

Leaders and Followers: An Exploration of the Notion of Scale-Free Networks Within a New Brand Community

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The authors explore the formation of a new brand community to increase our understanding of the development of particular social networks within this overall new community. An ethnographic study was conducted among four tailgating groups of a new college team during its inaugural season. The method was chosen to gain insight into how individual consumers interacted with each other and how these early interactions contributed to the development of a brand community. To examine these interactions, social network theory was used to examine the relationships between the individuals within a larger group setting. Adopting this theoretical approach allowed the authors to observe that newly created groups follow the principles of scale-free networks, where some consumers act as leaders and others as followers. The implications for both highly committed leaders and noncommittal followers within each social network are discussed.

Sport teams are among the most powerful brand communities within society (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan & James, 2011; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001), since they allow for compelling entertainment that enthralls millions. Yet, their attraction reaches beyond the quality of the given product as thousands of sport teams thrive while they arguably provide an on-field product that should be regarded as inferior at best (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). For example, while the Chicago Cubs have not won a World Series in more than a century, which continues to disappoint their fans, the franchise consistently ranks among the highest revenue generators in the league ("Baseball's Most Valuable," 2012). The reason for the popularity of these teams is their ability to serve not only as a focal point of community formation (e.g., fans identify with the sport team itself), but also as an instrument to identify with a larger community the team represents (Heere et al., 2011). As such, there are few settings that evoke a stronger sense of identity and loyalty than sport teams. Even if the team continues to perform poorly, many fans refuse to abandon their loyalties for a competitor. While some might temporarily diminish involvement (and thus active consumption) with the team, which is referred to as cutting off reflected failure (Snyder, Lassegard & Ford, 1986), they reaffiliate as soon as new signs of success become apparent (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976). The resistance of fans to alter their allegiance has been discussed in brand community literature as "oppositional brand loyalty" and "moral responsibility" (Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009). Particularly in situations where teams

are seen as symbolic of the communities they represent, the moral responsibility to maintain one's allegiance to the team is high (Heere & James, 2007).

What differentiates a brand community from a traditional brand-consumer relation is that within a community, consumers interact and build relationships among themselves (i.e., often independent of the brand), while still maintaining the brand as the focal point (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Most research on brand communities has been conducted within the settings of powerful and well-established brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), yet we know little about the dynamics of how new brand communities (or "weak" brand communities) manifest and build. Grant, Heere and Dickson (2011) suggested that marketers of new sport teams often fail to implement brand community markers in their marketing strategies. This occurs because marketers feel they either lack a history or because there is too much turnover in the organization to maintain certain traditions or rituals. While marketers were aware of certain brand community precursors, and even mentioned future plans to initiate the development of each antecedent, the research found only minimal evidence of such practices and developments occurring (Grant et al., 2011). Thus, little is actually known about how brand communities begin.

Other research on brand communities has focused on what drives consumers to act upon their identity with the community (Schau et al., 2009), but we know less about the relationship between consumers and what role this relationship plays within the overall consumption of the brand. Although Holt (1998) conceptualized a brand community as encompassing all relationships that provide members with commonality and cultural capital, the current study emphasizes the relationship between consumer

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and consumer. This restricted view allows more attention to be dedicated to the individual consumer. Furthermore, it must be recognized that groups of consumers within a brand community may appear homogenous, however, as Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) demonstrated, there are important managerial implications in recognizing the heterogeneous perspectives that shape brand communities.

To understand the relationship between consumers, Underwood et al. (2001) discussed group experiences as crucial to the development of a sense of identity with the community—a concept that strongly relates to what Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) refer to as sharing stories. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) examined these shared group experiences as “brandfests.” Stokburger-Sauer (2010) found that organized branded events positively led to increased consumer-brand identification, which is an individual’s perception of similarity between the brand and the consumer (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). An organization is able to offer these experiences and provide opportunities for the consumers to interact, but the question still remains: what drives consumers to choose a particular setting for their shared experiences? Understanding the dynamics behind group experiences is crucial, particularly during the early stages of community development. During that stage, the organization is searching for its groundings within the larger community and has limited community markers to rely on since they have yet to build their history or establish traditions and rituals (Grant et al., 2011). In situations such as these, we can assume consumer identity and loyalty is not as deep as with established communities, and organizations are more reliant on the interaction between consumers themselves.

To examine how these interactions could lead to the formation of a new brand community, an ethnographic study among tailgaters of a new college football team, during their first season of play was conducted. The purpose was to understand how consumers interacted with each other, and how these early interactions contributed to the formation of community markers. The findings should increase our understanding not only of tailgating groups and college football fans, but also of the processes behind new brand community development within any setting. For the examination of these interactions, we made use of social network theory, a burgeoning new field that examines the relationships between individuals within a larger setting.

Literature Review

Consumer to Consumer Relationships Within Newly Formed Brand Communities

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) identified three key markers of brand communities: 1) consciousness of kind, 2) shared rituals and traditions, and 3) moral responsibility toward the brand. Consciousness of kind refers to the concept of “we-ness” (Bender, 1978), a collective identity

of community members developed in sharp contrast to “they”, which refers to either rival brand followers or simply nonmembers. Shared rituals and traditions allow fans and followers to celebrate the history of the brand and to allow brand members to share stories about the brand, which meaningfully links community member to community member (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Finally, the third marker, moral responsibility toward the brand, involves both integrating and retaining community members in addition to assisting other members in the use of the brand.

Since Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) analyzed only well-established brand communities, their work focused on examples where each of the three markers of brand community was entrenched. As such, individual community members were able to connect directly to the brand itself, thereby creating a theoretical model of brand community highlighting the consumer-community relationship. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this model focuses on the thicker arrows connecting the individual consumers to the larger community. In an established community this may well be the case, but for newly created communities that may lack the prominent markers of a brand community, the thick arrows connecting consumer to community may not be possible.

For a new brand community the most significant relationship is not between consumer and community, but rather between consumers. As Figure 2 portrays, for newly created communities the thickest arrows connect the consumers. Since new communities lack the shared history of established communities, they rely instead on social interaction between group members to create identification with the brand. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) refer to these social interactions as “brandfests,” which are characterized by a significant number of brand owners and potential owners to engage in consumption and brand celebrations. Brandfests afford normally dispersed members of a community the opportunity for high-context interaction, and generally promote group experiences among brand members (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Whether through brandfests or other group experiences, the interaction between community members is a crucial, yet often overlooked, aspect of brand community development. Within on-online brand communities, for instance, research has shown that the interaction between community members strongly influences community commitment by those same members (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008). Also in the on-line setting, McWilliam (2000) found that increased interaction among community members led to increased consumer commitment to communication, with the brand and other community members. Similarly, McAlexander et al. (2002) found that for consumers who felt less connected to other community members, social interactions and group experiences led to more positive relations with other consumers. McAlexander et al. (2002) concluded that social interactions facilitate longer lasting customer-customer relationships.



Figure 1 — Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) Brand Community Triad.



Figure 2 — Consumer-to-Consumer Brand Community Model.

Consumer to consumer relationships may also increase a felt sense of community, a topic especially germane to college campuses (McDonald, 2002; Clopton, 2008). Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, Ridinger, and Harrison (2011) measured sense of community among fans of a new football team, finding that the new team did not

significantly alter sense of community levels among university stakeholders. In addition, Clopton (2008) concluded that attending sport games led to stronger feelings of sense of community, his conclusions, however, only applied only to so-called “major” football programs. While there is support that college sport can impact

sense of community, the findings have not supported the supposition that increases in sense of community could lead to brand community development.

