (2000), individuals in modern society are experiencing relationships in a less intimate way than before due to the mass-consumption society that people currently live in. People are more likely to form communities within informal organizations, such as common interest or lifestyle groups, instead of more traditional venues for communities such as church, family, employment, or voluntary organizations. Advanced technology, urbanization, and mobility have all contributed to the possibility of new forms of community. As the society shifts this way, understanding informal organizations, such as sport fan communities, becomes increasingly pertinent to sport managers and marketers in order to reach to current and potential consumers (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Professional sports grew exponentially throughout the 20th century even though 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. Although the globalization of sports 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 understand sport fan communities and operationalize how and why individuals identify as members of the sport fan community.

From a general perspective, 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 intensified competition in the sport marketplace, many sport organizations face the challenge of reaching a new generation of consumers under a drastically different social, cultural, and global environment. 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). According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), there are three elements that all brand communities share: (a) consciousness of kind, (b) shared rituals and traditions, and (c) moral responsibility to the brand. The concept of brand communities implies that a company’s brand can grow stronger based on interactions

consumers have with each other and the community is a self-sufficient group that feels a responsibility to grow the brand of the product they commonly identify with. Attachment to the larger social structure of a fan community reinforces an individual's identity and loyalty to a sport team, resulting in more consumption of the sport organization's products and services (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Heere & James, 2007; Schau et al., 2009; Wann et al., 2001)

Sport fan communities share similar characteristics that Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) outlined, in which sport brand communities share similarities with findings from brand community research on mainstream business products. For example, Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (2015) found that fan community attachment was the only significant predictor of continued attendance throughout a competition season and that attachment to the fan community explained the largest amount of variance of team identification. This notion has in turn led to organizations working with their current fan groups and empowering them to be advocates of the brand, such as the Arizona Coyotes of the National Hockey League (NHL) which made fan empowerment a major priority of their marketing strategy (Mastromartino, Zhang, & Wann, in press). Grant, Heere, and Dickson (2011) found that by building a marketing strategy around the markers of a brand community, sport marketers for new sport franchises could make the team's on-field success a secondary focus because fans value the strong sense of community the most. If fans feel like being members of a sport team and also a social group, they are more likely to disregard poor performance and become advocates for the brand, lowering the pressure for the team's on-field success to the point where minor victories such as just qualifying for the playoffs can be celebrated profoundly. The feeling of belonging is important to fans of any product, and empirical evidence has shown that when sport organizations make their fans feel like they are members of the team, it can lead to positive impacts on consumer behavior such as increased

ticket sales, media consumption, merchandise sales, and overall feelings of loyalty (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1993a). According to Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, and Kim (2008), there are two types of fan communities: fan-initiated and team-initiated. In fan initiated communities, fans voluntarily spend time developing the community and provide beneficial information to other fans such as reviews of products and experiences. These communities serve the fan's need for social interaction, information acquisition, and entertainment. Team-initiated communities are intentionally created by the management of the team and are primarily used in order to strengthen the relationship with consumers. Depending on who the community is initiated by, the behavioral outcomes may be different. For example, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) examined a small brand community of Harley Davidson fans and found that identification within that small group officially sponsored by the brand, but mostly run and managed by the fans themselves, led to further brand identification and positive consumption behaviors. This could suggest that an organization should aim to organize smaller communities within the larger fan community where fans can interact in a social setting and begin to take responsibility for being an ambassador of the brand. However, the article does not break down the factors that constitute membership in the community and examined mostly the antecedents and behavioral outcomes of such membership.

Mastromartino, Zhang, Hollenbeck, Suggs, and Connaughton (2019) undertook a qualitative approach in conceptually examining membership in a sport fan community. This study involved interviewing fans of NHL teams in an effort to determine what led to membership in the community, those factors that confirmed a sense of membership in the community, how an individual was benefited from the membership, and the consumption outcomes of the membership and activity in the community. The findings derived in this study revealed that there

were various factors that would contribute to the antecedents, composition, involvement, and benefits of a membership as they play a fundamental role in sport fan communities. The antecedents are the factors that lead an individual to seek out membership in the sport fan community. Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) found that a quest for knowledge, need for social interaction, desire to share an opinion, and team performance were key factors that led one to seek membership in the fan community. To identify the key pillars that signified one's membership in the community, participants were asked 'how do you know you are a member of the fan community?' The themes that lead to one achieving a sense of membership in the fan community centered around a sense of collective unity, positivity, inclusiveness, social opportunities, and knowledgeable members. Once a member, those markings of membership in the fan community are features that contribute to how strong the fan community is, which influence the involvement one has in the community and the benefits he/she receives. While evolving into the membership, these individuals become involved in the fan community through increased discussions with others, purchasing merchandise, and evangelizing others to become fans of the sport and members of a team's fan community. The benefits these individuals received for their membership in the community were often of cognitive, affective, behavioral, or place-related aspects. Comprehensively, the findings of this study provided a preliminary conceptual groundwork for examining membership in a sport fan community; even so, much more empirical evidences are needed to support the assertions, concepts, and their inter-relationships. To fully understand membership in a sport fan community, each concept needs to be further explored and examined by conducting in-depth quantitative analyses. When considering the fan community as a whole, elements of fan-initiated communities and team-initiated communities come into play to form the fan community at large. Figure 1 outlines the

theoretical framework behind membership in sport fan communities from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019).

Previous research findings showed the importance of identification, attachment, and socialization when it comes to an individual becoming a fan of a sport team. However, there is no literature that definitively shows empirical evidence for those antecedents to a sport fan community. For a sport organization, nurturing identification, attachment, and socialization to a brand and building a brand community from the ground up to facilitate consumer attachment to the brand is no easy task. Yoshida, Gordon, James, and Heere (2015) examined antecedents of sport fan communities and how those factors influenced fan consumer behaviors. Their conceptual paper suggested that three antecedents (brand equity, consumers' perceptions of team sponsored fan appreciation events, and perceived rituals and traditions) would influence the fan's identification with the fan community which results in four specific behavior: fan community engagement, enhanced product use, member responsibility, and positive word of mouth. The researchers suggest the more an individual is engaged in the fan community, the greater levels of the mentioned outcomes would occur. Their study addresses the importance of understanding the unique behavior outcomes in fan communities and suggests further follow-up investigations, which provides a foundation for the current study that aims to operationalize what it means to have a sense of membership in a sport fan community. The antecedents and outcomes of membership in a community have been discussed, explored, and even theorized; however, the essential constituents of membership in a sport fan community are missing from the literature. Also, although the concept of sport fan communities has been discussed in previous studies, actual investigations have been general, sporadic, inconsistent, non-specific, and non-systematic. As general ideas do not help research and practice without knowing the constructs within a

concept, it is necessary to move past the general descriptions, outline the precise delineations of the components, and understand how specific constructs of fan community membership are influenced by antecedent factors and how they would influence fan behavior (Zhang, Kim, & Pifer, 2015)

Statement of Problem

A comprehensive review of literature reveals that to date, there has been little research that outlines the specific constructs that contribute to a fan's sense of membership in a sport fan community, nor is there any explanation on the social capital implications and outcomes of such membership. Previous literature has discussed the antecedents of membership in a fan community and the outcomes of that membership (increased loyalty and consumption), but what is missing is what comes between socialization into the fan community and the behavioral outcomes. How does a fan know he/she is a part of the fan community? What are the factors that constitute membership in a sport fan community?

The purpose of this study is to explore the conceptual framework from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) and increase the understanding of a sense of membership in a sport fan community. Specifically, this study seeks to empirically examine three research questions: (a) how does a sport fan know they are part of the fan community and what are the key features that confirm sense of membership? (b) once membership is achieved, how is social capital increased? and (c) what are the outcomes of membership in the fan community? The theoretical framework this research aims to build on has not gone through empirical verification, only preliminary conceptualizing. It is necessary to take this study one step further and conduct an empirical investigation through quantitative procedures. Based on previous literature and the

need for a better understanding of sport fan communities, the following hypothesis are developed for this study:

- H1: Key factors that signify a sense membership in a fan community will emerge and be confirmed with the following: collective unity, positivity, inclusivity, social opportunities, and knowledgeable members.
- H2: Membership in a sport fan community would be positively associated with bridging social capital
- H3: Membership in a sport fan community would be positively associated with bonding social capital
- H4: Membership in a sport fan community leads to behavioral outcomes (purchasing merchandise, evangelism, discussion with others)
- H5: Membership in a sport fan community leads to psychological outcomes (cognitive, affective benefits)

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework for this study. The first stage of this model is where individuals recognize their sense of membership in the fan community. According to Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) sense of membership is made up of various factors which include a sense of positivity, sense of collective unity, sense of inclusiveness, social opportunities, and a perception of knowledgeable community members. Although that study identified important themes and patterns in the factors that contribute to a sense of membership in a sport fan community, the authors suggested further quantitative follow up in order to confirm the factors. Next, this theoretical framework suggests that individuals who are members of a sport fan community experience an increase in social capital and demonstrate psychological

and behavioral outcomes as a result of said membership. Social capital measures the value and benefits one receives from their membership in the community. By taking action through going to games, conversing with other fans, and purchasing merchandise, the community member can receive benefits such as increased self-esteem and increased sense of trust with other community members. The ways in which social capital is accrued and sensed will vary from individual to individual but those are some ways in which social capital is increased through membership in the fan community. Putnam (2000) notes there are two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging capital occurs amongst casual acquaintances who are connected by loose ties that result in opportunities for sharing new ideas and information. Bonding social capital involves strong ties between close individuals, such as family or friends, that result in emotional support. Each type of social capital can be beneficial to an individual and result in different outcomes, namely psychological and behavioral outcomes. Psychological outcomes can include increased cognitive functions such as increased knowledge of the team/sport and/or an understanding of team traditions, among other factors. As well, these outcomes can be affective in nature where an individual experiences an increase in self-esteem or mental well-being as a result of their membership. Behavioral outcomes can include new friends, social opportunities, and/or consumption activities. A further examination of social capital and outcomes occur in the literature review section. What connects the three concepts (membership, social capital, outcomes) is an understanding of social network theory. This theory examines the specific set of connections between people in a group and provides an understanding of how the ties and pattern of ties are often more important than the behavior and actions of one individual in the group. This is why it is beneficial for sport organizations to have an understanding of their fan community, not just an understanding of individual fans. Christakis and Fowler (2009) explain

why this is the case: “They [networks] all groups to do things that a disconnected collection of individuals cannot. The ties explain why the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”(Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 19) A further examination of social network theory is also considered in the review of literature section.

Delimitations

The focus and design of this study require some delimitations that must be addressed.

1. This study focuses on fans of professional sport teams specifically those of the National Hockey League, not those who are fans of collegiate athletics or individual sports.
2. This study does not focus all sports due to the various cultural differences between sports and regions. The goal is to develop a measurement instrument that is eventually applicable to all sports in all regions, but in its development the focus is on one sport in North America.
3. The study uses a purposeful sampling technique and recruit participants through popular online fan communities. These are volunteer participants, so not a random sample, but with a large enough sample size this delimitation should not impact the study in a significant manner.

Limitations

Though this study is aimed to collect, analyze, and interpret the most valid and reliable data, there are some limitations that place restrictions on the methodology and conclusions of this study.

1. Participants self-reported their identity based on the following definition: A sense of membership in a sport fan community is achieved when one fan feels a connection to another fan through their shared love for that team. This definition

may mean different things to each individual and some will interpret it in their own way. We hope that a large sample size will reduce this limitation but it is one that exists.

2. Timing of data collection. The nature of sports fans are they can be high on their team one day and low on their team the next, depending on their performance. The temporal emotion that comes with timing may have an effect on participant responses if he or she is particularly high or low on their team at the time of data collection. To reduce this limitation, data collection occurred in the early stages of the season while most fans will still be optimistic of his or her team's performance for that season.

Definitions of Terms

Sport Fan Communities

A group of highly identified individuals of a particular sports team, league, or player would be considered a sport fan community. There can be smaller groups of community within the larger group (such as small groups of friends or family) but the fandom of that team, league, or player is at the center of the connection is being studied.

Sense of Membership in a Sport Fan Community

A sense of membership in a sport fan community is achieved when one fan feels a connection to another fan through their shared love for that team Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019). The specific internal feelings that goes in to achieving that sense of membership include one or more of a feeling of a collective unity, a feeling of positivity, a feeling of inclusiveness, social opportunities, and knowledgeable community members.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the functions within networks where connected individuals exchange extrinsic assets such as goodwill, fellowship, trust, and cooperation in exchange for new ideas and information and/or emotional support. In essence, social capital examines the value social networks have (Putnam, 2008). These specific values can be measured into two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. A full examination of social capital occurs in the review of literature.

Outcomes

These are the internal rewards one receives and outward behaviors exhibited after achieving a sense of membership in a sport fan community. Once an individual achieves a sense of membership in the fan community, outcomes are the behaviors the individual exhibits in the community and how the individual expresses their membership in the fan community. Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) found that there were four categories of benefits that came as a result of membership in the fan community: cognitive, affective, behavioral, and place. This study examines the outcomes under two lenses: behavioral and psychological. Yoshida, Gordon, James, and Heere (2015) conceptualized that the behavior community members would exhibit include enhanced product use, member responsibility, and positive word of mouth. In addition to these factors, Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) conceptualized that purchasing merchandise would also be a form of involvement once one achieves a sense of membership in the community. A further breakdown of membership outcomes will be outlined in the review of literature section.

