

Metafandom: A Theory of Chronically Connected Leisure Communities

Larkin, Ben; Spalding, Ryan Lenard and Ahn, Taesoo

Merrimack College, United States of America

spaldingr@merrimack.edu

Aim

For decades, research on sport fandom has focused on team- and game-related consumption. Studies have focused on factors like team identification (e.g., Wann et al., 2001) and motives (e.g., Trail & James, 2001) as causal variables and behavioral loyalty and intentions (e.g., likelihood of attending games, watching games on TV, etc.) as outcomes. More recently, the number of sport content options have proliferated to the point where sport fans have a virtually inexhaustible array of choices at their fingertips around the clock. Sports talk radio, podcasts, 24-hour sport networks, regional sport networks, websites, blogs, and fantasy sport all compete for sport fans' time and attention. Tying all these options together is social media, which serves as a hub wherein sport fans from across the globe can engage around any topic they wish (Larkin & Fink, 2016). It is the fundamental argument of this paper that these changes have reformed fandom from a phenomenon centered around team- and game-related viewership, whether in person or through media, to one where simply talking about sport takes center stage. We label this movement "metafandom," and argue that it is not that individuals who could be characterized as "metafans" no longer watch games or enjoy the activity; rather, we argue that their motivation for doing so, and the roots of their enjoyment of the activity, have shifted. The motivation and enjoyment around the activity is now derivative of social interaction and the ability to be consistently connected to other like-minded fans about content of inherent interest to the individual. It is not so much the sport itself—the performance on the court, field, or ice—that people enjoy. It is talking about and connecting over that performance. Certainly, social interaction has long been a part of sport. The basis of our argument goes well beyond that. Metafandom is sport involvement rooted in a pervasive desire for social connectedness with like-minded others. Talking about sport supersedes watching it, and in the age of social media, there is a segment of (meta)fans who watch sport so that they *can* talk about it. It requires context to discuss, and so they must be informed. Our primary purpose in this paper is to explicate what metafandom is, how we got here, and the primary outcomes that we believe characterize a growing segment of consumers in the sport industry today.

Theoretical Background

Drawing on Baumeister, Maranges and Vohs' (2017) perspective on self as information agent, we argue that, for a growing number of fans, the consumption of sport is now rooted in the discussion around sport holistically (i.e., watching games, trade and free agency rumors, topics of debate, etc.). Baumeister et al. (2017) argued that individuals' primary functions include seeking and acquiring information, communicating one's thoughts to others, circulating information through groups, and constructing a shared understanding of reality. While these functions previously were rooted in face-to-face groups, social groups no longer function solely in traditional forms. Indeed, as Conlin, Billings and Averset (2016) explained, advances in technology have changed the "realm of necessary interconnectedness, providing the opportunity for the global village" wherein people feel motivated to be a part of not just their immediate social group, but rather a larger, cultural conversation about popular culture and media (p. 153). The desire to be a part of this conversation is further buoyed by a pervasive anxiety of failing to remain informed and abreast of the conversation ongoing at any given time, which is why the social media feed is consistently—indeed, compulsively—

refreshed (Conlin et al., 2016; Larkin & Fink, 2016). This phenomenon has been referred to as the fear of missing out (FoMO) and we believe it to be a critical motivational factor in meta fandom. This movement has been further spurred by the emergence of audience as co-creator (Napoli, 2011). That is, the audience now dictates what topics are “trending,” and thus discussed on radio and TV programs daily.

Design, Results and Conclusion

Conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections (Callahan, 2010). Instead, per Callahan (2010), we are “selectively choosing key pieces of literature that support a particular perspective (we) are putting forth for consideration” (p. 302). We posit that meta fandom is at least partially responsible for a number of outcomes observed in the sport industry in recent years, including a growing interest in league-wide matters as opposed to just one specific team, increased substitution through media, fan expertise, and a propensity for delayed gratification. We also posit that these central arguments provide merit in explaining other leisure and hobbyist communities, including craft beer, television viewership, and politics. While space constraints do not allow us to flesh out our full argument herein, our presentation will provide a more complete explanation of the theory. In addition, we will provide an empirical agenda for further investigation in our theory of meta fandom.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., Maranges, H. M., & Vohs, K. D. (2017). Human self as information agent: Functioning in a social environment based on shared meanings. *Review of General Psychology*, 1-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000114>.
- Callahan, J. L. (2010). Constructing a manuscript: Distinguishing integrative literature reviews and conceptual and theoretical articles. *Human Resource Development Review*, 9, 300-304.
- Conlin, L., Billings, A. C., & Averset, L. (2016). Time-shifting vs. appointment viewing: The role of fear of missing within TV consumption behaviors. *Communication & Society*, 29, 151-164.
- Larkin, B. A., & Fink, J. S. (2016). Fantasy sport, FoMO, and traditional fandom: How second-screen use of social media allows fans to accommodate multiple identities. *Journal of Sport Management*, 30, 643-655.
- Napoli, P. M. (2011). *Audience evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Trail, G. T., & James, J. D. (2001). The motivation scale for sport consumption: Assessment of the scale's psychometric properties. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 24, 108-127.