Within the sport landscape, a tailgate event is deemed an appropriate venue to examine brand communities as they are laden with shared group experiences and extended social interaction. Unlike the sport event product itself, where social interaction is often restrained by the game, loud crowd noises, and cramped seating, the tailgate atmosphere offers an ideal environment for social interaction and group experiences.

Tailgating as the Setting for Shared Group Experiences

Tailgating has historically been part of the tradition of attending different outdoor sport events, and plays an important role in the overall game day experience. The importance of tailgating is demonstrated by its overwhelming popularity. Megerian (2007) buttressed this point by illustrating that nearly 50 million fans participate in tailgates across the United States, a figure that has reportedly doubled over the eight years prior. Despite its significance in American sport, little research has been conducted on this phenomenon. Only a few studies have investigated specific aspects of tailgating, primarily trying to understand the motivations underlying the decision for fans to tailgate. James, Breezeel, and Ross (2001) conducted a two-stage study of fan motivations, identifying two primary motives behind the decision to tailgate: 1) social interaction with friends and/or family, and 2) to escape their normal routines. Drenten, Peters, Leigh, and Hollenbeck (2009) found that, while framing their study within a ritualistic framework, tailgating has four primary motives, each with a dual nature that motivates long-term tailgating behavior: involvement (preparation and participation), social interaction (camaraderie and competition), intertemporal sentiment (retrospection and propection), and identity (collectivism and individualism).

Because both the James et al. (2001) and Drenten et al. (2009) studies focused on tailgating motivations, neither adequately addressed why (or how) tailgating groups are created. James et al. (2001) attempted to address this idea, but the results were vague and added little substantive value to the overarching question of formation. Their results maintained that 35% of respondents stated they “didn’t remember” when asked why they started tailgating. In addition, 47% of respondents had been tailgating more than 10 years, preventing the researchers from reaching any significant conclusions about the formation of tailgating groups (James et al., 2001).

Another important theme within the tailgating literature is the time consuming nature of the activity and the extreme dedication of individual tailgaters. Delaney (2008) reported that 90% of tailgaters at a NASCAR event setup at least three hours before the start of the event. James et al. (2001) added that the majority of tailgaters participate in their tailgating during every home game of a given season. Beyond the actual day of the event,

Drenten et al. (2009) found that most tailgaters consider tailgating a year-round process, and dedicate considerable time and resources throughout the entire calendar year. Each of these studies proves the dedication of individual tailgaters and the important of tailgating not only within the game day experience, but also in their overall lives as well. We could conclude from these studies that the value of tailgating is found in its ability to allow for social interaction between fans, the ability to distract from a potential poor team performance (e.g., “*My team lost, but I had a great time at the tailgate.*”), and its ability to experience the team (brand) community in a very direct manner, where the loyalty of tailgaters is not limited to the overall notion of the ‘team’, but directly tied to the game day experience of other tailgaters.

Drenten et al. (2009) confirmed that tailgating was a meaningful and enduring ritual. Packed with deep meanings for its participants, Drenten et al. (2009) stated, “Tailgating subculture transcends beer, burgers, and a ballgame” and thus represents something far more significant (p. 105). Among the meaningful connections with tailgating, Delaney (2008) and Delaney and Madigan (2009) found that belonging to a tailgating group increased one’s sense of community. Delaney (2008) found that tailgating represented the type of secular sentiment that helps bond fans together in a collective action where ritualistic behaviors are the norm, and compared a tailgating group to a neighborhood where neighbors interact and get along even if they hold opposing viewpoints on significant social and political matters.

Following this work, it could be proposed that tailgating provides an illustration of a geotemporal distillation of a brand community that affords dispersed members the opportunity for high-context interaction (McAlexander et al., 2002). As such, the tailgate party serves as a brandfest for the brand community and helps members to strengthen their identity with the brand community (Delaney, 2008). Despite this assertion, Woolf, Heere and Walker (2013) questioned whether every event associated with a brand community truly serves as a brandfest, and pointed out that not every event should be regarded as such.

While the research on tailgating has analyzed motives and meaning, little is known regarding the process by which tailgating groups form. The specific dynamics of the community formation process remains a largely uncovered concept, and one with important ramifications—specifically for new sports teams; however, existing teams have much to gain as well. For example, better understanding of the dynamics of group formation will allow sport managers to more effectively promote the growth and development of their team community through the use of tailgating experiences. To better understand the dynamics of group formation, we turn to social network analysis.

Social Network Analysis

Quatman and Chelladurai (2008a) introduced social network analysis as a new and promising research lens

for sport management, claiming that no previous sport research had implemented this methodological tool. In the years since, a number of studies have followed the suggestion of Quatman and Chelladurai (2008a), including their own study of the social construction of knowledge in the sport management field (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008b) and a more recent study of team dynamics by Warner, Bowers, and Dixon (2012).

Social network analysis studies often seek to uncover patterns of interaction between and among actors or entities in a system, determine the conditions under which those patterns arose, or attempt to identify the consequence of the structural patterns (Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008a). The ontological foundation of social network analysis suggests that the world is comprised of systems of actors embedded within structures webs of relationship (Emirbayer, 1997). These structures webs of relationships, however, are not random nor are they equal.

As Barabási (2003) demonstrates, social networks are scale-free networks, meaning they include individual hubs that connect to a far greater number of nodes than the average entity or actor. Essentially, hubs are the individuals through which other individuals are able to connect. Barabási and Réka (1999) also found that power laws, rather than bell curves, best define scale-free networks as a low quantity of hubs connect to exponentially more other nodes than the average entity. Consequently, within a given social network most individuals have very few links, yet a small number of connected hubs with a very large number of links hold together the larger social network.

These key connecting hubs, while maintaining the integrity and size of the social network, also pose a threat to social networks as their existence highlights the potential for the destruction of a social network. Because hubs connect such large quantities of nodes, the disappearance of destruction of a single hub can have devastating consequences for even the largest of individual networks. Barabási (2003) discusses this phenomenon in terms of viruses or failures on the World Wide Web, but the same principles can be applied to networks of individuals; the loss of a single connecting hub can disrupt or even disband a community of individuals. Thus, connecting hubs within scale-free networks are responsible for both the growth of networks and pose as the greatest threat to the stability of any given social network.

Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) stated that each brand community consists of a heterogeneous group of individuals. We believe that this perspective misses one mediating level of analysis, particularly in the context of a sport team. For sport teams, their brand community consists of a series of smaller social networks, which each contain individuals with different degrees of involvement. The first point of identification for the individual is its own group, and the examination of each of these social networks can provide valuable insight on the overall development of brand community.

Using social network analysis, we are offered a lens of inquiry into the underlying processes behind

tailgate group formation and development. Since social network analysis offers the potential to connect the micro and macro level structures for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Burt, 1980), social network studies should yield significant findings on both the individuals and larger groups of individuals involved in tailgating. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the dynamic processes involved in the creation of tailgating groups, and the relationships between the various members of these newly established groups.

Method

This study implements an ethnographic method to analyze how new tailgating groups were formed and how they developed over the course of their first season in existence. Ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Ethnography makes explicit the commonsense knowledge of cultures by revealing what the social worlds mean for the persons with the worlds and what the mean as insiders acting within them, thus portraying a shared understanding of the insiders' world (Wolf, 2010). Classic ethnography is a naturalistic, systemic, interpretive approach that relies on observation, interview, and description rather than statistics or experimentation (Ragucci, 1972).