Significance of Study

Identifying and operationalizing the concept of membership in a sport fan community and developing a theoretical and empirical framework for future inquiry is necessary to further theoretical inquiries and aid practitioners in developing and nurturing their fan community. No instrument is currently available to measure those factors representing membership in a sport fan community. This study would further theories in that it helps lead to a better understanding of sport fan communities and allow sport practitioners to examine their fan community and identify areas in which they can make it stronger, leading to larger fan communities and greater revenues. Sport is a major factor in personal identity and having a better understanding of how global communities within sport fandom operate would allow better understanding of diverse consumer populations and very importantly, how the culture of sport fandom and the resulted business transactions transcends borders, creating a global fan community. For practical implications, the findings of this investigation would allow for cultivating economic growth for sport organizations, social benefits for community members, and cultural understanding of the role sport fan communities play in modern day society. This study will allow management of sport teams to examine specific elements of their fan communities and better understand which areas to focus on marketing efforts in order to grow their fan bases, find new revenue sources, and increase overall consumer success. Additionally, by understanding the consequences of a sense of fan community membership, sport organizations would be able to assess the areas of their fan communities for improvement.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following section provides the theoretical context of this study through an examination of previous studies on motivation to consume sport, sport fan communities, and social network and capital theory. Then, the author draws from the functionalities and attributes of sport fan communities to build on Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) framework for the Sense of Membership in a Sport Fan Community Theory.

Sport Fandom

The behaviors of sport fans have been a widely studied concept in sport management research. There has been extensive research because fans are the lifeblood for sport organizations and it is important for sport organizations to understand fan consumer behaviors in order to better fit their needs and generate more profits (Wann et al., 2001). Often the term sport spectator and sport fan are used interchangeably, but they both carry a significant difference in meaning. “Sports fans are individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete. Sport spectators (also called sport consumers) are those individuals who actively witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media” (Wann et al., 2001, p. 2). They should not be confused because some sports fans don’t attend games live in person, while a spectator may not identify with the team and are attending for other reasons, such as a free ticket gifted to them. However, these terms are not mutually exclusive as the majority of people at a sporting event are usually a fan of the home team, but this research is concerned with sport fans and the long-term lifelong commitment that can be developed.

Wann et al. (2001) state that identification formation starts with socialization and the factors that contribute to identity formation are called socialization agents. They define socialization as “the process of learning to live in and understand a culture or subculture by internalizing its values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms. With respect to sport fandom, we are specifically concerned with the process by which fans learn and accept the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the sport fan culture (e.g., the notion of ‘never giving up’, the jargon, terminology, rules of specific sports, players’ statistics, and so forth)” (Wann et al., 2001, p. 24). McPherson (1976) conducted one of the earliest studies on sport fan socialization and concluded that an individual’s family, peers, school and community were the main influences in his participant’s sport socialization process. Frederiksen (2003) expanded on McPherson (1976) and added a fifth socialization agent, mass media. The socialization of a fan often occurs in the early stages of an individual’s cognitive development, as early as the age of five, but may not show the behaviors associated with team identification until later in life (James, 2001). It is possible socialization agents have different impacts depending on the age of the sport fan. For example, among all family influences, Kolbe and James (2000) found that fathers specifically have an overwhelmingly higher level of influence than other family members or friends for individuals who became fans at an early age. For those who became fans in adulthood, players and coaches of the team were important influences. This is in line with research from Kwon, Trail, and Anderson (2005) who note that there are multiple points of entry for attachment as a fan beyond the team itself, such as specific players or coaches. These studies noted that respondents valued being part of a community of fans, but this article does not highlight what specific aspects of the community these fans find appealing. In addition to age, one’s external social identities can play a role in their identity as a sports fan (Heere et al., 2011). B. A. Boyle and Magnusson (2007)

examined collegiate sports fans by three different groups: current students, alumni, and the general public. They found that the social identity as a fan differed by type of fan. If this is the case, it could be argued that fan community membership may differ by type of fan group and needs to be further examined. As well, this study only looked at collegiate fans where school allegiance may be a mediator in developing a social identity as a sports fan of that school. More research needs to be done to better understand how different groups of fans identify with the team and fan community in a professional sport context.

Sport fans reinforce identification with a team by engaging in supportive and repetitive consumption behaviors such as attending live events, purchasing team merchandise, and watching games on TV or through Internet streaming services. Sport fans are different than fans of other products such as car or clothing brands due to a unique emotional attachment an individual has with their sports teams. Wakefield (2007) highlights this attachment:

Highly identified fans will internalize or adopt the team or player's attitudes and behaviors as their own. If you are highly identified with a team, you feel good when the team wins and bad when the team loses. You believe the team is a representation of who you are to yourself and to others. You practically feel as though you are part of the team (p. 37).

For a sport organization, it is more efficient to develop and maintain a diehard lifelong fan as opposed to constantly finding ways to engage new fans. A lifelong fan will consume more over time and often sport fandom can be generational where a parent passes down their fandom to a child, creating a new generation of fans with little effort by the organization. In most research on the origin of sport fan identification, it has been found that parents have a large influence on how an individual became a fan of their favorite team (McPherson, 1976; Parry,

Jones, & Wann, 2014; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). As well, sociodemographic factors such as ethnicity, education, and income have been shown to influence an individual's sport consumption behavior (Zapalac, Zhang, & Pease, 2010; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). In addition to these prominent factors, there are dozens of other reasons found in research for the origin of sport fan identification including influence from friends and peers, geographic pride, media, playing experience, team success, and fan community.

There are many reasons why one originally identified with their favorite team and varying degrees of how strongly one identifies with a team, therefore there are various ways one will engage with their sport fandom (Wann, 1995). Noting the ways in which fans engage with their fandom is important in better understanding the consumer behavior of sport fans. The marketing of a professional sports team is unique because the product they are marketing is not guaranteed. The nature of sports is unpredictable and only one team can win the championship at the end of the year. Despite a sometimes below average product when the team is losing, sport marketers still have to sell the product. With sport fans, their emotional attachment to a team does not usually lessen if there is a subpar product being shown to them every game. Sport fans are usually not sensitive to ticket price increases, player controversies, or negative incidents occurring. For the most part, a few down seasons for a team will not alter the consumption behavior of lifelong fans in an impactful manner. This is highlighted in research by Calabuig, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, and Añó (2014) who found that although ticket price increases hurt the satisfaction of sport fans, it had a low direct effect on predicting the future intentions of sport consumers. Another example of this was found in research by Schmidt and Berri (2004) who found that attendance and consumption rose for sport leagues in their return from a player strike or league lockout. Wins, losses, or controversies do not impact the consumption behaviors of

highly identified sport fans and this strong brand loyalty can be leveraged by sport organizations to increase revenues and offset increasing expenses such as player salaries, new stadiums, or philanthropic endeavors (Gladden & Funk, 2001; M. Kim & Walker, 2013).

The functions of sport fandom are very unique, and to better understand the motivations of individuals to consume sport, (Wann, 1995) developed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) that determines what specifically motivates an individual to consume their favorite sport. The scale identified eight motivational factors for individuals to participate in spectator sport: eustress (feeling of excitement), benefits to self-esteem, diversion from everyday life, entertainment, aesthetics, economic value (gambling), need for affiliation, and family needs. In the study it was noted that motivations could vary by sociodemographic status and by sport or activity. The SFMS shows that by understanding the various motivations for individuals to identify with teams, organizations can better understand their consumers and focus on those to attract new fans and maintain current ones. Although individuals have different motivations as the SFMS shows, recent research has focused on the need for affiliation and what that means for sport fans. Understanding that need for affiliation can be tied to how fans achieve vicariously through their favorite team and athletes. Part of sport fandom is the aspect of ‘achieving vicariously’ through athletes (Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). Sport fans feel as though they are living through the athletes, sharing their successes and failures, and ultimately feel like they are part of the team. This feeling is enhanced for fans when they consume a sport product such as watching a game on TV, sharing information via social media, or purchasing a new jersey. Although they are not a part of the team in an actual game, sport fans are part of a larger team – the fan community.

Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) developed a framework for different levels of fan identification and the motivations and benefits of such identification. They divided fans into three groups with key characteristics associated with each level: Low, Medium, and High identification. Low identification is for social fans that are low on emotion, financial commitment, and involvement, but a relationship does exist. These fans may be more attracted to sport entertainment than the sport or team itself. Medium identification is a fan's association based on some attributes or elements found to be attractive. They have some achievement developing desires and may be mostly attracted to the 'big event' that can sometimes lead to higher levels of identification but could also fade away if there is poor team performance or a star player is traded. The high identification is vested with fans who have the strongest, most loyal and long term relationship a fan can have with their team. The success of the team reflects personally upon these fans as well as on the collective identity of the community. Their study concluded that community affiliation is the most significant correlate of fan identification. It is potentially the most important factor in building fan identification and can have the strongest long term effects. Like other studies, this one highlights the importance of community but does not delve deeper into what constitutes membership in a sport fan community and the specific behavioral outcomes that come from said membership.

Cunningham and Kwon (2003) utilized the theory of planned behavior to better understand consumer's intentions to attend a Division 1 college hockey game. Through questionnaires to students who attended that college, the authors assessed previous behavior, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intentions. The researcher's findings found some practical implications for sport marketers, especially for this hockey team. With the influence of subjective norms, the social aspect of the sport event is important in

attracting people to attend. As well, a positive relationship between attitudes toward a team and intention to attend a game was revealed. Ideas such as creating a more social atmosphere at sporting events, group ticket sale specials, and customer loyalty programs, came from the study, as it's believed it could increase one's intention of attending the hockey game. Although there is significant research to show intent is a strong predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991) it is not known if those who intended to go to a game actually went.

Zhang, Smith, Pease, and Mahar (1996) analyzed a spectator's previous knowledge and how it was a predictor in attendance at an International Hockey League hockey game. They found that there was a positive relationship between a spectator's previous knowledge of hockey and their behavior and intention to attend the games. However, they noticed that spectator knowledge was affected by sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, race, income, education, and marital status. Participants who identified in different sociodemographs were found to respond differently in how they learn about the game of hockey. The researchers suggested that education of the game of hockey could be accomplished during the in-game program by holding a knowledge contest, a video show on hockey knowledge, public address announcer's comments before games and/or during the intermission of games. As well, they suggested that the improvement of spectator knowledge of hockey should be a large part of a marketing plan for professional hockey teams. They said it is especially relevant for people who are making decisions about a new product for the first time. In addition to this analysis, the researchers discovered differences between sociodemographic variables. They found that these variables affected the exposure and understanding of spectators to hockey games. For example, older male spectators who were Caucasian, married, with higher education and middle to high income tended to be more knowledgeable about hockey than other spectators. This led them to

suggest that women and ethnic minorities could be a good demographic to educate about hockey and increase the motivation to attend games.

Wakefield and Sloan (1995) acknowledged that while strong team loyalty affects attendance; stadium design and stadium services also directly influence spectator's desire to stay and attend more games in the future. Through various factors such as crowding, food service, quality, fan behavior control, stadium parking, and stadium cleanliness, a sport organization can improve fan attendance regardless of how successful a team is when it comes to wins and losses. They also concluded that these results could be especially important for teams in small markets, as stadium factors are something within their control. Factors such as market size, competitors, and team performance are out of control of the sport marketer, but enhancing the stadium experience is important to building a loyal fan base that keeps coming back. However, they acknowledged that in order to get them into the stadium in the first place, building team loyalty is crucial. They cited promotions that reinforce spectator's involvement in the team, making team members accessible to the general public, and discounted first time tickets as ways to begin that loyal relationship.

Although there is plenty of research on the motivations and functions of sports fans, there is limited research on how fandom is impacted from membership in the fan community and what the behavioral outcomes of that membership is. Sport organizations are seeking to compete in the international marketplace, now more so than ever before. As the domestic market becomes saturated, sport organizations in North America are looking to build a global consumer base for their products (Zhang, Chen, & Kim, 2014). This has led sport managers to believe that potential for long term growth can be accomplished through the global marketplace (Walker & Tehrani, 2001). It is already evident in the National Basketball Association (NBA) with its development

of international exhibition games and also programs such as Basketball Without Borders. With new technologies, fan communities are stretching geographic boundaries and with an understanding of how an individual connects with a fan community and the behavioral outcomes of that membership, sport organizations can expand their fan community across the globe.

Social Network Theory

Social network theory has been used to further examine many areas in sport, such as organizational behavior (Kanter, 1977), sport participation (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Perks, 2007) and sport fandom, which will be the focus of this section. Networks can be looked at from the perspective of an individual (a manager), or from the perspective of an organization as a whole. From a management perspective, Ibarra and Hunter (2007) suggests that strong, useful networks require careful construction and they don't just happen naturally. According to their research, successful managers are made by networking because they have a pool of contacts to provide support, feedback, and resources needed to accomplish personal and organizational goals. Although some may find networking to be forced or manipulative, research has shown that managers who have three types of networks are successful; personally and professionally. The researchers cite that the three important types of networks are a personal network, operational network, and strategic network. Personal networks consist of individuals who are outside your organization that can help you with personal advancement. They are usually made up of casual acquaintances from outside the organization, or close family and friends. Personal networks are often built up from participating in alumni groups, clubs, professional associations and personal interest communities. Within these networks, individuals exchange important referrals and develop professional skills through coaching and mentoring. Most personal networks are highly clustered meaning that in an individual's network, their friends are likely to be friends with one

another as well. This can cause an issue because their experiences and perspectives echo your own and may not be able to provide new information or resources. However, personal networks are important in the sense that they provide you with valuable resources and support but the challenge is to convert them into network resources that also help with operational and strategic needs. Operational networks consist of people you need to accomplish assigned, routine tasks. Ibarra and Hunter (2007) found that operational networking was geared toward doing one's tasks more effectively. In order to build a strong operational network, individuals need to cultivate stronger relationships with colleagues whose membership in the network is clear and their role defines them as stakeholders. Ties in this network are determined in large part by routine, short-term demands – "Either you're necessary to the job and helping get it done, or you're not" (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007, p. 3). A strategic network is made up of people outside your organization who will enable you to reach key organizational objectives. This could be managers from other organizations or colleagues from previous workplaces that help you determine how your role and contribution fit into the overall picture. As operational networks help with short term goals, strategic networks help with long term goals. These networks take time to build and often don't have immediate or obvious benefits. But this research suggests that effective leaders are highly dependent on others to get things done and strategic networks allows managers to marshal information, support, and resources from one sector of a network to achieve results in another. These studies provided evidence for the importance of understanding network theory from an individual perspective, but there is also research that describes the make-up of networks within an organization.