Sample and Participant Selection

The tailgating groups and participants discussed in this article are members of tailgating groups for the same Southwestern University during its inaugural season of competition. Following approval from the institutional review board, participating groups were purposefully recruited based on several characteristics. First, groups were selected based on the description of "serious tailgaters." Markers of such included the presence of a grill, tailgating tents, tables, or chairs and more importantly, their presence in the parking lots approximately four hours before a noon game time. The researchers believed that groups most likely to continue throughout the season were also the first groups to arrive before the game and possibly the last groups to leave afterward. The time commitment necessary for these groups was believed to be indicative of a strong commitment to tailgating. Such commitment was necessary to lessen the chance that a chosen group would discontinue tailgating during the season.

Selecting only committed groups decreased the likelihood that a single group would discontinue tailgating during the season. While examining a failed tailgating group could have important managerial implications, the longitudinal nature of this study intends to address this question in the coming seasons. This particular analysis looks at only the first year of new tailgating groups, but the larger research projects intends to continue through the second and perhaps third year of tailgating as well. The issue of how to solidify the brand community before

it falls apart, before groups discontinue tailgating, will be more thoroughly analyzed in the future seasons.

Four different groups were chosen as participants, each located in a different region of the tailgating parking lot. Four groups were selected as the ideal amount because such allowed the researcher to spend ample time (i.e., between 45 min and an hour) with each group before the game; more than four groups would have diminished the amount of interaction time substantially. Groups from different regions of the tailgating area were chosen to command a better sense of the geographic layout of the tailgating community, and to see if the most “serious” tailgaters would all establish their groups located in similar areas of the parking lot. However, our results yielded no indication that location in the parking lot correlated to level of commitment among tailgaters.

During the first game of the season, the researchers walked through the parking lots looking for potential groups. Beginning at the parking lot closest to the stadium entrance and moving away from the stadium, a list of potential groups was developed, according to the desired attributes discussed earlier. Once the list had been shortened to four groups, the researchers approached each group, introducing themselves and explaining they were conducting a study about tailgating groups. The four groups approached all allowed the researchers access to the groups and stated their intention to tailgate at each home game during the season. The four groups were intentionally chosen to represent different demographic groups prevalent in the surrounding communities. One group was young, recent alumni; the second a larger ($n > 15$) group of White adults; the third a group of Hispanic heritage; the fourth a larger ($n > 15$) family of both White and Hispanic background. Although there were no specific requirements for the age/race/gender of the participants, it was desired that the four groups represent a variety of demographic groups to promote diversity in the results and prevent redundancy in the data.

Data Collection

The researchers attended five of the six home games during the 2011 season, as the researchers were unable to attend one game. At each game, the researchers arrived roughly four hours before kickoff, thus allowing enough time to spend up to one hour with each tailgating group. The order in which the groups were visited changed each

game, so to arrive at a different time to each group. Within the groups, the researchers attempted to act as if they were “full-members” of the group, specifically performing the tasks expected of a tailgating members (e.g., setting up chairs, helping to clean) and also engaging in the social activities associated with each group (e.g., eating and socializing). Furthermore, since the consumption of alcohol was a prevalent socializing activity for several of the groups, the researchers decided the best method to deal with this issue was to always be holding a beverage, but to never actually consume the alcohol. As such, the researchers appeared to be participating in the group behavior but never dulled their senses of observation or memory.

Despite the best effort to appear as insiders, the researchers inherently remained outsiders, as ethnographic researchers hold an identity that is never fully coterminous with the individuals who are true members of the community (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). As such, being viewed as an outsider has the potential to affect how group members acted and behaved around the researchers. Schensul et al. (1999) recommend initially observing from a distance, such as remaining on the periphery of the tailgating group and observing the actions and behaviors rather than fully engaging with all group members immediately. Once a strong rapport was built with key informants and group leaders, the researchers more actively interacted with group members. Such an approach limited the possibility that the researchers’ presence impacted the observations and results (Schensul et al., 1999).

Approximately 45 min to an hour was spent with each group. While interacting with group members, mental notes about ongoing dialogue, actions, and setting were taken. No recording or writing devices were used during interaction with the research participants. These devices were avoided while within the individual groups under the hope that their absence would increase the likelihood that the researchers would be viewed as a “full-member” of the group rather than an outside researcher. After leaving each group, however, an audio recorder was used to document any significant observations or conversation from the previous interaction. The audio recorder was never used in front of the research participants, and was never used to record anyone other than the researchers while in the field. When the researchers left the tailgating area following postgame activities, written

Table 1 Demographic Breakdown of Research Participant Groups

Group	Size Range	Age Range	General Race	Relationship
1	12–20	12–75	White/Hispanic	Family
2	18–30	22–34	White	Fraternity
3	10–20	16–55	Hispanic	Business
4	22–34	45–72	White	Social

notes about the experiences of the day were completed using the field notes methods proposed by Emerson et al. (1995). These field notes were extensive documents, often exceeding 15 pages in length for each individual game, and were written as a description of the experiences and observations of the researchers throughout the game day.

Outside of the tailgating and game day, several interviews were conducted with key group members from the different groups. In total, seven individuals were interviewed, including the leader of each group. The remaining three interviews were conducted with individuals who were not the leader. These nonleaders were chosen based on the level of rapport developed between the researchers and the group members, and it was desired the interviewed nonleader be a committed member of the group (i.e., attended most games, participated in the preparation, etc.) These individuals were often closely connected to the leader, but not necessarily the majority of the other group members. It was important to interview both leaders and nonleaders since the responses of leaders tended to be much different from the responses of nonleaders. Nonleaders were interviewed for three of the four groups. While the lack of an interview nonleader from one of the groups was a concern for the confidence of the results, the similarities of the results from the other three groups was such that it appears very likely the four group followed a similar process. Interviews were held in various locations (offices and restaurants), but always outside of the tailgating environment. The interviews were of a semistructured nature. Examples of interview topics included questions about the formation of the tailgating groups, plans for future season, and questions about the relationships of the various group members. A full list of interviewing topics can be found in Table 2. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. All names of the interviewees were removed from the recording, and each given a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The collected data were organized into field notes and interview transcriptions, and the researchers transcribed all interviews themselves. No qualitative software was

used. Instead, the data were further analyzed according to the method proposed by O'Leary (2005). This method of qualitative data analyses aims to create new understanding by exploring and interpreting complex data from a variety sources, namely field notes and interview transcriptions. O'Leary's (2005) specific four-step strategy calls for: 1) reading and rereading the data, 2) annotating growing understanding in notes and memos, 3) organizing and coding data, and 4) searching for patterns to build and verify theories.

The data were approached in an inductive manner, seeking to generate overarching themes without settling on a specific number of themes until the data were fully analyzed. Following a thorough reading and rereading of the field notes and interview transcriptions, thorough analytic memos were created. Using Saldaña's (2009) method for analytic memos, the memos served as a platform to express any thoughts, questions, or frustrations that occurred during the reading and rereading process. The writing of memos served as the first step in funneling the raw data into meaningful understanding. After writing and examining the memos, the data were ready for coding.

The researchers first used an open coding process by analyzing each line of the field notes and interviews. Using Emerson et al. (1995) as a guide, open coding consists of writing words and phrases that identify and name specific analytic dimensions and categories, as are suggested by the recorded observations. Codes such as "family" and "entertainment" were among the common codes used in this level. Next, a focused coding process helped transform the dozens of open codes into more coherent themes and patterns. For instance, the codes "gatekeeper", "creator", "organizer", and "supply purchaser" were all grouped into the more focused code of "leader roles."

To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of the analysis, the final themes were validated against the analytic memos to confirm the themes matched the experiences and observations of the researchers. Finally, themes were advanced for discussion by the researchers, allowing the other research to develop counterarguments, a method of data analysis used in Schouten and McAlexander (1995). Only themes that passed the scrutiny of the

Table 2 Sample of Interview Questions

Questions
1. Why did you start tailgating this season?
2. What is your relationship with the other members of your tailgating group?
3. How did your tailgating experience evolve throughout the season?
4. What have you especially liked about your tailgating experience?
5. What have you especially disliked about your tailgating experience?
6. What, if any, are your tailgating plans for next season?
7. How important is tailgating to your overall game day experience?
8. Does tailgating make you feel part of a larger community?

researchers were presented in the results. Through the manner presented, the themes discussed in the results were established.

In addition, after the data were thoroughly analyzed the researchers used the social network software UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). This software was used to generate visual images of the proposed social networks. Furthermore, the statistical options of UCINET were used to compute network considerations such as density and cohesion.

Results and Discussion

Using social network analysis as a guide, our data analysis ultimately led to the identification of several important themes. Specifically, the emergence of scale-free networks within the individual groups, and the significance of the group leader in the creation and development of the groups, and the formation of a group identity were all identified as themes best explored through social network analysis. Each of these themes will be explored independently.

The Tailgate Group as a Scale-Free Network

Within each group existed a single leader whose presence as a hub, a highly connected node, allowed the rest of the group network to develop. Specifically, for each tailgating group the social relationships of the various members highlighted their properties as scale-free networks, best illustrated by the social network within Group 4 and its leader, Paul. Paul's group contained roughly 15 adult couples, where each couple had either full-grown children or no children at all. As such, these couples viewed tailgating as a means for socializations and interaction, and for making new friends. Thanks to Paul's high-degree of connectedness, a new network of friends were created via the tailgate. When asked if the various members of his group all knew each other before the season, Paul offered the following explanation:

No, not everybody did. We had an introductory part, where everyone kind of introduced themselves to everybody else. We put out an e-mail about football tickets, people piled in and wanted to do it, and a lot of people didn't know anybody. So we kind of started off with a part to meet everybody that was going to be tailgating.

As Paul's story illustrates, for many members of the group Paul himself was the only connection to the rest of the network. Kathy, one of Paul's group members, knew Paul from their work environment but had never met anyone else in the group before the season. While Kathy is an extreme example of knowing no other group members besides the group leader, several other group members were also strangers at the start of the season.

All of these individual group members, however, were connected to Paul.

Paul served as the network star within his tailgating group, a term describing nodes that are highly central to other nodes (Quatman and Chelladurai, 2008a). Accordingly, Paul connected multiple couples that, without him, would not have had any connection to other couples in the group. After discussing the list of group members with Paul, Figure 3 represents a model of his group's social network, with Paul serving as the network star and the group hub.

As Figure 3 demonstrates, the group leader, Paul, was located in a central position within the network, surrounded by three isolated and cohesive subgroups. The subgroups only connected to other subgroups by first connecting with Paul; thus emphasizing the importance of Paul's role as a connector. A network without a leader would not have the isolated subgroups. There would be no single nodes whose placement in the center individually connects a large portion of the network to the rest of the nodes.

Paul's role as group node was integral to the formation of the group in its earliest stages as well as the sustainability of the group after the formative processes were completed. If any random node were removed from the network, the group as a whole would surely survive. If Paul, however, were to be removed from the network for any reason, the network would almost certainly collapse with his removal if the other group members had not yet created strong enough bonds between themselves independent of Paul. Barabási refers to this phenomenon as the "Achilles' Heel" of scale-free networks: that even in large networks, the removal of the key nodes and connectors can rather easily lead to the destruction of a network.

In Group 1, leader Brian played a very similar to Paul as the group hub. Brian's group were all part of a complex family tree: Brian grew up with step-brothers, has children with an ex-wife, is dating a woman with children from a previous marriage plus several of her siblings with children of their own. While Brian's various family members have met at various family gathers, few of them interact on a consistent basis. More significantly, none of the group members interact without Brian initiating the occasion. Brian's high-degree of connectedness further supports the notion of tailgating group as scale-free networks.

Stephen, leader of Group 2, similarly demonstrated the importance of the leader as hub during the formative process of a tailgating group. Most of Stephen's group belonged to the same business fraternity while in school, but many of them attended the school during very different years. So while the fraternity itself may have acted as a connecting hub of sorts, on a personal level it was the connectedness of Stephen that connected the various nodes of the group. Stephen was one of the few alumni who knew the current students, recent alumni, and the older alumni. During the actual tailgate, Group 2 was more visibly divided than the other tailgating groups, with clear

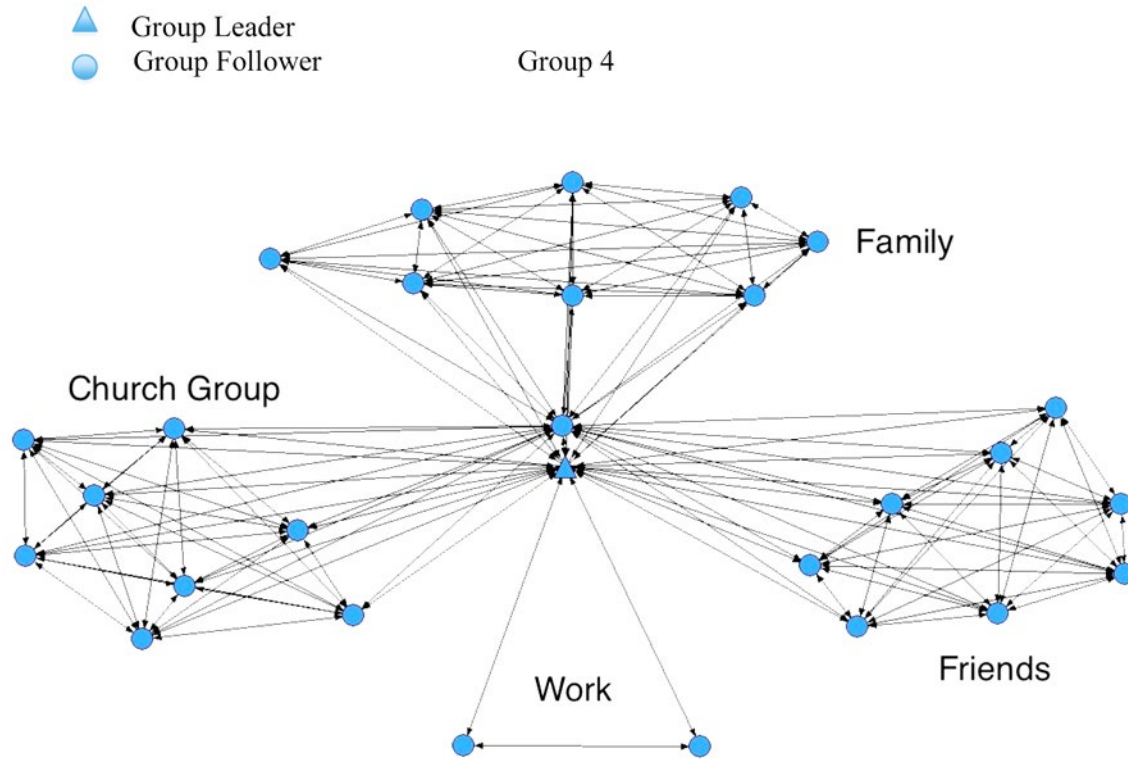


Figure 3 — Network Model for Group 4.