According to Cross, Borgatti, and Parker (2002), there are various types of social networks within an organization. These are a communication network, information network,

problem solving network, knowledge network, and access network. These networks aren't mutually exclusive and can be mini networks that fit within the larger structure of an organization. The communication network is the informal structure of an organization as represented in ongoing patterns of interaction, either in general or with respect to a given issue. For example, people on the same office floor might gather in the break room to engage in informal communication. This is a pattern of interaction that isn't a direct consequence of job descriptions or the organizational chart. The information network shows whom goes to whom for advice on work related matters. If an employee isn't sure how to answer a customer's question, they would look within the information network to find someone who might know the answer. The problem solving network indicates whom goes to whom to engage in dialogue that helps solve problems at work. This might mean going to the IT department for computer issues, or HR specialists for employee related matters. The knowledge network shows who is aware of whose knowledge and skills. This would often be a network of upper level management who oversee the organization from a big picture perspective and have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of other employees in the organization. The access network shows who has access to whose knowledge and expertise. This network is made up of people who have ties to people from outside the organization that can be used as information brokers to bring valuable resources and knowledge into the organization from their connection. There are many types of networks from an individual and organizational perspective, and previous research suggests that defining and understanding them can create value for managers and organizations.

The strength of one's connection to someone else in a network can be weak or strong. Weak ties exist among individuals who know one another, at least by reputation, but who don't engage in regular exchange of resources. An example of this is most of the people in one's social

media network (Facebook friends) or classmates/colleagues that you see around but don't work on projects together regularly. Strong ties exist among individuals who know one another well and engage in relatively frequent, ongoing resource exchanges. Strong ties are often between family members, close friends, and longtime colleagues. Although it may seem counterintuitive, there is often value in weak ties. Granovetter (1983) found that job seekers were more likely to find a job through weak ties than through strong ties. Job seekers wouldn't use close friends to find jobs because they usually knew the same things and people as they did. They found jobs through acquaintances like old college friends, former colleagues, or people they just happened to run into at the right moment. This study showed that those who relied on weak ties to get a job got higher pay, higher occupational status, greater job satisfaction, and longer job tenure.

Although we might think of relationships being more valuable when we have strong ties to others, weak ties create value because of a 'bridging tie' that often brings those connections together. Research from Goleman (2006) found that for weak ties to be effective, there must be a bridging tie between the indirectly connected individuals. These bridging ties can be as simple as having the same college alma matter or favorite band, but they work to create value as the tie provides non redundant information and resources. Granovetter (1986) and Goleman (2006) highlight that it's good to have connections of varying strengths in your network. However, other research shows that there is a limit in how many times one can be in an effective network.

There can be no more than 150 meaningful ties in a network (Dunbar, 1993). Every contact in a network takes time and effort to sustain, and there's only so much time an individual has. According to this research, 150 people is the upper limit to the size of network one can effectively maintain, even with online social networks. This research isn't just understood from a social perspective, it is a function of the brain's cognitive capacity: "This limit is a direct

function of relative neocortex size [your brain's center of higher brain functions], and that this in turn limits group size...the limit imposed by neocortical processing capacity is simply on the number of individuals with whom a stable inter-personal relationship can be maintained" (Bialik, 2007). The strength and size of a network can vary and it's important to be able to find value in all shapes and sizes of networks.

When considering sport fandom and consumption, the aspect of fan communities is becoming a significant developmental trend in sport management research. In an age where communication technologies and social media are bringing people closer and creating new spaces to foster community, sport fan communities are becoming more relevant and important for sport organizations to understand, and they can be understood through network theory and SNA. Social Network Theory allows for a deeper understanding for how people, organizations or groups interact with others inside their network. Originating from (Barnes, 1954), social networks refer to social structures made of nodes (key individuals, groups, or organizations) and it indicates the ways in which those nodes are connected through various social connections ranging from casual acquaintances to close family. In an effort to analyze these social networks, (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003) introduced the concept of social network analysis that has been adopted in many fields including biology, physics, sociology, and sport management. Using network and graph theories, social network analysis focuses on social structures and how and why the key nodes interact with each other. In a sport fan community context, Katz and Heere (2013) used social network analysis among fans of a newly formed sports team and found that the leader of each group of fans was crucial in the long term attachment other fans developed toward the team. Their research noted, "The findings signify that not all members are created equal. A newly formed community is not a homogenous or random network of individuals; rather, it is a network

where a select few persons have many more connections, and thus a heightened importance, than the average consumer” (p. 283). This suggests that in a sport fan context, fan communities are not a collection of hundreds of thousands of individuals, they are made up of a few thousand highly invested individuals that have many connections to others whom they bring along to consume the team’s product. In addition to better understanding sport fan communities, social network analysis has been successful in further investigating other areas of sport management, such as group behavior in sporting teams (Lusher, Robins, & Kremer, 2010) and sport participation (Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011).

According to Putnam (2000), individuals in modern society are experiencing relationships in a less intimate way than before due to mass-consumption society. People are finding community within informal organizations, such as groups of friends, instead of more traditional venues for community such as church, family, or voluntary organizations. In one of the earliest notions of sport fan communities as an emerging form of community, Anderson and Stone (1981) identified urbanization in the 20th century as reason for changes to the living patterns of people and the emergence of sport as a focal point for community. Sport fan communities, considered as one of Putnam’s (2000) informal organizations, provide opportunities for individuals to gain a sense of belonging, resulting in a positive effect on self-esteem and mood (Wann *et al.*, 2001). As well, attachment to the larger social structure of a fan community reinforces an individual’s identity and loyalty to a sport team (Heere & James, 2007; Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Studies on how networks of fan communities have benefited members of that network have been well documented. For example, Wann (2006) developed the Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model that found team identification leads to well-being benefits

because it results in increased social connections with other individuals. However, this model did not conclusively test the notion that team identification directly leads to social connections with others (social capital), but it highlights that if connections are made with others in the fan community, psychological well-being can be increased and/or gained. Wann, Waddill, Polk, and Weaver (2011) built on the Team Identification Social Psychological Health Model. Their study was concerned with the extent to which participants believed that being a follower of a team assisted with their general ability to generate and maintain social relationships, which led to an assessment of the level of their social psychological health. Results found that team identification was positively related to both well-being and social connections. In another related study, Wann, Brame, Clarkson, Brooks, and Waddill (2008) considered that lowly identified fans could receive the same psychological well-being benefits as a highly identified fan who is invested in the community, just by attending occasional games. Their results found that team identification (i.e. investment in a fan community), but not attendance (i.e., occasionally attending games) was a significant predictor of well-being. This study, along with the others mentioned about social capital show that although it is possible to increase one's social connections without any real interest in a team by just showing up to games once in a while, it is more likely that the individual's well-being will be enhanced via a strong association with the team and community that supports it. As these studies show, social network theory is very relevant to sport fandom and sport fan communities. Most research has examined networks of 'in person' sport fan communities, but a growing area of research has been focusing on networks of online sport fan communities.

Communicating with other fans, especially through online means, allows fans from all over the world to engage in every day discussions about their favorite sports team. Specifically,

social media has changed the way in which communication is done on the Internet, making it a place that is participatory and conversational (Jenkins, 2006; Weinberg, 2009). Sport fans who engage in communication with other fans online have been found to be the more highly identified fans of a team and more engaged in the fan community than fans who do not participate in online communication (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010; Milward, 2008; Phua, 2010). Crawford (2004) noted that Internet communication has impacted sport fandom over the years because it allows supporters to connect across time and space to form groups with other like-minded individuals who share a specialized interest in that team or sport. Norman (2014) explored the social characteristics of an online community of hockey fans. The author found that for members of this particular online community, it functioned more as an online 'sports bar' where individuals would drop in and out but there were a core group of regular participants that demonstrated a higher level of commitment to the group, similar to what you might find in a sports bar offline. Despite varying levels of commitment to the community, the fan blog served as a significant function of the member's fandom. Research on the impact of other social media mediums on sports fan communities has been well documented, including Wikipedia (Ferriter, 2009), Facebook (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker., 2012), and Twitter (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Beyond social media, which is largely collaborative in nature, other types of online communication are important to sport fan communities. Some examples include online betting (Boyle & Haynes, 2004), interactive television such as iTV in the United Kingdom (Bennet, 2008), and mobile technology content (Boyle, 2004). However, most of the non-social media communities that maintain fandom online are largely user generated, such as fanzines, podcasts, or fantasy leagues (Davis & Duncan, 2006). Sport fan

communities of all types, online or offline, can be examined through social network theory and provide value to sport organizations.

Social Capital Theory

Stemming from social network theory is social capital theory, another important aspect of understanding sport fan communities. Social capital is created and exchanged through social networks. Social capital can be defined as “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001, p. 41). In other words, a social network, or fan community, has a certain value to an individual and members of the community have benefits to be gained by acting in that network. The benefits members gain vary from individual to individual, but can include an increase in self-esteem and sense of belonging. The purposive actions individuals can take in a sport fan community in order to achieve these benefits include going to games, hosting and attending viewing parties with friends, or contributing to conversation about the team through social media. These actions make their identity as a fan stronger, connection to the community tighter, and thus these benefits can be achieved (Phua, 2012). Previous literature has likened this theory to the saying “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000, p. 225) and inherently implies that the more connections individuals make within their communities, the better off they will be emotionally, socially, physically, and economically (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). However, some research argues that social capital is not about resources to be gained, but instead it’s about communication, cooperation, and positive collective action within social networks (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Others insist that social capital is about the resources and how to reinvest those resources within a social network (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lin et al., 2001). Either way, the general consensus on social capital theory, is at their core, social networks

have value (Putnam, 2000). The specific value placed and gained varies from individual to individual within a social network, but some commonalities can include a sense of belonging, personal fulfillment, and sense of continuity (Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). A unique element of social capital is that it operates on various levels of a social structure, such as a sport fan community. It functions on the individual level for personal social capital gain, or it can be accessed to serve more general communal or societal needs (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995).

Aside from these exchanges of resources, an important element of social capital is the exchanges of 'bonding' and bridging' that are vital in understanding the value associated with a community. Putnam (2000) noted that bonding is the social capital value found in homogenous communities. These are individuals who are grouped together in a collective unity based on similar interests, values, goals and band together to support their collective needs. Bonding social capital is when feelings of trust and reciprocity are developed among close ties and can often be found in church groups, employment unions, or a fraternity where there is a shared value system upheld within the group. This can be found in sport fan communities as Mastromartino, Wann, and Zhang (2019) found that NHL fans in the southern United States often became fans because they did not enjoy the fan culture of the more prominent sport leagues such as the NFL or NCAA and found a safety net in the community of NHL fans. Their memberships in the NHL fan community allowed members to bond and build social capital through their collective mindset of being against the fan culture of other sports leagues and develop feelings of trust and security with other members of the community. Bridging occurs when new ideas and information are exchanged among loose ties. For example, this could be two fan community members exchanging information about the history and traditions of the team. However, bridging can have negative results and is often seen in gang communities, where practices based on intolerance or

hate promote exclusionary values. These groups encourage exclusion of others and can lead to distrust of those not in the community, and although may add value to those in it, is not positive for society as a whole. However, with a balance of social capital bridging, a community may be able to avoid those negative consequences. Bridging in social networks is the value found in pushing the community outward. They promote inclusion across heterogeneous networks and bridge across various social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. This is valuable for communities because it allows for new ideas and resources to be available to the community, and create an exchange of trust among members. However, this exchange of trust is unique because it is not among close family or friends; it is among 'weaker ties' that are valuable because they open the door for diverse ideas, attitudes, and experiences that allows the individual, by virtue of their membership in the community, to move onward (Putnam, 2000). In sport fan communities, there is an element of bonding as members band together to support a team and their rivalry with other teams and their fan base is an integral element of sport fandom (Havard, 2014). As well, Putnam's idea of bridging is important for sport organizations to understand because it will allow for them to grow their fan community in a way that adds positive value for organization and for the members of the community. Social capital theory has been used to further examine sport participation engagement (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Perks, 2007) and can be applicable to sport fandom as well. Incorporating social network and capital theories can lead to many investigations regarding sport fan communities and how sport consumers behave in these groups and what is to be gained from them.

Within a community, such as a connected group of sport fans, social capital implies that there is value to membership in that community. Whether it be new ideas and information, or emotional support, members of the community give from the community and they receive from

the community. To oversimplify, The Beatles 1969 song *The End* states “And in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love you make”. This implies there is certain value to contributing to the community, which is social capital. Kadushin (2012) notes there are two types of social capital in communities: social capital investment and individual social capital. Social capital investment is what one puts into their community, such as volunteer work and leadership roles can increase involvement among other community members or improvement in the community such as lower crime rates and economic growth. Individual social capital is what impacts well-being on the individual level, such as an increased sense of wellness or self-esteem. However, these are not mutually exclusive consequences as an improved and active community can contribute to increases in personal well-being.