subgroups prominent within the network. Stephen was one of the few group members who interacted with each of the various subgroups, thus connecting the subgroups through their independent connections with Stephen. When Stephen was absent for a game, not only was there more disconnect between the subgroups, but some of the subgroups were absent that day as well. Presumably, this increased disconnect and lowered attendance were the direct results of the temporary removal of the group hub.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the highly connected group hub was in Group 3, where leader Sergio's personal and professional networks converged into a new single group for tailgating. Sergio works in a liquor distribution chain, and the tailgating lot served Sergio and his business partners well as a promotional opportunity. Sergio's group offered official liquor tasting by the "Bacardi Girls" as they offered free samples of their product to a long line of willing takers of legal age. The remainder of Sergio's group included other business partners in addition to members of his immediate family and a few close friends. This combination of professional and personal resulted in the other group members having no prior connection to the other nodes in their network besides their mutual connections directly to Sergio. Figure 4 demonstrates the centrality and importance of Sergio's role in the group social network.

Sergio's placement in the center of the network connected the various subgroups. While this network did not have the extremely isolated subgroups found in Figure 3, the importance of Sergio's centrality was nonetheless apparent. Without Sergio, the individual nodes from the work, friends, and family subgroups would have lacked connectivity. The node beneath and to the right of Sergio is his son; if Sergio and his son were removed from the network, the single network would be divided into two separate networks since no other nodes connect the right side of the diagram (family and friends) from the left side (work). Furthermore, without Sergio's placement between the various subgroups, the different clusters of individuals would not have formed a single network in the first place. Perhaps these clusters could have survived as independent networks, but without Sergio's role as node and network star the larger tailgating group could not have been created or maintained.

As the examples of Brian, Stephen, Sergio, and Paul demonstrate, the group leader as connector validates that each of the tailgating groups was indeed a scale-free network. Quatman and Chelladurai (2008a) identify the role of structurally significant actor as one of the major considerations in social network analysis studies, and each of the group leaders certainly qualified as just such an actor. While their role as hub within their individual

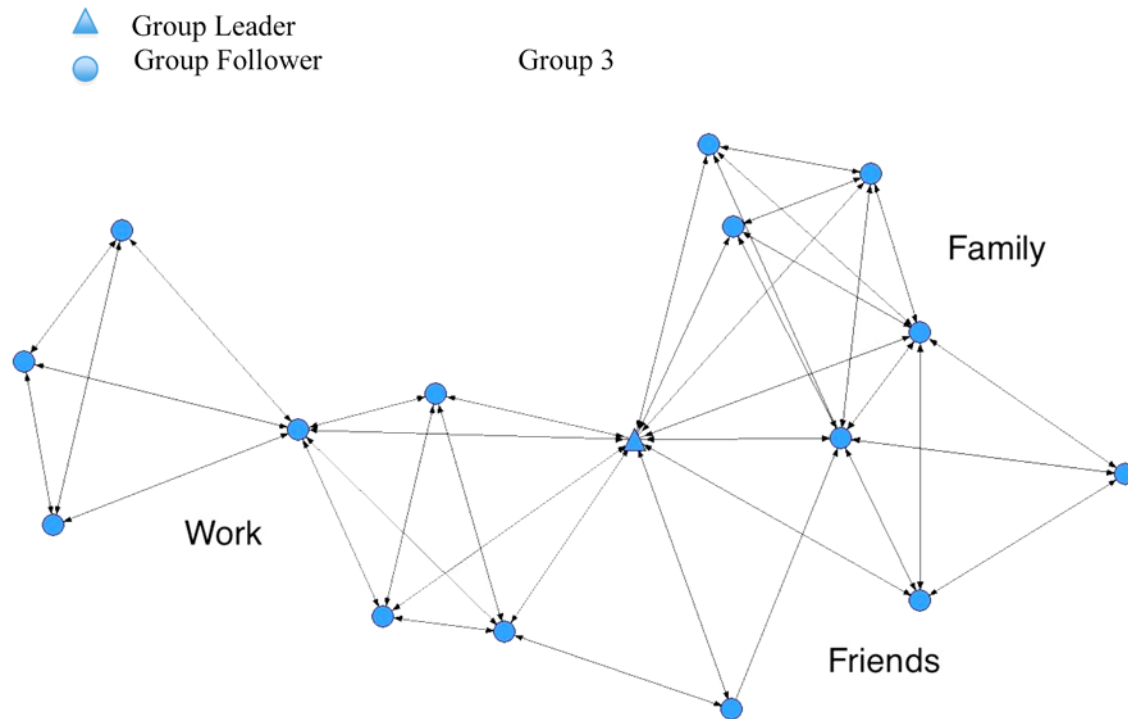


Figure 4 — Network Model for Group 3.

networks was significant to the creation and development of the tailgating groups, these group leaders fulfilled many other important roles within their groups as well.

The Roles of the Leader Within the Network

With no history or tradition of tailgating for this particular university, the tailgating community needed to be built from scratch. This process of creation proved not so much a collective effort, but rather the result of key individuals building and enhancing their individual networks. Within scale-free networks, hubs or connectors play a disproportionately important role in the growth and development of the network, and the tailgating groups proved no exception. In addition to serving as the connecting link between the various network nodes, the group leaders served other important roles in the creation and advancement of the tailgating groups.

The group leaders' ability to act as a conduit for the spread of ideas and information was one of the most significant roles of the group leader (Quatman and Cheladurai, 2008a). Due to the high degree of connectivity as the network nodes, group leaders were often responsible for the organization and creation of the groups; in a literal sense, they spread the idea of tailgating to the other group members. In many cases, such as Kathy, a non-leader

from Group 4, group members had not contemplated tailgating during the season until the group leader mentioned the idea to them. When asked how the idea of tailgating became an option for Kathy and her husband, Kathy offered the following explanation:

It didn't come up; he [group leader Paul] brought it up to us. Sort of 'would you like to be a part of your group and support the team' and 'would you like to be a season ticket holder with us?' And we were like 'how much is it? How many Saturdays does it involve?'

As Kathy's comments indicate, the group leader provided Kathy not only with the initial idea of tailgating, but with all the necessary information required to create a tailgating group as well.

Likewise, a member of Group 2 named Zach stated very explicitly that his group would have not have existed without their group leader, Stephen. As Zach explained, no other group member was organized enough to create the group, and he felt without leader Stephen spreading the news of him forming a tailgating group, none of the other members would have even attended the games. Interestingly, when Stephen was asked about his role in the creation of the group, he gave himself less credit than his other group members did. Stephen offered the following anecdote for how his group was formed:

I knew I was going to tailgate the moment they [the university] announced they were starting a team – that was never a question. I started planning and thinking about this before any of the other [fraternity] brothers even jumped on board. But there was never a doubt I was going to do this.

Not only was tailgating Stephen's idea, but he was also responsible for much of the financing and organizing of the group. Stephen purchased several dozen season tickets and a number of parking passes, and then resold them individually as his friends and associated agreed to join the group. In this sense, Stephen extended his role as conduit for the spread of ideas to the actual creator of the group.

The role of creator was common for the group leaders throughout the different tailgating groups. Brian, the leader of Group 1, purchased 16 tickets and 5 parking passes on his own before selling them later to joining group members. Paul, leader of Group 4, personally gathered the money from his 30 group members and then purchased a block season ticket package and parking passes for the group. In each of these cases, the group leader not only proposed the idea for tailgating but also actually performed the initial steps involved in the creating their tailgating groups. Each leader used the high connectedness within their various personal networks to combine their friends, family, and professional associates into single tailgating groups.

Once the various groups were formed, the group leaders continued to play important roles in the development of their groups. As the most well-connected node in the network, the group leader not only served as the conduit to spread information, but the leader also actively controlled the information that spread throughout the group. During the initial meeting between the researchers and the groups, it was explicitly clear who acted as decision-maker for the group. When asked if his group was interested in participating in the study, a non-leader member of Group 3, Jon, quickly escorted us to the their group leader, Sergio. Jon informed the researchers that "you'll have to talk to Sergio about that. I'm not here to make any decisions. No sir. Just to eat, drink, and enjoy myself! That's it!" The other tailgating groups showed similar evidence of the group leader acting as a "gatekeeper" for the group. In this role, it was the decision of the group leader whether the larger group was willing to participate in the research study. In their list of brand community behavior practices, Schau et al. (2009) list "welcoming" as one of the overarching practices of brand community members. By acting as a gatekeeper, the group leader is satisfying the practice of welcoming by welcoming in new members to the great and assisting in the brand learning and community socialization.

During the week-to-week operations and activities of the groups, the group leader continued to play a greater role in the group's operations than the typical

group member. In each group, the leader provided the bulk of the equipment necessary for the tailgating, thus fulfilling the role of organizer and leader. Each of the individual group leaders was responsible for the grills each group used; two leaders have already expressed their intention of purchasing a new and "improved" grill for next season. The tailgating tents, chairs, and tables were also transported to the parking lots group leaders. Paul, the leader from Group 4, even purchased a used RV to transport his group's equipment to each game. Only one of the groups alternated which group member was responsible for food and drink—for the other groups it was always the group leader—but even in the alternating group the organization of who was responsible during certain weeks and the actual transportation was still the responsibility of the group leader.

A final role of the leader within each group network was briefly discussed earlier, that of the group's "Achilles' Heel." Scale-free networks are generally stable enough to survive the removal of many random nodes from the network, yet due to the heightened importance of the group hub the removal of such hub can have devastating consequences for the future of the network. During one particular game, the leader of Group 2 was unable to attend due to prior obligations. Though the tailgating group did not disappear without its leader, so the network did survive the removal of the hub, the consequences of the leader's absence was significant and noticeable. Group 2 usually had a large grill, a keg of beer, and several tables used for drinking games. In the leader's absence, none of these commodities were found for this particular group. When the group members were asked why their usual equipment was missing, one group member replied that with the group leader gone, no one else knew how to "deal with all that stuff." So while Stephen's group did not collapse in his absence, his importance was painfully felt by the rest of his group members since no one other group member have the motivation nor the ability to fulfill Stephen's traditional roles.

In Group 3, the concept of the "Achilles' Heel" was even more obvious, as the group was not able to survive the absence of leader Sergio. For two home games, Sergio had prior commitments that he could not avoid, and thus was forced to miss both games. During these games, there was no sign of Sergio's group anywhere in the parking lot, as none of the regular group members attended the game despite all having season tickets and season parking passes. When the other group members were asked weeks later why they did not attend the game, the consensus response from the group was that without Sergio organizing the tailgating they never even considered attending. For this network, the removal of the group leader and his ability to relay information about the game and group eliminated the entire network for that particular game.

As the "Achilles' Heel" examples demonstrate, the dependence of the group on a single leader had dangerous consequences. Since group members tended to view their

groups as “Brian’s Group” or “Sergio’s Group,” it is no surprise that the removal of the hub led to the collapse of the larger network. But in two of the groups, this dependence on and identification with the group leader showed signs of diminishing in the later weeks of the season, as the creation of a unique group identity for the tailgating groups increased the attachment of the non-leaders.

The Formation of a Group Identity

According to Drenten et al. (2009), the creation of both collectivistic and individualistic identities is one of the key motivations for tailgating, and appears to be a crucial part of the staking process within the overall brand community process (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). Toward the end of the season, two of the tailgating groups developed their own unique group names, thus fulfilling their desire for the creation of identities. Group 2 began referring to themselves as the “Well-Beered Crew” and Group 4 named themselves “The Nest.” Both of these naming practices are indicators of the creation of a unique group identity that ultimately helped the group to develop an identity with the overall brand community. This identity did not exist at the start of the season but emerged during the later weeks of the inaugural season of tailgating as a result of the social interaction among the members of the social network. Just as the members of a specific Winnebago traveling club (Peters, 2004) created distinct vocabularies to distinguish themselves and their participation within the larger community of Winnebago enthusiasts, unique group names mark intragroup distinction within the larger community of tailgaters and fans. The group name was the individual group’s method of staking their individual place within the larger brand community.

In addition, the creation of a distinctive group identity demonstrates the groups’ ability to overcome their dependence on the group leader. With an identity of their own, these groups represented something larger than merely the group leader’s friends and associates. For both of the named groups, the names were the result of a shared memory, an event from the past that resonated within the collectivist memories of all the individual group members. As such, the development of the group identity represents an increased emotional and psychological commitment between the individuals in the group to their fellow group members, and not just a connection between the individual group members and the leader.

For Group 2, the story behind their “Well-Beered Crew” name comes from an experience that occurred some six months before the first game. Several of the group members attended the football team’s inaugural Spring Game, where a magazine writer interviewed the group. In the following magazine article, the author referred to the group as a collection of “well beered individuals.” Most interesting about the naming process for this group was that the name was not adopted immediately, even though the event had already occurred.

Rather, it took the group several games to develop the necessary group dynamic to adopt a name. The group ordered matching t-shirts, but the shirts were just the beginning. Group leader Stephen expressed high hopes for next season in regards to the name, where he expects the entire group to have matching shirts and he plans on ordering a large sign for the tailgating tent announcing their group identity to the rest of the tailgaters.

While the adoption of the group name represents a transition from identifying with solely the group leader to the group at large, it is important to highlight that the group leader still played a crucial role in this process. For the Well-Beered Crew, it was group leader Stephen who was interviewed in the initial magazine article, and it was Stephen who ultimately designed, ordered, and delivered the matching shirts. As the new identity of the group spreads throughout the group members, the connection between the previously distant nodes begins to heighten. In addition, the density of the group—the ratio of the number of present ties to the number of possible ties in the network—grows through collectivist action such as group naming. Perhaps the naming process is the next step toward increasing both the density of the group and the cohesion—the extent to which a network can remain connected even when various nodes are removed from the network—of the tailgating group.

Across the parking lot from the Well-Beered Crew, Group 4 leader Paul took the concept of group naming even further. Paul’s group dubbed themselves “The Nest,” a name that Paul was responsible for. Group 4 member Kathy explained the evolution of the name:

Paul wanted to always name it the Nest. My daughter, because she’s in advertising, Paul asked ‘hey can you get some t-shirts made?’ So I said yes, let me call her. So Paul got together with some of the other guys and threw a bunch of things together.