There are certain resources that are available to community members as a result of their membership in that community. Kadushin (2012) uses the example of borrowing sugar from a neighbor. In turn, the borrower is not necessarily in debt for the exact amount of sugar to return, but in turn, the neighbor may feel they have the ability to ask the borrower for a favor in the future and the borrower may feel indebted to oblige. Since they are both members of the same geographic community, this type of exchange is available to them. This is reinforced by Putnam (2000) who argues that participation in informal networks (such as political groups, workplace, volunteer activities) leads to a culture of social trust and to communities with a sense of reciprocity that links different groups together. Although still somewhat loose in its definition, social capital in networks is a rich topic. However, this requires continued attention and empirical follow up, as is the aim of this current study: “This richness, however, means that much further conceptual exploration and empirical research are required further to develop and ground the implications of social capital (Kadushin, 2012, p. 184)

Sport Fan Communities as Social Networks with Social Capital

Various elements of sport fan communities have been discussed in previous studies; however, to date little research effort has been made to systematically investigate these factors to understand which components are pertinent to sport fans and therefore valuable for sport organizations to comprehend and act on. Notably, investigations into sport communities have primarily been focused on sport participants; for example, (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013) conducted a series of studies that led to the formulation of the Sport and Sense of Community Theory as it relates to participant sport. Their research concluded that administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership opportunities, social spaces, and voluntary action are what forms the community of sport participants. This theory was followed up by the creation of a measurement scale to gauge sense of community by (Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). Undoubtedly, these studies have substantially contributed to the understanding and management of participant sports; although some elements of sport participation and sport fan communities may overlap, there could be significant differences between sport participation communities and sport fan communities. It is questionable if these factors can be directly used in sport fan community settings. At least, empirical evidence is needed to support their similarities or differences. The theory developed by Warner and Dixon (2011) was constructed by data from an athlete's perspective and was reflective of their personal experience as a member of a participant community and that experience could be different than that of a fan who consumes the sport product. Also, previous studies have overlooked the clear definition of sense of membership in a sport fan community, mix up its causes, composition, benefits, and behavioral consequences. For example, Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, and James (2015) examined fan community identification of Japanese soccer and

baseball fans. They found that identification and membership with the fan community had positive effects on team brand equity which resulted in increased fan community engagement, customized product use, member responsibility, and positive word of mouth. These are similar behavioral outcome findings from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) but neither empirically define the factors that constitute membership in the community. This study is limited in that research was conducted in Japan, known as a collective culture (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011) and these findings need to be tested in other cultural contexts. The authors recognize their proposed model was only a mediocre fit for the data, thus more testing needs to be done in order to confirm the findings of this study and understand more about consumer behavior in sport fan communities.

Some other previous studies work to define identification or membership within a sport fan community and generally conclude that identification with a fan community is achieved when one feels a sense of connection with other members of the community and a sense of difference from those not in the community (Keller, 2003; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, these studies do not break down the specific elements of what constitutes membership in the community and what factors contribute to that sense of connection one member feels with another. Grant et al. (2011) examined fan communities of newly formed professional sports teams in New Zealand to identify factors that contribute to building a successful brand community from scratch. They found that marketing strategies from the organization did not often match up with the markers of brand community and did not initiate marketing strategies to encourage the development of a brand community. This highlights the need for more research to be done for organizations to better understand the key factors of fan communities and utilize

them in their marketing mix in order to lessen the impact of a lack of team history or success on fan identification and consumption behavior.

One study to operationalize sense of membership in a sport fan community was conducted by Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019). 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. 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. 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. Although the research provides a solid conceptual framework, the study lacks empirical evidence needed to fully understand what it means to be a member of a sport fan community and the behaviors and benefits associated with such a membership. This current study aims to build off of

Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) and confirm their findings. A further breakdown of the specific elements of a sport fan community will be reviewed in the following section.

Outcomes of Membership in a Sport Fan Community

In research on sport fan communities, several key trends and patterns have emerged. As mentioned earlier, there are various elements of a fan community that are attractive to sport consumers and offer a variety of benefits. Membership in a sport fan community differs from other elements of sport fan identity such as attitudes, involvement, attachment, and satisfaction and can be likened to the concept of brand experience (Brakus, 2009). The authors note the key difference:

In contrast, brand experiences are not general evaluative judgements about the brand (e.g., “I like the brand”). They include specific sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses triggered by specific brand-related stimuli. For example, experiences may include specific feelings, not just an overall “liking.” At times, experiences may result in general evaluations and attitudes, especially evaluations of the experience itself (e.g., “I like the experience”). However, the overall attitude toward the experience captures only a small part of the entire brand experience. (Brakus, 2009, p. 53).

Although this study focuses on positive benefits of community membership, it is important to note there can be negative outcomes of membership in a brand community. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) developed a conceptual model of how a consumer’s relationship with the brand community has an impact on their intentions and behaviors with the brand, specifically European cars. A notable finding from this study showed that there can be negative outcomes of community membership, in addition to positive ones.

Specifically, the researchers found that normative pressure, an unspoken obligation to accept and live by community norms, acted as a negative outcome of identification with the brand community. The article notes that the difference between team initiated and individual initiated aspects of community identification should be examined in order to better understand where the positive or negative outcomes originate.

There are different degrees of attachment to a team and community and each individual places different value on their membership in the group. Previous research on brand attachment has suggested that dividing up functionalities and attributes of that attachment into various categories can be beneficial to understanding the case being examined (Chitturi, Chitturi, & Raghavaram, 2010; Evans, Bridson, & Rentschler, 2012; Hankinson, 2005). In this study, these membership outcomes will be organized into two categories that highlight the benefits the fan receives from their membership in the fan community leading to increased social capital: psychological outcomes and behavioral outcomes. It's important to note that these outcomes are not mutually exclusive and there may be some cross over in certain elements of each outcome. For example, the sense of exclusivity as a member of the fan community can achieve affective benefits in the sense of an increased self-esteem, in addition to behavioral outcomes such as purchase behavior. As well, the types of outcomes each individual will experience will vary from person to person some members may receive parts of some, or parts of none, or all of one, or none of one. The following sections describe each one in more detail.

Psychological Outcomes

The psychological outcomes of membership in a sport fan community are categorized into two types of benefits: cognitive and affective. A further examination follows.

Cognitive Benefits. Cognitive benefits refer to the psychological process one goes through in gaining and understanding knowledge, formulating beliefs and attitudes, and developing decision making skills. Through an association with a sport fan community, members receive cognitive benefits, such as a deeper knowledge of the brand (Zhang et al., 1996), including history, rituals, and lingo, along with aligning their values and beliefs with the sport organization (Wann et al., 2001), becoming empowered to co-produce the brand (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and contributing to the innovation of the company (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008)– all which contribute to social capital.

In sport fan communities, specific and passionate knowledge about a particular team, player, or sport that can grant them access into a fan community. Previous research has shown that a common cognitive motivation for consuming sports media is to learn about players and teams (Wenner, Gantz, & Wenner, 1998). It's been noted that sport fans are proud of their ability to remember and recite sports knowledge and trivia and gain social capital from that knowledge. The information gained about the particular sport or team is an important aspect of fandom because it allows them access into the community and the ability to share that information with others (Raney, Raney, & Bryant, 2006). In addition to consuming sport media for knowledge, rituals are a unique element of sport fan communities that create cognitive benefits, knowledge of the history and culture of the brand, for community members. H. McDonald and Karg (2014) found that fan rituals are an important element in developing a culture in which a fan community can be co-producers of the brand, leading to increases in satisfaction, team identification, merchandise expenditure, and game attendance. The authors noted the example of the Texas A&M fan community that has built a tradition of gathering the night before a game to participate in ritualistic chants and prepare for the game. Gatherings like this ritual provide opportunities for

fans to express connection to the team, leading to a higher involvement in the community. Their research found that participation in rituals was not only beneficial to those participating, but it was impactful for non-participating spectators who said the game day atmosphere and rituals that went along with it provided an additional point of interest and enjoyment on top of the game itself because they could learn about the history and culture of the community. The fans in this study acted as an extension of the team's marketing department and took control of the brand through their traditional ritual, which led to higher investment on their part, and the recruitment of new fans and ultimately new revenue sources for the organization. Similar results were found in Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) where fans of the NHL's Tampa Lightning noted that observing the rituals of the team's 'Sticks of Fire' fan community as something that enhanced their enjoyment of the games and influenced their connection to the fan community. These are patterns of behavior that are social in nature and where things can be shared together. In order to be most effective, rituals must be different than one's every day routine in order to invoke past experiences, be automatic behavior but have the awareness it is meaningful behavior, and have a strong sense of community as a foundation (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). This act of connecting rituals of a team to personal meaning is the process of gaining psychological ownership of a team. Individuals interpret meaningful values of a team's brand and connect meanings through the undertaking of rituals like the ones mentioned above. This in turn makes their identity as a fan higher and connection to the fan community stronger (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009; Sumida, Wooliscroft, & Sam, 2015).

Cognitive dissonance theory from Festinger (1962) tells us that people seek information that is in line with their own attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts, and avoid information that goes against their mindset. When one comes across something that goes against those values and

beliefs, it can cause distress which will lead people to seek information that is more in line with their personal belief system. This process can be found in sport fan communities in that relationships built and maintained with other members of the community can lead to significant cognitive benefits. For example, Wann (2006) developed the Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model that found team identification leads to well-being benefits because it results in increased social connections with other individuals. However, this model did not conclusively test the notion that team identification directly leads to social connections with others (social capital); instead, it highlights that if connections are made with others in the fan community, psychological well-being can be increased. Wann, Waddill, Polk, and Weaver (2011) built on the Team Identification Social Psychological Health Model. Their study was concerned with the extent to which participants believed that being a follower of a team contributed to their ability to initiate and maintain social relationships, which led to an examination of the level of their social psychological health. Results found that team identification was positively related to both well-being and social connections. In another related study, Wann, Brame, Clarkson, Brooks, and Waddill (2008) considered that lowly identified fans could receive the same cognitive benefits as a highly identified fan who is invested in the community, just by attending occasional games. Their results found that team identification (i.e. investment in a fan community), but not attendance (i.e. occasionally attending games) was a significant predictor of well-being. This study, along with the others mentioned about social capital show that although it is possible to increase one's social connections without any real interest in a team by just showing up to games once in a while, it is more likely that the individual's well-being will be enhanced via a strong association with the team and community that supports it.

Decision making skills are also developed in sport fan communities, when there is opportunity to be a co-producer of the brand. When making purchase and consuming products, individuals are more likely to trust someone they know than a corporation, or in this case, a sports team (Schau et al., 2009). This is why sport organizations want regular consumers to be advocates for the brand and play a role in selling it to others. This concept can be described as being a co-producer of a brand, as outlined by Vargo and Lusch (2004) who highlighted ‘the customer is always a co-producer’ as one of their eight foundational premises of marketing. Empowering consumers to be a co-producer of a brand can be beneficial to organizations because it makes their marketing more efficient by using less time and resources (Kalaiganam & Varadarajan, 2006) but it also works to strengthen the fan community and is appealing for members of that community because of the cognitive benefits the members receive. Schau et al. (2009) studied nine brand communities from a variety of product categories and found common themes in how these brands empowered their consumers to be co-producers of the brand. These themes resulted in value for the brand as well as the fan community. The way in which brand co-production creates value is that it empowers the consumer to have more control in how the brand is viewed and consumed. This process has been referred to as a “brand hijack” where a consumer takes control of the brand from the organization’s marketers and enhances the brand’s evolution (Wipperfurth, 2005). A brand hijack can be distinguished in two ways. First is a serendipitous hijack which is “the act of consumers seizing control of a brand’s ideology, use and persona” (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1090). This usually occurs by fans of the brand within subcultures and is mostly unanticipated and separate from the brand’s marketing department. Some examples of this from recent research include Harley-Davidson with biker fans (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and Apple computers (Belk & Tumbat, 2005). In these situations, organizations have let

go of trying to control how the brand is perceived and instead provide their fans with the tools to communicate with each other and co-create the brand (McWilliam, 2000). This passion for the product and newfound responsibility leads to expertise and competencies, thus giving them legitimate marketing credibility (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2005). The second type of a brand hijack is a co-created hijack which is "the act of inviting subcultures to co-create a brand's ideology, use and persona, and pave the road for adoption by the mainstream" (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1090). This is where a brand manager acts as a facilitator to the fan community and plays a large role in the marketing message (Wipperfurth, 2005).

Most of the research on fans as co-producers of the brand has focused on fans that are highly invested and identified with that product. (Cova & Pace, 2006) wondered if the same effects were at play if the product was an ordinary brand like convenience products sold through large retail outlets. In a now infamous study of brand communities, (Cova & Pace, 2006) examined the ways in which consumers co-produce a brand in the fan community of the food product Nutella. In their research, the authors noted that the 'My Nutella' campaign and fan community was an example of communal customer empowerment, allowing the consumers to shape the meaning of the brand they love, making the relationship between consumer and brand stronger. On the other end of the spectrum, Tynan, McKechnie, and Chhuon (2010) found similar results for fans of luxury item brands where fans of a product found value in the ability to be a co-producer of the product and have a direct voice in key decisions the company was making. These studies found similar results to fan communities of highly invested fans like Harley Davidson and Apple in fan communities of lower investment attachment like Nutella.

An extension of being a co-producer, brand evangelism is a form of marketing where consumers advocate on behalf of the brand on their own accord. Behaviors of brand evangelism

include voluntary word of mouth and recruitment of new fans, caused by their extreme passion for a brand (Matzler, Pichler, & Hemetsberger, 2007). Research has shown that empowering brand evangelism is important for organizations, and can lead fans to not only spread positive word of mouth messages, but to engage in passionate recruitment campaigns (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004; Rozanski, Baum, & Wolfsen, 1999). In developing a scale to measure brand evangelism for sport organizations, (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2015) identified four main factors in how sport fans evangelize other individuals into fandom. First is one who advocates for the brand in order to feel like part of the team and repeatedly promotes the team's superiority to all. Next is a fan that advertises by displaying and or/gifting team-related merchandise. Third is a fan that antagonizes by initiating communication with nonfans as an avenue to provoke someone using the team's performance, and last is a fan who assimilates and uses the brand as a means to "connect with like-minded individuals through repeated apparel choice, communication, and/or gatherings" (Dwyer et al., 2015, p. 651). Their research allows for organizations to measure fan behavior items beyond traditional ticket and merchandise sales. As well it shows that brand evangelism allows members to gain decision making power, a cognitive benefit. The process one goes through in learning about the culture of the fan community, gaining knowledge and history about the organization, and having a role in decision making all create cognitive benefits for the fan and ultimately lead to increased social capital.

Affective Benefits. Affective benefits are those relating to, or arising from influencing feelings or emotions. Often times in sport fandom, boosts in self-esteem and feelings of belonging are common affective benefits because the fan is part of an exclusive club with like-minded individuals (Wann et al., 2001). This can be characterized as a kinship between members (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Being part of an exclusive club is desirable for

consumers because it leads to a sense of perceived value and uniqueness that members gain if they are part of a group that has limited space and special requirements that are necessary for membership (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Wu, Lu, Wu, & Fu, 2012). Scholars have noted that consuming sport often brings disparate people together in a communal experience (Kutcher, 1983; Melnick, 1993) and consumers enjoy a boost in self-esteem, which is derived from the exclusivity of membership in a group. When it comes to sport specifically, Wann (1995) found that group affiliation is one of the most common motivations for an individual to consume sports. It can often be factors outside of the specific team or sport of interest that align individuals and create a common group identity such as symbols from associated communities (Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011), class affirmation (Taylor, 1987) or national unity (Klein, 1984, 1991). For example, M. A. McDonald, Milne, and Hong (2002) note that members of exclusive country or sailing clubs can be aligned by social class and then enjoy the benefits of being members in those exclusive clubs. Even though they may be united by other affiliations, it is the membership in the exclusive sport club or community that leads to self-esteem benefits.

When a brand employs an exclusivity marketing strategy, it is an example of a brand hijack Wipperfurth (2005) because it seeks to seduce the consumer by aiming at their heart, not their brain: "Is there anything you want more than the thing you can't have?" (Wipperfurth, 2005, p. 56). Further elaborating on that, the author uses the example of Red Bull as a brand that creates an air of exclusivity that attracts members of their fan community. Red Bull focuses their sampling efforts on exclusive sub communities in order to create a deep experience for the consumer. They do not focus on how many people sample the product, for them it's who and how that matter. As well, Red Bull has limited access and availability of their merchandise. It is only their spokespeople such as celebrities and athletes who get access to t-shirts and hats,

consumers do not have the ability to purchase any merchandise. This forces consumers to work hard to obtain any Red Bull related merchandise, and when they do they consider it a prized possession while giving them a story to tell their friends and family. Red Bull's strategy "encourages consumers to feel special, as though they've discovered something different" (Wipperfurth, 2005, p. 57).

In a sport fan community context, Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) acknowledged that NHL fans in the southern US were fans of a niche sport and it required an extra level of dedication that allowed them to be members of the fan community. This unique requirement, that not many people in their geographic region possessed, made them feel that the fan community was extra special and increased their sense of membership in the community, further forming their identity as a fan of the team. This is in line with other studies on the affective benefits of fan communities, such as Jancovich (2002) who examined the fan community of cult classic films and noted the "value of membership within these subcultures is based on a sense of exclusivity that is formed in opposition to the dominant or mainstream" (Jancovich, 2002, p. 318). For participants in a study conducted by Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) the mainstream sport for them to follow in their geographic region tended to be football or baseball, but they chose hockey as their favorite sport in part to be part of a community that their specific knowledge was the bridge to membership. In a study on fans of surfing, Moutinho, Dionísio, and Leal (2007) noted that fans in this community displayed similar attitudes and behaviors because it is a very specific sport that takes dedication to understand and be involved with. In this specific fan community, individuals would purchase and wear certain surfing apparel brands to signify they were part of the exclusive surf fan community. No one other than a diehard surf fan would wear these brands, something that draws them closer to the fan

community. Another example of this is in an analysis on mountain climbers and rugby players by Donnelly and Young (1988) who noted there is a complex process of identity construction that is built on subculture affiliation, or membership in exclusive groups. Through this previous research, it is clear that being part of an exclusive club with like-minded individuals is desirable for sports consumers and an integral part of a sport fan community, leading to cognitive benefits through their sense of membership in the community.

For fans to feel part of a fan community, they also need a sense of acceptance for their religious beliefs, gender, race, sexual orientation, or any other important part of their identity outside of their fandom. Not only is tolerance important for fan communities, positivity around those elements and for welcoming new people into the community is important in feeling connected to that community. An example of this comes from Darling-Wolf (2004) in an examination of identity and gender in a fan community of a Japanese celebrity. The research found that this was a popular community because female fans felt that the community was a safe haven where other members of the community were supportive and not view their fandom any differently because they were a woman. This was an online community with clearly defined rules from the webmaster, but this community collectively acted to be positive and accepting of each other, resulting in an enjoyable fan community experience for those involved. In a sport consumer context, Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) found that fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt states felt a strong connection to the NHL fan community because of the acceptance and positivity of the fan community. Participants in that study noted that they felt like it was a place they could be themselves and not worry about judgments from others. This was especially the case for female participants who noted that they felt accepted in the NHL fan community, leading to a strong connection to the community but felt that fan communities of other sport

leagues were not as inclusive, causing them to gravitate to the NHL as their favorite league to follow. Cleland (2015) found that British football fan message boards have been increasing in inclusive and tolerant attitudes, specifically through the rejection of homophobia. This has been a common topic of research in football fan communities and has aligned with other studies that show decreasing homophobia has been found among sport fans (Adams, 2011; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Nylund, 2012). However, there have been opposite results found in some sport fan communities, such as Kian, Clavio, Vincent, and Shaw (2011) who found that homophobic and sexist posts went uncontested on message boards in fan communities of American football. The ability to be accepted for who they are has a strong impact in how a fan can connect with a fan community and the type of benefits they receive from acting in that community.

In addition to the feeling of acceptance from fellow community members, sport fans receive further affective benefits by having a direct relationship with the organization through their membership in the fan community. Although fan communities are often self-sufficient and operate within themselves, a relationship with the organization can give a fan community legitimacy and make members feel like they are part of the team they follow. In business practices, this function is often referred to as relationship marketing which can be defined as “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22). When it comes to relationship marketing in the sport fan context, professional sport organizations want their fans to feel like they contribute to the team and with that requires being interactive with the fan community. A perceived relationship with the organization can lead to increased intention to consume media, purchase licensed merchandise, and attend games (Y. K. Kim, Trail, & Ko, 2011). This interaction is a two-way process and (Bühler & Nufer, 2010) outline some examples of sport organizations that

have a direct relationship with their fans. One is the New Zealand All Blacks national rugby team who, through their website, invite fans to send messages to the players and then post those messages through the team's locker room. Some sport organizations have official fan clubs where in return for their membership; fans receive perks such as gifts from the team and communication with players. An example of this is Juventus of the Italian Serie A football league who charges \$12 per year for fans to join and in return the fans receive autographed player photos, access to their online fan community, and an official team e-mail address. There are variations of these types of membership loyalty programs, but all serve to highlight the affective benefits from having a direct relationship with the organization.

Bee and Kahle (2006) examined why having a relationship with the organization is important for sport organizations as well. The authors suggest that in a sport relationship marketing context, an examination of all three levels of social influence for consumers would allow sport organizations to strengthen their relationship with consumers and help to “understand, deal with, or change a particular relationship attitude” (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 106). Their research argues that many sport organizations use market data to analyze simple purchasing behavior information such as the amount paid, the type of product purchased, where the product was purchased, and if it was a repeat purchase – but with relationship marketing, an organization can work to build a stronger emotional connection with their fan community by approaching it in a way that allows them to understand why a particular product was purchased and assess the likelihood of a repeat purchase. This suggests that sport organizations should view their fans as lifetime partners and work to understand their changing needs, instead of a strong focus on short-term transactions and immediate profits (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008) This approach by Bee and Kahle (2006) has been shown to lead to financial gains for organizations

(Palmatier, 2008). Further research shows that the length of a relationship between the consumer and organization can lead to an increased sense of loyalty. Research from Raimondo, Miceli, and Costabile (2008) tells us that the longer someone feels they are loyal to a certain brand, the more likely they are to have positive attitudes such as satisfaction and trust, as well as increased consumer behavior. Practically speaking, this research suggests sport organization should focus on length of a time as a fan in order to develop social equity with their fan base. However, most previous work has indicated that little research has been done on relationship marketing in sport and more theoretical development needs to be achieved.

Behavioral Outcomes

Social opportunities, be it with current friends or potential new friends, is often at the forefront of sport fan culture. Attending live games, tailgates, or watching games at home is the activity sport fans engage in the most and where many consumer behaviors occur (Wann et al., 2001). Engaging with others about your favorite team in a social context can contribute to a sense of self which psychologically intertwines with the sport or team of interest and lead to behavioral benefits. These social opportunities give sport fans a chance to act on their fandom and develop meaningful connections to others at the same time (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). A group experience around a sports team can be related to the concept of a subculture of consumption from Schouten and McAlexander (1995). Their research notes that when a distinct group of society identifies with a certain activity or product, in this case a sport fan community communally consuming a game, they are governed by a unique set of values. (Underwood et al., 2001) built on this and found that the greater the degree to which the brand serves as a basis for social interaction, the greater the social identity. That is to say, when sport fans consume sports with other fans, their sense of self increases and their connection to the team and fan bases

strengthens. B. A. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) built on this theory and found it aligned with a community of college basketball fans whose social identity had a strong connection to brand equity. Watching a game alone disconnects an individual with a fan community and consuming with others enhances the attachment to the team. A fan can't engage with the team in isolation, an idea that stems from social brand engagement (Kozinets, 2014). When engaging with other members of the fan community about the focus brand, the relationship moves from person-brand to person-person-brand.

Katz and Heere (2013) examined the relationships among fans of a newly formed sports team and found that the leader of each group of fans was crucial in the long term attachment other fans developed toward the team. Their study found that within subgroups of the overall fan community, there were leaders of each group that played a large role in the fan identity of others in their subgroup. For example, the leader would often initiate the social plans to watch the team's game that week and others in the subgroup went along to just be part of the group. This study looked at a newly formed sports team so there was no previous attachment to the team, and the social opportunities influenced many in this study to go to games and led to an increase in their attachment to the team. In a follow up study, Katz and Heere (2015) found that the leaders who empowered other members of their group led to a stronger and better balanced fan group, leading to stronger team identification. These two studies provide a developmental outline for organizations to follow:

The initial stage of development was marked by the presence of a select few highly identified individuals whereby marketers could best approach new consumer groups by targeting centralized leaders. The current research proposes that in the second phase of

development marketers need to develop specific tactics towards the leaders that assist them in empowering other brand followers. (Katz & Heere, 2015, p. 381)

When it comes to social opportunities in sports, research has shown that females especially are motivated by the social aspect and behavioral benefits of being a sports fan. Dietz-Uler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte (2000) examined the differences in gender when it comes to sport fan behavior and reasons for being a sport fan. They conducted a study among college students and found that an equal number of male and female participants considered themselves to be sport fans but males identified more strongly with being a fan than females. They found that males engaged in more sport fan behavior such as discussion on sport and watching sport but when it came to attending actual events, females were fairly close to males in amount of sport events attended. When it came to why they identify as a sport fan, females were more likely to report being a fan because they attended and watching sporting events with friends and family, while males were more likely to consider themselves to be fans because they played sports and wanted to acquire sports information. The results reported that 10.1% of females reported they enjoy watching sports with friends and family as a reason they identify as a sport fan, while only 5% of males reported that reason. Overall, the study showed that males and females are equally likely to consider themselves to be sport fans, but females appear unlikely to engage in all of the behaviors that the researchers used to describe a sport fan (engaging in discussion, consuming sport media, owning memorabilia, etc.). They generalized that for females in their study, being a sport fan means attending, watching, and cheering at sporting events, preferably in the company of family and friends.

Social opportunities, whether it is with current friends or to make new friends, are a large part of the community aspect of sport fandom. Most research already noted focuses on

socializing with current friends, but making new friends is also part of the sport fan community. Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) found that participants bought season tickets for an NHL team just for themselves with the hope they would meet new friends in their section. That study also found that individuals would often go to team sponsored socials at restaurants and bars to watch the team's away game to meet other fans. Establishing meaningful connections with others through a common identity as a fan of a team is an important part of a sport fan community because of the behavioral benefits achieved.

Having a physical space for a fan community to congregate is essential in a sport fan community and provides benefits to fans. For many brands, a physical space exists as a core brand association. Think of the Apple Store for Apple or theme parks for Disney. These brand associations characterize all the products the brand has and where consumers have the strongest associations (Keller, Heckler, & Houston, 1998). These physical spaces can showcase the brand by positioning it in a specific way in order to create meaning and benefits for consumers (Hollenbeck, Peters, & Zinkhan, 2008). For sports, infamous stadiums such as Lambeau Field, Fenway Park, and Madison Square Garden carry meaning beyond just being a location where sporting events take place. In Chicago Magazine, writer Bill Veeck described the meaning of Wrigley Field for Chicago Cubs fans: "The bleachers aren't just concrete and steel, cheap seats, and concession stands; they're a state of mind, a way of life, the best of summer" (Veeck, 1984). Examples such as the Michigan Wolverines and the 'Big House', Baltimore Orioles and 'Camden Yards', and the Florida Gators and the 'Swamp' are all examples of linking the stadium and the brand. This has direct implications on the fan community because as that association between team and facility becomes more salient, the impact it has on team and community identification becomes stronger and more benefits are achieved (Underwood et al., 2001).