While leader Paul played an important role in the creation of the name, other group members were active in developing their group identity as well. The group members created a logo, which incorporated each group member’s alma mater. Each alma mater was included as a baby bird, which were being fed by a larger bird, representing the mascot of their newly adopted team. Since each member still identifies with the alma maters, none of them want to be seen as defecting from their alma maters. Therefore, they created a custom shirt that shows support for *both* teams, not just their new one. Schau et al. (2009) classify this type of activity as badging, the practice of translating past milestones or experiences into symbols. In addition, the unique naming and shirt creation allowed each individual group member to contribute to their group identity, rather than passively allowing their group leader to do so.

Each of the tailgating groups was established and created through the positioning and connectedness of the group leader. The importance of the leader in the creation raises the critical question of what motivates the leader to

so. For each individual leader, the creation of the tailgating group was an attempt to connect their own separate networks (i.e., work, family, etc.) The tailgate group was an opportunity for distant families to unite, and strangers to become acquaintances. Without the tailgating groups, many of these individuals may never have interacted and certainly would not have experienced the brandfest of tailgating together. Without the leader's connectedness, the individual tailgating group brand communities would never have existed.

Although it was apparent that the formative stages for these groups was more the result of the group leader than the collective action of the larger group, yet the development of a group identity independent of the group leader himself signals that group density and cohesion may soon increase, as other group members take on more of the responsibility. This process, however, will not likely happen immediately. When the various tailgaters spoke of their intentions to tailgate the following season, it was apparent that a difference in investment in the group still existed between leader and follow.

Each of the group leaders responded to questions about the following season with specific plans to improve their tailgating experience. Brian and Stephen, the leaders from Groups 1 and 2, spoke of their intentions to purchase a new grill and to expand their cooking repertoire. Similarly, Paul spoke of purchasing additional season tickets and parking passes, increasing the size of the group, and changing their seating locations inside the stadium. The detailed planning by these leaders demonstrates not only that they have already thought about the future, but also that they are emotionally invested in the future success of the tailgating groups. When non-leaders were asked about tailgating plans next year, the lack of detail or planning highlights the lower-levels of commitment. When asked if she had thought about her plans for tailgating next season, Group 4 member Kathy responded by saying, "No, no not yet. As long as it's still fun, we'll keep coming. But we haven't talked about it yet."

The difference in the level of investment between leader and non-leader is evident through their thoughts about next season. Whether further identifying with their tailgating groups will increase this investment remains to be seen, but the leader's role in the creation of a unique social identity may play an important role in the future developments and sustainability of the individual tailgating groups.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying processes of the formation of new communities through the examination of several social networks within the brand community. More specifically, this study sought to generate findings to help marketers assist in the development of a brand community and to better understand the shared group experiences of consumers. Ultimately, the

results will assist marketers to develop and implement brandfests that take into account the uneven relations between consumers.

Theoretical Contribution

While previous models of brand community suggest a horizontal relationship between consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), this study found that newly created groups follow the principles of scale-free networks, where some consumers act as leaders and others as followers. This is significant because of the importance of key individuals within scale-free networks. Thus, while generalized marketing strategies often aim to reach the greatest number of people, the existence of scale-free networks implies that the greatest number strategy may not be the most efficient method for marketing to fan bases. Rather, the findings signify that not all members are created equal. A newly formed community is not a homogenous or random network of individuals but rather a network where a select few persons have many more connections, and thus a heightened importance, than the average consumer. In reference to the sport team in this study, rather than having a fan base of tens of thousands of fans of equal importance, fan bases are more accurately described as a collection of a few thousand highly invested consumers who bring their own personal network to consume the team's product. Heterogeneity within a brand community is consistent with Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), yet our focus on the level of commitment of each member extends their findings. Most of these consumers have little investment with the organization and without the presence of the leader would leave this newly formed community, regardless of the efforts of the organization. Based on these results we propose a new model to examine newly formed brand communities in Figure 5.

Depending on the size of the community, identifying key leaders was a crucial step for creating or growing the brand community. Schau et al. (2009) discussed brand community behavioral practices, and it became clear from this study that during the early stages of the brand community, only a few individuals exhibited these kinds of behavior, while others simply followed the initiative of the network hub. In this particular study, these fans often bought the season tickets or parking passes in larger quantities over and above the average fan. In the tailgating lot specifically, the connecting hubs are often the first individuals to setup in the mornings and the last to leave in the evenings. In addition, since hubs serve as the conduits of information sharing, they are often the individuals from whom other fans learn of recent news about the team or promotional opportunities. Any of these proposed methods, in addition to more expensive and time-consuming methods such as creating a social network map, are reasonably effective approaches for identifying the connecting hubs within a fan base of any size.

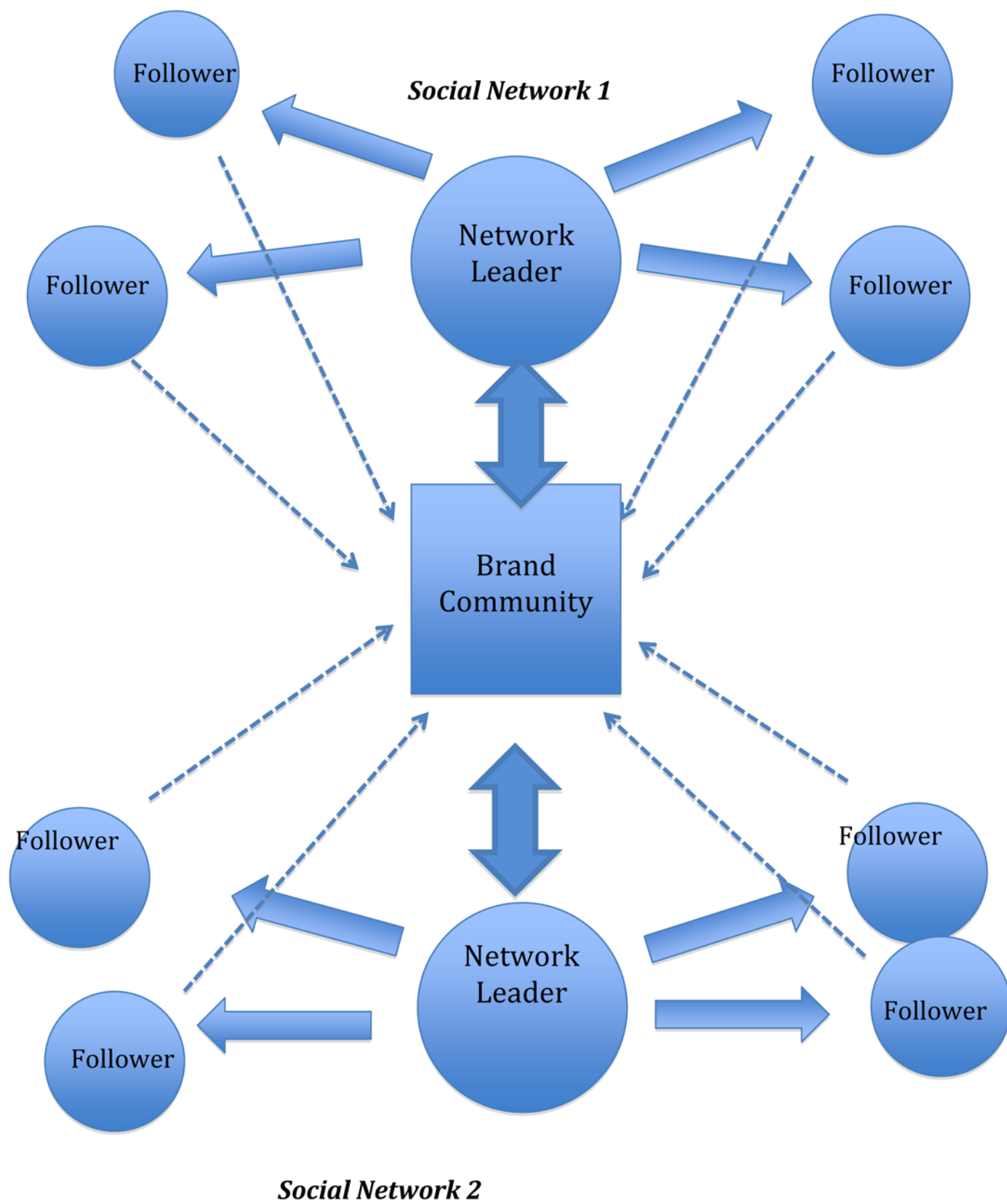


Figure 5 — Proposed Model for Newly Formed Brand Communities.