Aside from creating the association between stadium and brand, the physical space also functions to create an atmosphere that is conducive to fans forming a group identity. Underwood et al. (2001) noted that there were a number of facility characteristics that impact the opportunity for identity formation, including size, design, fan proximity, facility age, atmosphere, and idiosyncratic features. Wakefield and Sloan (1995) conducted a study to determine how a team's stadium factors in to a spectator's enjoyment of the game and intentions to come back again. They acknowledged that while strong team loyalty affects attendance; stadium design and stadium services also directly influence spectator's desire to stay and attend more games in the future. Through various factors such as crowding, food service, quality, fan behavior control, stadium parking, and stadium cleanliness, a sport organization can improve fan attendance regardless of how successful a team is when it comes to wins and losses. They also concluded that these results could be especially important for teams in small markets, as stadium factors are something within their control. Factors such as market size, competitors, and team performance are out of control of the sport marketer, but enhancing the stadium experience is important to building a loyal fan base that keeps coming back. A highlight for Cubs fans in the bleachers of Wrigley Field "is that its close quarters and celebratory, carnivalesque atmosphere facilitate the communal aspects of consumption" (Holt, 1995, p. 9). It is noted by Underwood et al. (2001) that facilities should provide more than a clean place with accessible amenities; they should work to foster a strong sense of group affiliation and identity. The authors note that many baseball stadiums are designing their facilities to create more of an intimate and nostalgic feeling, and point to the 'Dawg Pound' for Cleveland Browns fans at FirstEnergy Stadium (formerly Cleveland Municipal Stadium) as a good example of this as well. The researchers conclude that "physical facilities should be designed to both communicate a unique brand identity and

facilitate shared experience among consumers” (Underwood et al., 2001, p. 10). The idea that a stadium can keep fans coming back regardless of team performance shows how meaningful these place benefits are to members of the fan community.

In addition to the physical space, virtual spaces that sport fans act in achieve similar benefits as well. Communicating with other fans, especially through online means, allows fans from all over the world to engage in every day discussions about their favorite sports team. Most recently, social media has changed the way in which communication is done on the Internet, making it a place that is participatory and conversational (Jenkins, 2006; Weinberg, 2009). Differing from traditional communication methods and media outlets, social media allows for connection, communication, and collaboration to occur between users on a larger scale (Bradley, 2010; J. Williams & Chinn, 2010). By following and ‘liking’ a brand on Facebook, fans can affirm their membership in the community and act on their identity as a fan (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Sport fans who engage in communication with other fans online have been found to be the more highly identified fans of a team and more engaged in the fan community than fans who do not participate in online communication (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010; Millward, 2008; Phua, 2010). As well, it’s been noted that the longer one senses membership in a virtual community, the more social capital they gain (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008). In the early days of online fan communities, some scholars were skeptical that a ‘real’ community could be formed and maintained in an online format. In a study of online fan communities, Watson (1997) conducted an ethnography that took over two years, which examined the online fan community of the band Phish. The research found that a virtual community can have real world implications and can connect people in ways that offline communities can’t. In large part because of this research, online fan communities have gained legitimacy as real communities with significant

meaning to their members. McWilliam (2000) cites four factors for successful online fan communities. First is that it is a forum for exchange of common interests. As found by Mastromartino, Wann, et al. (2019) fans of smaller niche sports may not find others with similar fandom in their geographic location and can use online fan communities to connect with fans in other locations, working to strengthen their own identity as a fan. The second factor for McWilliam (2000) is a sense of place with codes and behavior. Although the Internet is an open forum, strong fan communities have expectations of fellow members and over time a certain code of conduct becomes part of the culture. Third is the development of congenial and stimulating dialogues leading to relationships based on trust. Over time, individuals who are part of online communities develop relationships with other users, which can turn into relationships that exist outside the fan community. This works to strengthen their ties and sense of belonging to that community. Lastly, the researcher cites successful online communities offer encouragement for active participation by more than an exclusive few. Online communities are places where individuals can have their voices heard in ways that can't be done with traditional media. Fans do not have to read only the one journalist who covers their team in the local newspaper or passively view the game broadcast. In the changing sport media landscape, fans can often bypass traditional media outlets and interact directly with their favorite athlete or team (Suggs, 2015) and in online communities, each fan can have their voice heard which leads to a stronger sense of belonging. These virtual spaces are an important space for fans because "they offer the rare opportunity to relocate in place a profound sense of belonging which has otherwise shifted into the textual space of media consumption" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 64).

Petersen (2014) examined the online fan community of the television series 'Sherlock' on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Specifically using the social media site

tumblr.com, the author noted how and why Sherlock fans interact with each other in an online community. A major finding from this research was that Tumblr was a place for fans to show off their devotion for the show and the conversations fans had with each other played a part in shaping their fan identity. This suggests that this online community has a dual meaning for fans. One in that their activity enhances the fandom for others in a communal experience and another in that it strengthens and shapes their own identity as a fan.

As it relates to sport fan communities who utilize communication technologies, Crawford (2004) noted that Internet communication has impacted sport fandom over the years because it allows supporters to connect across time and space to form groups with other likeminded individuals who share a specialized interest in that team or sport. Norman (2014) explored the social characteristics of an online community of hockey fans. The author found that for members of this particular online community, it functioned more as an online 'sports bar' where individuals would drop in and out but there were a core group of regular participants that demonstrated a higher level of commitment to the group, similar to what you might find in a sports bar offline. Despite varying levels of commitment to the community, the fan blog served as a significant function of the member's fandom. Research on the impact of other social media mediums on sports fan communities has been well documented, including Wikipedia (Ferriter, 2009), Facebook (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012), and Twitter (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Beyond social media, which is largely collaborative in nature, other types of online spaces are important to sport fan communities. Some examples include online betting (R. Boyle, 2004; R. Boyle & Haynes, 2004), interactive television such as iTV in the United Kingdom (Bennett, 2008) and mobile technology content (R. Boyle, 2004).

However, most of the nonsocial media communities that maintain fandom online are largely user generated, such as fanzines, podcasts, or fantasy leagues (Davis, 2006).

These virtual spaces also offer the opportunity for fans to communicate directly with the team they follow. Communication technology is important for sports fans in the ever growing global scale of sports. Foster and Hyatt (2008) believe that the building of a fan base shouldn't be limited to just within the city where the team is based. They argue that with today's growing technology, sport franchises should target a more global audience and build a fan community of both local and distant loyal fans. The researchers point to the example of Real Madrid of the Spanish Primera Division in European football who has an estimated 150 million supporters worldwide. The function of online communication has enhanced the fan experience for sport fans and their ability to contribute to the team. Without this aspect of the fan community, sport fans would not be able to express their fandom in the same way. In modern times with advanced communication technologies, a lot of this direct connection with the organization can come online, especially through social media. Research by (Pronschinske et al., 2012) found that sport fans appreciated and reacted positively to genuine relationship building engagement from their favorite team on Facebook. For sport organizations, it is not enough to just be present online; they need to be active and authentic in their interactions. Their research developed a methodology to assess if an organization's engagement on Facebook was genuine and authentic and results showed that if an organization fostered a genuine connection with their fans, they were more likely to have more likes on their page than organizations that didn't post regularly or interact with fans in the group. Their results also noted that teams who were able to indicate their page was verified as official through Facebook or as noted on their team website were able to attract more fans. This study highlights the notion that fans enjoy a direct connection to their

favorite team and are attracted to the ability to easily communicate with them. An engaging connection from organizations stretches beyond professional sport organizations and has also shown to be beneficial for sport participation organizations (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013). As this previous literature has shown, sport fans receive various benefits from acting in physical and virtual spaces in the fan community.

What is Missing and Next Steps

When considering sport fandom and consumption, the concept of fan community is becoming a significant developmental trend in sport management research and practice. When communication technologies and social media are bringing people closer and creating new spaces to foster communities, sport fan communities are becoming more relevant and important for sport organizations to foster. Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) developed a conceptual framework but lacked empirical findings necessary for furthering the theory. Based on the conceptual evidence, this research aims to confirm the meaning of membership in a sport fan community. This requires considering a deductive approach and asking the following questions: As a sport fan, how do I know that I am in the community? What are the factors that constitute the concept of membership in sport fan communities? Previous studies by such scholars as Yoshida, Gordon, James, et al. (2015) examined the antecedents and outcomes of fan communities, but there is no research on the in-between stage of fan communities that specifically outlines the elements that defines what membership in a sport fan community is. As well, no research empirically examines the social capital implications and outcomes of membership in the sport fan community. This research aims to discover what it means to be part of a sport fan community and build on the Sense of Membership in a Sport Fan Community Theory. Findings of this study would supplement the Sense of Community in Sport theory and

scale (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner et al., 2013) and allow sport practitioners to examine their fan community and understand their consumers better.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to develop an instrument to measure membership in a sport fan community and validate that instrument, as well as examine the outcomes of membership in a sport fan community and the social capital implications. This chapter outlines the procedures that will be used to develop an instrument and evaluate the proposed theoretical framework. This study was divided into two sub studies: first, the development of an instrument to measure membership in a sport fan community, and second to validate the instrument and analyze the impact of membership in a sport fan community on consumer behavior outcomes and social capital implications.

The study conducted by Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) identified five factors that constitute membership in a sport fan community: collective unity, positivity, inclusivity, social opportunities, and knowledgeable members. Building on this study, definitions for each factor were created and items relating to each one were developed. The first sense of membership factor, Collective Unity, was defined as having a shared vision and goals for the community. The second factor, Positivity, was defined as having a sense of positivity among the community. The third factor, Inclusivity, was described as having a welcoming feeling in the community. The fourth factor, Social Opportunities, was described as having opportunities to interact with other community members. The fifth factor, Knowledgeable Members, was described as having other community members with a strong understanding of the history and culture of the team.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of individuals who identified as members of the fan community of their favorite National Hockey League (NHL) team. Although the goal of the study is to develop a scale that can be applicable to all fan communities, it would be unrealistic and irresponsible to generalize the sense of membership in fan communities derived in a professional hockey setting to fan communities of all sports worldwide. The use of this specific sample allowed this study to be more specific in the details about the fan community because members of the same fan community often share similar values that can differ from those of various other fan communities (Schroy, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2015). The study was intended to build on the understanding of sport fan communities in the current research context in the hope of shedding light on the essential elements that can cross sport and cultural lines. The NHL was chosen because this study built from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019), who used a sample of NHL fans, and because previous research has noted that NHL fans have a strong sense of community (Mastromartino, Wann, et al., 2019).

Measurement

In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the survey, several screener questions were included (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014), such as name of favorite team, length of time as a fan, and sense of membership in the community. The questionnaire was developed by following guidelines from Andrew, Pedersen, and McEvoy (2011) and asked participants to measure all items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Items were developed from previous studies on sport fan communities (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, et al., 2015; Yoshida, Heere, et al., 2015) and then reviewed by a panel of experts. After being asked to measure sense of membership in the fan community,

the questionnaire shifted to membership outcomes. Building on the outcomes of membership in a sport community from previous research (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, et al., 2015), there are two main outcome categories: psychological and behavioral outcomes. Multiple items were created for each outcome, and participants were asked to answer questions about those outcomes on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Statements were developed by using in vivo coding from participant responses from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) and Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, et al. (2015).

Next, to measure social capital implications, participants were asked to answer questions about their relationship with other members of the community. Items were adapted from previous studies that had measured perceived bridging and bonding social capital (Phua, 2012; D. Williams, 2006). Multiple items were adapted for both bridging and bonding, and participants were asked to answer questions about social capital on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

Procedures

An online survey was designed with Qualtrics and distributed on popular online NHL fan communities, such as [Reddit.com/r/hockey](https://www.reddit.com/r/hockey) and [hfboards.com](https://www.hfboards.com), as it has been shown that online fan message boards are suitable places to recruit highly identified sports fans (Phua, 2010). The survey was administered through Qualtrics, and participants were asked to complete sociodemographic and fan behavior questions in addition to items measuring the constructs of membership in sport fan communities. The data was randomly split into two halves. A confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) was conducted with the first-half data to assess the goodness-of-fit of the proposed membership sense scale. A series of CFAs were conducted with the second-half data to cross-validate the membership sense scale and assess the measurement

properties of other latent factor scales (e.g., bonding social capital, bridging social capital, cognition, and affection). Then structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted with the second-half data to assess the relationships between community membership and other related constructs such as perceived bridging social capital, perceived bonding social capital, psychological outcomes, and behavioral outcomes.

Data Analyses

SPSS 26.0 was utilized to produce descriptive statistics and identify outliers, missing data, and to check for normality. Then, the analysis moved to a two-step confirmatory factor analysis. This was done by conducting one CFA with the first half of the data and then conducting a second one in order to test the reliability and validity of the original CFA using guidelines from Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Previous research has shown this can be an effective methodology to empirically examine theoretically sound conceptualizations, as is the aim of this current research (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013). Due to extensive exploratory research in this topic (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, et al., 2015; Yoshida, Heere, et al., 2015), it was deemed appropriate to move forward to a two-step confirmatory factor analysis and subsequent SEM. Both CFA and SEM were conducted by using Mplus 8.0 procedures with the MLR estimator that is robust to non-normal distributed data, was used to examine the goodness-of-fit indices (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

The following statistical tests were examined the goodness-of-fit of the factor model: chi-square statistic (χ^2), normed chi-square (χ^2/df), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and standardized root mean residual (SRMR). To indicate the satisfactory goodness-of-fit, normed chi-square less than 3.0, RMSEA less than .60, CFI larger than .90, and SRMR less than .08 were suggested by measurement literature (Hair Jr,

Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005). In terms of reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) over .70 were suggested (Hair Jr et al., 2010; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Further, factor loadings should be over .60 to indicate good convergent validity, and inter-factor correlations should be less than .85 to show the presence of acceptable discriminant validity (Hair Jr et al., 2010; Kline, 2005). In the SEM, a second-order factor model of membership sense was used to assess its relationship with linked constructs, which serves to examine the nomological validity of membership sense.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter outlines the findings of the data analyses of this study. Quantitative data were collected using a mix of a newly developed instrument to measure sense of membership in a sport fan community and existing scales to measure outcomes and social capital implications and outcomes of membership in a sport fan community. The results are presented in three sections, which include: (1) factor specification and descriptive findings; (2) confirmatory factor analysis; and (3) structural equation modeling.

Factor Specification and Descriptive Statistics

As suggested by Churchill (1979), operational definitions for each factor that contributes to a sense of membership were developed based on the previous research findings of Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019). The first sense of membership factor, Collective Unity, was defined as community members having a similar vision and goals for the community. The second factor, Positivity, was defined as having a sense of positivity among the community. The third factor, Inclusivity, was described as having a welcoming feeling in the community. The fourth factor, Social Opportunities, was described as there are opportunities to interact with other community members. The fifth factor, Knowledgeable Members, is defined as, other community members have a strong understanding of the history and culture of the team.