Finally, following the work of Woolf et al. (2013), we studied to what extent a brandfest assisted in the development of a brand community. While their study ultimately concluded that their particular brandfest did not contribute to the overall sense of community with the brand (i.e., due to the lack of brand community markers), it appeared that in this study, the tailgate event did have the potential to contribute to an increased sense of community. However, this only occurred if the group was able to successfully stake their identity within the overall brand community and diminish the dependency on the leader.

Managerial Implications

In this particular setting, the management team of the athletic department did not undertake any efforts to 'manage' these tailgating groups, thus it remains unclear what role management should or could play in the development of these communities. While too much assistance might be perceived as 'commercial' and thus met with resistance, we do believe management could play an active role in the development of these communities. However, this qualitative study is a first in its kind and its focus is on understanding how these brand communities are formed/developed. While the role of management is interesting in this regard, it was not the focus of this study and it might be more appropriate to examine this relationship in a potential follow up study.

This research did show that once hubs within the larger network have been identified, it is imperative that marketers maintain the allegiances of these highly connected individuals. Marketers may offer incentives to network hubs, perhaps offering free parking passes or discounted tickets to individuals who buy larger quantities of tickets to one of the brandfests. Providing those hubs with the highest degree of connectedness with premier access during shared group experiences could aid the group leader in continuing to grow and develop their own groups. As the groups grow, the network hub will continue to bring more and more members of their personal and professional networks into their network, thus increasing the size of the overall consumer base simultaneously. Whatever the specifics of individual marketing programs, the significant implication here is that well-connected hubs become the priority for marketing programs and that measures are implanted which signify the importance of network hubs. Ensuring the satisfaction of network hubs is significant due to the potential backlash of the removal of such a hub from a network. As the scale-free network literature has made clear, while networks can survive the removal of many random nodes, the removal of a highly central hub can lead to the immediate collapse of even the largest networks (Barabási, 2003). As the four tailgating groups demonstrate, each time a group leader, such as Sergio, decided not to attend a game, the domino effect of the decision led to multiple other fans deciding not to attend as well.

Marketing specifically to network hubs is an important lesson that sport managers can use outside of

tailgating as well. Activities involving alumni support or general fundraising can also benefit from the findings of scale-free networks. Specifically, there may be leaders within alumni networks whose presence and continued support of the University ensured the other members of his network continued supporting the institution as well. Just as sport marketers need to focus on network leaders to maintain the community membership of the non-leaders, fundraisers and alumni programs could benefit from dedicating more attention and time to identifying network leaders and ensuring their participation. Future research should conduct similar studies of donor or alumni groups to test whether they are, in fact, scale-free networks.

While this study was conducted within a football team setting that is associated to a university, the notion of a scale free network with highly committed leaders and non-committed followers is likely to expand to professional sports both within and outside the United States and should be further examined in future research. The notion of tailgating as a brandfest where members can interact before and after a game is somewhat unique to the North American setting yet does not mean that in other cultures, fans do not get together before games to socialize. For instance, in nations such as the United Kingdom, fans often meet in pubs somewhere in the vicinity of the stadium and then walk over to the stadium right before the game. Future research could discuss whether social networks of fans in other cultures follow similar patterns as in the United States.

The formation of a group identity during the early stages of the overall brand community is crucial as well. Similar to what Schouten and McAlexander (1995) found in their discussion of the Harley Davidson and the smaller communities surrounding them (e.g., Hell's Angels, Fifth Chapter, Trinity Road Riders), once the tailgate groups continued to interact with each other, they felt the urge to provide meaning to their setting through the development of a unique group identity (discussed by Schau et al. (2009) as the process of 'staking'), strongly related to the overall brand community. While it is too early to make claims about what the consequences of these group identities are for the individual network groups, it seems intuitive that this process would take away some of the importance of the group leader, as the group becomes bigger than just the efforts of one individual and that it would have a positive effect on the attachment of the different individuals to the overall brand community. With a group identity in place, members stopped referring to their groups as "Jeff's Group" or "Sergio's Group" and started calling them by names that include all group members, not just the leader. Perhaps as the tailgating members continue to identify more emotionally and psychologically with the group name, the likelihood of a group surviving the removal of the group leader may increase as well.

Identifying and targeting network hubs can increase the efficiency of marketing programs and may represent the ideal to both create and develop a passionate fan base. While the current study looked at a small data set, the findings were strongly supported. The heightened importance

that key individuals play warrant special attention by sport organizations, since a passionate and satisfied network hub is the easiest way to promote a strong community of loyal fans. It should be noted, however, that not all outcomes of a brand community are positive. Hickman and Ward (2007) identified several possible negative impacts of brand community, some of which is especially applicable in the tailgating setting. For instance, they found that intragroup trash talk led to increased trash talk to people outside of the community as well. Administrators should be weary of potential issues arising within a setting containing members of rival social networks. Similarly, Hickman and Ward (2007) also found that brand community member actually derive pleasure from news of their rival's misfortune. Sport administrators within the European football industry have struggled for decades with social networks within their own brand community that do not adhere to the desired norms and values of the overall brand community, and have been involved in vandalism, rioting, singing racial slurs and other undesirable social behavior (e.g., hooliganism). As such, administrators are well advised to build strong relationships with these networks and either prevent the development of any of these potential negative consequences of brand community or to prepare for them (i.e., police in parking lots), brand communities should remain a positive and beneficial development for brand and consumer alike.

Conclusion

This is one of the first studies in which researchers attempt to examine brand communities during its early stages of formation. Within these new communities, the ties between the consumer and community are much weaker due to the lack of history, traditions and rituals (Grant et al., 2011), thus we focused on the relationship between consumers. By implementing the concept of scale free networks into the brand community model, we divided the consumer base into 'leaders' and 'followers', and found that instead of marketing to an overall consumer base, organizations are well advised to understand the different position that consumers maintain within their network and focus on the leaders as their main target audience. In addition, an intriguing topic for further research involves the personality characteristics of the leaders. Are there characteristics that differentiate a successful leader from unsuccessful leaders? What are the types of leaders that marketers could specifically target? A more thorough understanding of the individual leader and what motivates them could have significant implications for marketers in the future.

As this is a first attempt to explore the dynamics behind the formation of a new community, our findings might have been impacted by the particular setting that the study was conducted in, and future research should be conducted in different settings, to add to the validity of the findings in this study. As this ethnographic study

has only progressed through the first year, it has yet to be seen what effect the development of the group identity will have on the interpersonal dynamics within each group. Early findings suggest that the role of the leader will decrease, as more people will become emotionally involved with the group and the larger brand community.

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