In total, 525 useable surveys were collected. Demographic characteristics of participants ($N = 525$) are depicted in Table 1. Demographically, the majority of participants were male (86.9%). The average age of participants was 27 years old ($M=27.29$, $SD = 6.60$) with a range

from 18 – 60 years old. A majority of participants were Caucasian (86.2%) and the household income was fairly balanced across all the categories.

Examining the means and standard deviations for factors that contribute to a sense of membership in the fan community, all five factors scored above the midpoint ($M = 4.71$ to 6.02). The items for Inclusivity had the highest mean score ($M = 6.02$), and the items for Positivity had the lowest mean score ($M=4.71$). Specifically, the item “People can be members of the community regardless of race, gender, religion, and/or sexuality” has the highest mean ($M = 6.49$), and the item “Negativity is not present in our community” had the lowest mean ($M = 2.54$).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The first half of the data ($n = 269$) was used for initial CFA. The results confirmed the five factor model from Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) and retained 17 items. The five-factor model with 17 items fit the data moderately well: $\chi^2/df = 213.345/109 = 1.957$; RMSEA = .060, 90% CI (.048 - .071); CFI = .923; TLI = .903; and SRMR = .053. However, factor loadings of five items were below the suggested value of .60 and one factor (social opportunities) retained one less item than the recommended three. Nonetheless, considering the good theoretical soundness of these items and preliminary nature of this research, we chose to keep the items in the current study and we urge future studies to re-examine this issue.

Another CFA with the second half of the data ($n = 256$) was conducted to cross-validate the proposed factor model. As the results, goodness-of-fit indices were satisfactory: $\chi^2/df = 201.887/109 = 1.852$; RMSEA = .058, 90% CI (.045 - .070); CFI = .900; and SRMR = .059. However, one of factor loading was inferior ($\lambda = .403$) and therefore removed from the factor model. The revised factor model produced similar fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 184.703/94 = 1.965$;

RMSEA = .062, 90% CI (.048 - .075); CFI = .897; and SRMR = .060. As shown in the Table 3, the values of Cronbach's α ranging from .596 to .820 and the values of CR ranging from .627 to .819 together indicated an acceptable level of reliability. Factor loading ranged from .529 to .887, and inter-factor correlations ranged from .134 to .777.

In addition, a series of CFAs were conducted to examine the statistical soundness of bonding social capital, bridging social capital, cognitive outcomes, and affective outcomes measurement scales (see Table 5). Fit indices of CFA for initial bridging scale were below average: $\chi^2/df = 60.472/20 = 3.024$; RMSEA = .090, 90% CI (.064 - .115); CFI = .938; and SRMR = .040. In order to better understand these results, the items were further examined under the lens of the conceptual framework of the study and some items did not fit well from a theoretical perspective. As suggested by the modification indices and experts review, items 2, 5, and 6 were removed. CFA for revised bridging scale was re-run and produced good fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 7.355/5 = 1.471$, RMSEA = .043, 90% CI (.001 - .104); CFI = .993; and SRMR = .024. As shown in Table 5, its convergent validity was supported by factor loadings ranging from .677 to .823. Its reliability was supported by .838 of Cronbach's α value and .842 of CR value.

Fit indices of CFA for initial bonding scale were poor: $\chi^2/df = 164.134/20 = 8.207$; RMSEA = .168, 90% CI (.145 - .192); CFI = .851; and SRMR = .064. Like the results of the bridging scale, the items were further examined and it was noted some did not fit in well with the theoretical perspective of the model. As suggested by the modification indices and experts review, items 1, 3, and 8 were removed. The CFA of revised bonding scale generated good fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 23.420/5 = 4.684$, RMSEA = .120, 90% CI (.074 - .171); CFI = .962; and SRMR = .026. As shown in Table 3, its convergent validity was supported by factor loadings ranging

from .728 to .886. Its reliability was supported by .906 of Cronbach's α value and .908 of CR value.

Fit indices of CFA for cognitive outcomes were approximately perfect: $\chi^2/df < .001$, RMSEA $< .001$; CFI $> .999$; and SRMR $< .001$. As shown in Table 3, its convergent validity was supported by .689 of AVE value and factor loadings ranging from .561 to .926. Its reliability was supported by .798 of Cronbach's α value and .812 of CR value. Fit indices of CFA for affective outcomes responses were satisfactory: $\chi^2/df = 5.818/2 = 2.909$, RMSEA = .086 (.001 - .172); CFI = .984; and SRMR = .021. As shown in Table 3, its convergent validity was supported by factor loadings ranging from .685 to .778. Its reliability was supported by .823 of Cronbach's α value and .831 of CR value.

Structural Equation Modeling

The goodness-of-fit indices of SEM were acceptable: $\chi^2/df = 1020.937/564 = 1.810$; RMSEA = .056, 90% CI (.051 - .062); CFI = .869; and SRMR = .079. The relatively inferior value of CFI could be attributed to the complexity of tested relationship model. As shown in Figure 3, second-order factor loadings of membership sense were satisfactory, except for the factor loading of social opportunities ($\beta = .369, p < .01$), which was largely caused by the 2-item measurement of social opportunities. As shown in Figure 3, a sense of membership in the sport fan community had significant relationships with the psychological outcomes: bonding social capital ($\beta = .240, p < .05$), bridging social capital ($\beta = .651, p < .001$), cognitive outcomes ($\beta = .489, p < .001$), and affective outcomes ($\beta = .673, p < .001$). As well, a sense of membership in the sport fan community was shown to have significant relationships with the three behavioral outcomes: game attendance ($\beta = .186, p < .05$), merchandise purchases ($\beta = .449, p < .001$), and evangelism ($\beta = .396, p < .001$). In terms of explained variance, membership sense explained

5.8% of bonding, 42.3% of bridging, 23.9% of cognitive outcomes, 45.2% of affective outcomes, 3.4% of game attendance, 20.2% of merchandise purchases, and 15.7% of evangelism, together supporting the nomological validity of sense of membership in the community.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study provides a useful point for understanding the concept of community within a sports fan context and offers important implications for sport managers and academics. A comprehensive understanding of the factors that constitute a sense of membership in a sport fan community and the associated outcomes of membership are integral for sport organizations to better understand their fans. Previous studies have found that membership in sport fan communities is a predictor of future fan consumption behavior and satisfaction (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Heere, et al., 2015). The practices identified in this study stand in contrast to previous research suggesting that factors that contribute to a sense of community in spectator sport differs than sense of community in participation sports (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner et al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to expand the literature to uncover the factors that constitute a sense of membership in a sport fan community. This study finds vast differences in the experience of participating in a sport versus being a fan of and consuming a sport.

We conclude by offering theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, the scale developed and tested in this study can assess one's sense of membership in a sport fan community and predict the outcomes of that membership. The scale for this study utilized previous conceptualizations of community (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014) and tested with a two-step CFA and SEM. In the CFA, the five membership factors conceptualized by Mastromartino, Zhang, et al. (2019) were confirmed

and 17 items were retained: (a) collective unity, (b) positivity, (c) inclusivity, (d) social opportunities, and (e) knowledgeable members. Overall, the five-factor sense of membership in a sport fan community model displayed good psychometric values, specifically when considering the reliability and validity estimates, providing support for H₁. In the subsequent SEM, it was observed that each factor had a significant influence on achieving a sense of membership in the sport fan community. Thus, our model alters how we study sport fan membership by providing a holistic review of membership variables including team identification, socialization, satisfaction, and future purchase intentions.

In regards to the creation and maintenance of social capital, this study shows that a sense of membership in a sport fan community has a positive effect on both bridging social capital (H₂) and bonding social capital (H₃). Our analysis shows that a sense of membership had a larger influence in bridging social capital (65%) than in bonding social capital (24%). Based on this finding, we suggest that achieving a sense of membership in a sport fan community is more likely to lead fans to form a large number of weak ties than to form more personal emotional relationships. Weaker ties are beneficial to fans in the sense that it exposes them to new people from different backgrounds, leading to the exchange of and access to new ideas and information. Fans who achieve that sense of membership in the sport fan community are able to connect with new people and be engaged with the larger fan community. Moreover, although the impact may be lower, a sense of membership in the sport fan community also has an impact on bonding social capital, allowing for closer, more intimate relationships to develop. The results of this study suggest that social capital should be an integral theoretical element when researching aspects of sport fan communities. Previously, there has been no research that incorporates social capital as a theoretical framework when examining sport fan communities.

With regard to managerial implications of achieving a sense of membership in the sport fan community, both behavioral and psychological outcomes were positively related to that sense of membership, providing support for H4 and H5. Although both types of outcomes were identified, the findings suggest that psychological outcomes are more prevalent than behavioral outcomes. This is important for managers to understand in order to identify and emphasize the psychological benefits of membership for fans. Specifically, the two highest explained variances were found among the psychological outcomes (48.9% for cognitive benefits and 67.3% for affective benefits), while the three lowest were dimensions of behavioral outcomes. Previous literature shows that identification with a sport team can lead to an increased sense of well-being (Wann, 2006); this study builds on that finding by suggesting that, in addition to identifying with a team, identifying as a member of the fan community is responsible for psychological outcomes. For example, two psychological outcomes identified include: (1) cognitive outcomes, such as new knowledge about the rituals and history of the team, and (2) affective outcomes, such as an increased sense of connectedness and boosts in self-esteem. Cognitive and affective outcomes have been conceptualized in previous research (Mastromartino, Zhang, et al., 2019; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, et al., 2015), and this study builds on previous findings by empirically examining these outcomes and providing managers with sound evidence for shifting their focus to emphasize the psychological benefits for fans.

Lastly, from a managerial perspective, sport organizations can use this study to better understand their fans who have a sense of membership in the sport fan community and to design marketing campaigns around communal knowledge to build a larger and stronger fanbase. These results are also valuable for sport organizations seeking to increase purchases and spread positive word of mouth, as the results indicate they can do so by tailoring marketing campaigns around

developing a sense of membership in the sport fan community.

As a result of the confirmation analysis, some items from previous conceptualizations were eliminated, mostly due to low factor loadings, and one factor (social opportunities) only retained two items, one less than the recommended amount (Hair Jr et al., 2010). However, due to strong theoretical soundness we decided to keep the factor in the final model. The possible reason for the difference from the conceptualized model was that the original study was an exploratory qualitative study with a small sample size. This current study included a much larger sample and was an empirical investigation, resulting in more precise results. Future research should test this model further, perhaps with fans of sports other than hockey, as the sample for this study was composed only of NHL fans. Moreover, further testing of content validity could be conducted using guidelines from Aiken (1996) and Dunn, Bouffard, and Rogers (1999), where a panel of experts focus on each item under the constructs and evaluate content validity (i.e., relevance, representativeness, and clarity) through statistical procedures, which would result in a better understanding of the items being measured. With further testing and improvement, this scale can be a valuable tool for both academics and sport management practitioners. The scale has a reasonable number of items (17), allowing for easy distribution to participants at events or games.

Overall, there are three primary limitations to consider with this study. First, as with any survey design, all responses were self-reported and could therefore be over- or under-reported. As well, by administering the survey online, we may have missed fans who do not spend much time online and their perspective is not included in these results. Second, only fans of NHL teams were surveyed, and thus the results may be different than if fans of all sports and leagues had been considered. As noted earlier, using this sample allowed us to be specific with the results

(Schroy et al., 2015); nonetheless, future research should expand and test the model in other sporting and cultural contexts. Third, this study utilized split-sample validation when conducting the two-step CFA. Although similar validation has been adopted in other scale development studies (Arai et al., 2013; Byon, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010; Qian, Zhang, Wang, & Hullah, 2019), this model could be further tested by utilizing two rounds of data collection for a more robust understanding of the model. Moreover, this study did not examine the differences between highly identified and less-identified fans. Previous research has shown that fans can be split into different groups based on their level of identification to the team, and those different groups may display different consumption behaviors (James, Delia, & Wann, 2019; Wann & Branscombe, 1993b). Perhaps highly identified fans are likely to gain more through a sense of membership in a sport fan community than less-identified fans are. These differences need to be assessed in the context of membership in a sport fan community, and in this process, sociodemographic factors such as gender, income, education, and ethnicity should be considered and examined. Future research can build on these findings and should examine potential mediating factors of social capital gained as a result of a sense of membership in a sport fan community, such as gender, income, and fan identification. Overall, these results are applicable for sport practitioners, in that by building marketing strategies to grow the fan community, they can enable their fans to develop and maintain social capital and thus to engage further in their fandom. These findings also build on previous research on sport fan communities and highlight the theoretical implications of a sense of membership in a sport fan community. Future research should continue to build on the findings of this study and examine sport fan communities as the importance of community continues to evolve in society.

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TABLES

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	n	Valid%	Cumulative %
Age	18-29	362	69.6	70.1
	30 - 39	131	24.9	95.0
	40 - 49	21	4.0	99.0
	More than 50	5	1.0	100.0
Gender	Male	456	86.9	87.0
	Female	68	13.0	100.0
Ethnicity	Caucasian	449	86.2	86.2
	African American	2	0.4	86.6
	Hispanic	22	4.2	90.8
	Asian	29	5.6	96.4
	Other	19	3.6	100.0
Household Income	Less than \$25K	99	19.1	19.1
	\$25K ~ \$49K	105	20.3	39.4
	\$50K ~ \$74K	98	18.9	58.3
	\$75K ~ \$99K	87	16.8	75.1
	\$100K ~ \$149K	76	14.7	89.8
	More than \$150K	53	10.2	100.0

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Sense of Membership Scale

Factors	Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Collective Unity	I feel a sense of collective unity among the fanbase	5.61	1.24
	The community is all in it together	5.45	1.36
	The community has similar goals	5.70	1.25
	I bond with other fans	5.41	1.37
	I celebrate victories with other members	5.89	1.36
	I commiserate with fellow members when the team loses	5.40	1.45
Positivity	There is a sense of positivity among the community	4.82	1.55
	The community doesn't take things too seriously	3.85	1.68
	We embrace positive news stories about the team together	6.09	1.21
	I get along with other community members	5.68	1.16
	We express our passion in a positive way	5.27	1.32
	Negativity is not present in our community	2.54	1.40
Inclusivity	The community is accepting of newcomers	6.20	1.11
	The community accepts people from all backgrounds	6.21	1.69
	People can be members of the community regardless of race, gender, religion, and/or sexuality	6.49	1.02
	Inclusive language is used in our community	5.14	1.43
	I feel welcome in the community	6.07	1.12
Social Opportunities	There is interaction among community members in person	5.06	1.67
	There is interaction among community members online	6.27	1.07
	I attend team sponsored events	3.69	2.15
	I get together with other fans to watch the game	4.18	2.03
	I communicate with other fans online during games	4.88	2.04
Knowledgeable Members	I have considerable knowledge about the team	6.12	1.14
	Other community members are knowledgeable about the team	5.62	1.19
	Other community members are able to have in-depth conversations about the team	5.74	1.27
	Other community members teach me about the team	5.28	1.53
	Other community members are able to constructively criticize the decisions of the team	5.29	1.39
	There are good debates among community members	5.47	1.22
	There is smart, informed communication among community members	5.29	1.19

Table 3

Final Factor Model of Sense of Membership. Summary Results for Reliability and Validity Assessments (Factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Average Variance Extracted, and Composite Reliability)

Factors	λ	α	CR
<i>Collective Unity (7 items)</i>		.640	.652
I feel a sense of collective unity among the fan base	.678		
The community is all in it together	.613		
I bond with other fans	.566		
<i>Positivity (3 items)</i>		.646	.648
We embrace positive news stories together	.627		
I get along with other community members	.691		
We express our passion in a positive way	.529		
<i>Inclusivity (4 items)</i>		.820	.784
The community is accepting of newcomers	.658		
The community accepts people from all backgrounds	.764		
People can be members of the community regardless of race, gender, religion, and/or sexuality	.700		
I feel welcome in the community	.635		
<i>Social Opportunity (2 items)</i>		.596	.687
I attend team sponsored events	.537		
I get together with other fans to watch games	.887		
<i>Knowledge Members (4 items)</i>		.690	.704
Other community members are knowledgeable about the team	.649		
Other community members are able to have in-depth conversations about the team	.507		
There are good debates among community members	.650		
There is smart, informed communication among community members	.632		

Table 4

Inter-Factor Correlations Among Sense of Membership Dimensions

Factor	Unity	Positivity	Inclusivity	Social Opportunity	Knowledgeable Member
Unity	1.000				
Positivity	.777	1.000			
Inclusivity	.711	.777	1.000		
Social Opportunity	.372	.201	.136	1.000	
Knowledgeable Member	.698	.707	.526	.134	1.000

Table 5

CFA for Bridging, Bonding, Cognitive Outcomes, and Affective Outcomes

Factors	λ	α	CR
<i>Bridging (5 items)</i>		.838	.842
Interacting with people in the community makes me want to try new things	.697		
In the fan community, I come in contact with new people all the time	.638		
Interacting with people in the fan community makes me feel like part of a larger community.	.747		
I am willing to spend time to support general community activities.	.677		
Interacting with people in the community gives me new people to talk to.	.823		
<i>Bonding (5 items)</i>		.906	.908
There is someone in the community I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions	.728		
If I needed an emergency loan of \$500, I know someone in the fan community I can turn to.	.786		
The people I interact with in the fan community would put their reputation on the line for me	.867		
The people I interact with in the fan community would be a good job reference for me.	.886		
The people I interact with in the community would share their last dollar for me.	.800		
<i>Cognitive Outcomes (3 items)</i>		.798	.812
I have learned more about the sport of hockey	.790		
I have learned more about the history and traditions of the team	.919		
I am in the know about team related news	.572		
<i>Affective Outcomes (4 items)</i>		.823	.831
I feel a sense of belonging in the community	.740		
I feel a sense of camaraderie with fellow community members	.778		
I feel like I am part of the team	.685		
I care about fellow community members	.767		

FIGURES

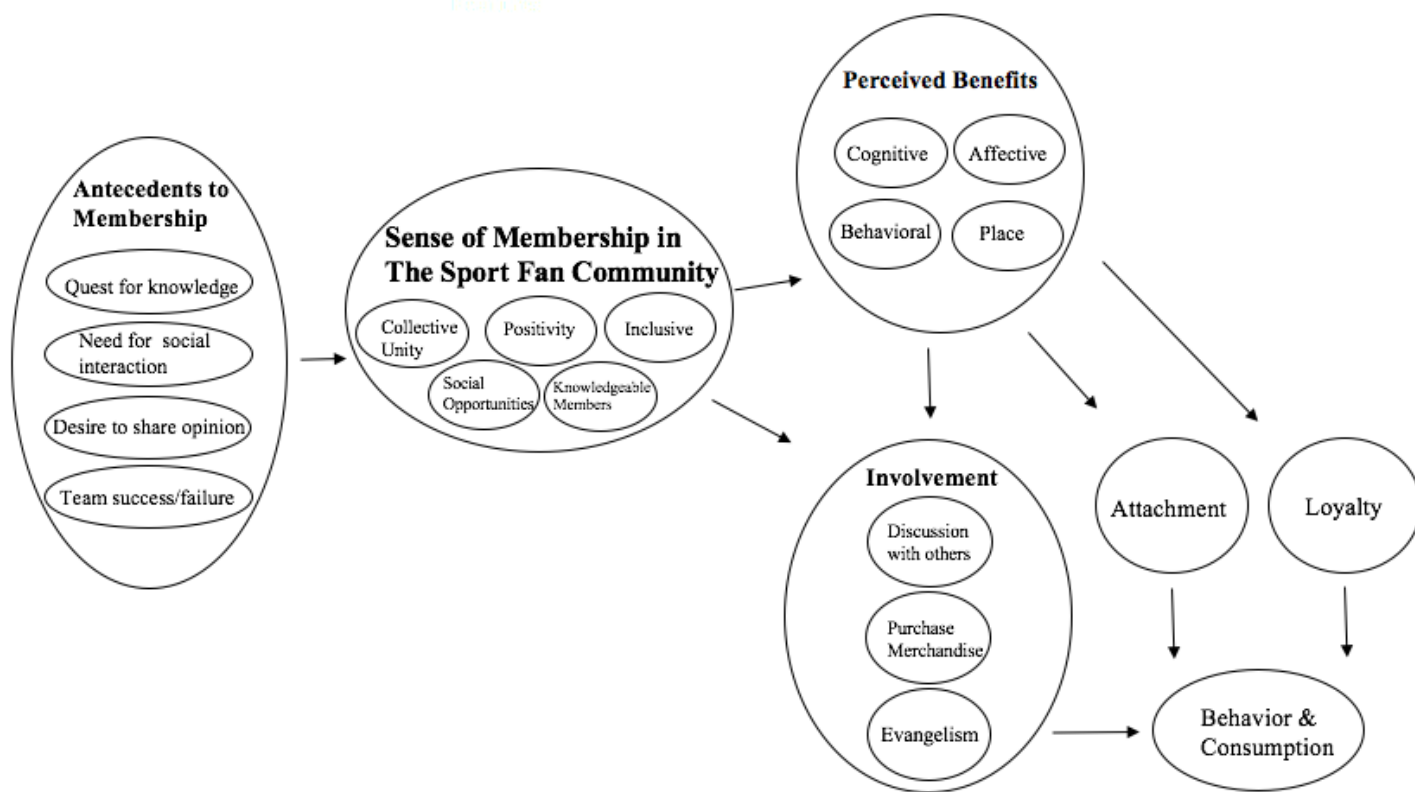


Figure 1. Structural model of the Sport Fan Community Membership Theory

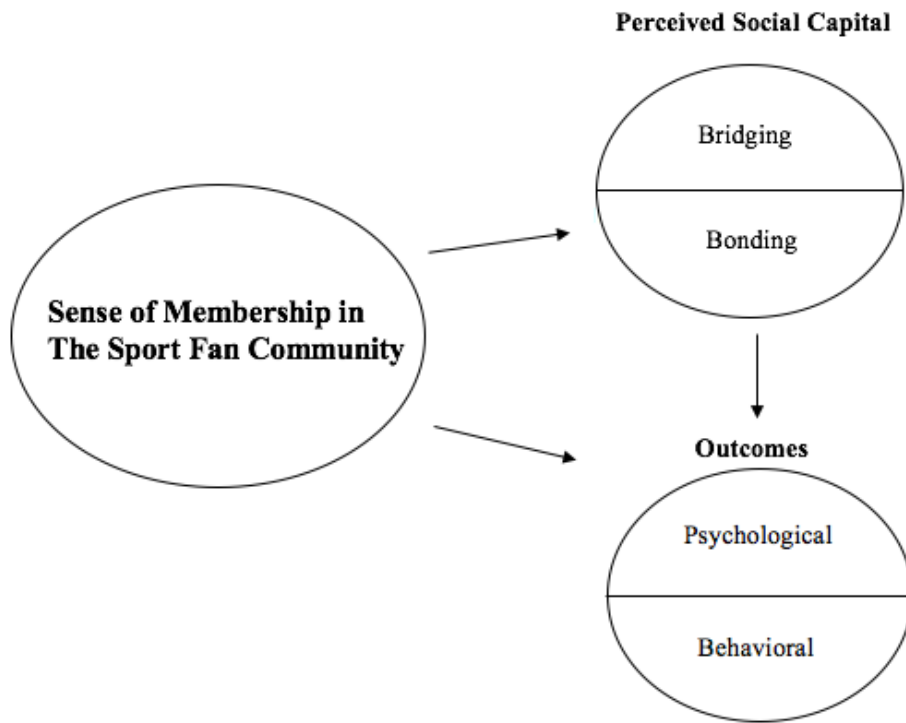


Figure 2. Structural model of the Sport Fan Community Membership Theory

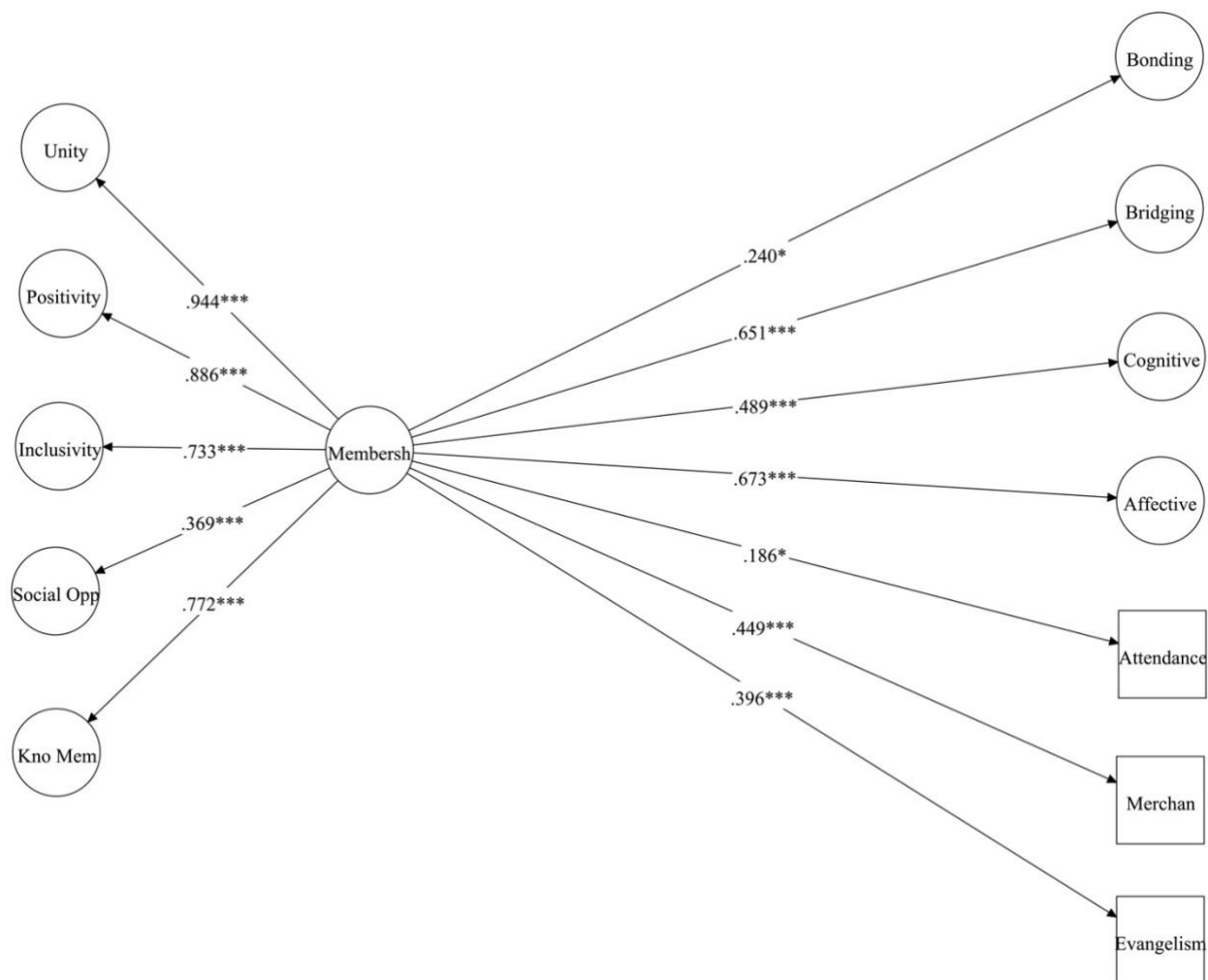


Figure 3. Structural relationships between second-order sense of membership in the fan community and related constructs.