

The Psychology of Fandom:
Understanding the Etiology, Motives, and Implications of Fanship

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Time and again, we hear stories of and even witness firsthand the phenomenon of fandom. We know of those whose emotions rise and fall with their team's performance. We know of those who forgo clothing in cold weather, withstand monsoon rains, and simmer in the summertime heat for their teams. We know of those competing in multiple fantasy leagues and following their team's every move in cyberspace with faithful devotion. We also know of those who live their lives uninformed and unaware to the world of sports around them and yet still find their way into stadiums worldwide. These examples illustrate only a sample of the diverse yet complex range of behaviors exhibited by those we choose to label *fans*. For the most part, these complexities represent mere peculiarities that add intrigue to the experience of sports. For others, such as ourselves, these complexities spark fundamental questions about the psychological motives underlying fandom—and the market strategies intended to satisfy them.

Not surprisingly, then, any attempt to describe the psychology of the sports fan is a complex, multilayered process. In light of this complexity, we have elected to focus this chapter on the fundamental aspects of fandom. We first discuss the label of sports fan and the definitional issues that process incurs. In this section, we also highlight the various methods employed by researchers to index fanship. Next, we discuss the broader etiology of fanship before outlining the different motivations underlying sports fanship. Here, we highlight both the benefits and costs derived by the sports fan through their identification with their favorite team and/or favorite player(s). We then introduce a new taxonomy of the fundamental needs by which these various motivations for fanship can be categorized. Lastly, we present several implications of this taxonomy for improving market strategies designed to both entice new fans and escalate commitment from incumbent fans.

Defining and Measuring Sports Fanship

The concept of sports fanship has a broad and rich tradition. Fanship has its roots in the more general construct of group identification. Early psychologists such as Freud (1949) and Kagan (1958) argued that identification described a process by which people include attributes or characteristics of the group as part of themselves. As a result, a notable consequence of group identification is that the individual may “react to events occurring to the group as if they occurred to him” (Kagan, 1958, p. 298). More recently, researchers in the tradition of social identity (Tajfel, 1981) and self-categorization theories (Turner, 1984) have advanced the view that group identification constitutes a condition under which the actions of a group are a central component of one's social identity. One's categorization as a member of a group is important and significant to the individual. Certainly, one of the defining elements of sports fanship is that the fan identifies strongly with their favorite team and responds to the performance of the team as if team success were a personal success and team failure a personal failure (Hirt, Zillmann, Kennedy, & Erickson, 1992). Indeed, the concept of identification is central to the working definition for fanship espoused by Wann and Branscombe (1993), who describe fanship as the extent to which fans feel a psychological connection to a team and view team performances as self-relevant.

Of course, there are many ways one could define fanship. Core to this definitional issue, however, is considering the dimensions of this definition that allow for differentiation amongst individuals. Can the definition, for instance, separate the far-weather fan from the faithful? One dimension that would seem to delineate this spectrum of true fan to nonfan is knowledge—that is, relevant information of the sport, a given team, specific players, etc. While, on the surface, this dimension appears to be a pivotal factor in identifying sports fans, most definitions of sports fanship (including our own) do not consider knowledge as a central dimension and instead largely focus on differences in emotional commitment. However, this emphasis on emotion over knowledge is understandable, at least to some extent, given that fans of all levels of knowledge greatly differ from one another in the strength and intensity of their identification with their team.

Beyond the specific dimensions that constitute a fan, it is important to consider how we categorize or label fans. In our everyday vernacular, we tend to demarcate fans in terms of qualitative labels or categories such as *casual fans*, *fair weather fans*, and *diehard fans*.

Researchers, however, tend to treat sports fandom more as a hierarchy than as a set of discrete categories. In particular, the focus tends to be on the variations among fans in terms of the relative importance that their identity as a fan has within the pantheon of other social identities that comprise their overall sense of self. For some individuals, their primary social identity may be their sports team affiliation (e.g., I am, first and foremost, a New York Yankee fan or a University of North Carolina basketball fan); for others, their sports team affiliation is given less priority (i.e., I am a Red Sox fan, but also a staunch Democrat, a devout Jew, and a full professor).

Given these issues concerning both the dimensions and categories that constitute fandom, the challenge for sports marketing researchers has been to develop measures that accurately assess and quantify a given fan's degree of identification. Within the sports science literature, three measures have received substantial use and have become widely accepted indices of sports fandom. The Psychological Commitment to Team scale (PCT: Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000) and the Connection to Team Scale (CTS: Trail & James, 2001) are popular among sports marketing and sports management professionals. The PCT consists of fourteen Likert scale items and is specifically designed to segment sports fans based on loyalty. The CTS contains only three items and has been particularly useful when examining identification with newly formed (e.g., expansion) teams (cf. Wann, 2006). Arguably the most extensively used scale within the sports psychology literature is the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS: Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The SSIS is comprised of seven Likert scale items and has received the most extensive amount of psychometric validation. This measure assesses the self-reported importance of one's team fandom, how closely one follows the team, and how much one's fandom is displayed and known by others.

Interestingly, an implicit assumption of each of these measures—and an assumption shared by researchers and sports marketers more generally—is that allegiances have a great deal of permanence and stability over time. Anecdotally, we see this stability with individuals who have been lifelong fans of particular teams and players (e.g., Green Bay Packer football fans who pass on their tickets to family members as though it were a birth right). Furthermore, test-retest reliability data using the aforementioned measures supports that assumption (cf. Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

However, despite the fact that team identification appears to be a stable construct, the broader construct of social identification has been shown to be very dynamic and malleable (cf. Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999). This malleability is also witnessed in the realm of sports. One's degree of identification with a team, for instance, may wax and wane over the years or even across a season depending on team potential or performance. Nonetheless, the more critical question is whether we can strategically shift fans' identification through sports marketing efforts and campaigns. Indeed, the possibility that levels of fandom can be modified serves as the basis for sports marketing in general. We argue that a more thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to fandom can inform sports marketers to devise more effective strategies to increase team identification. An essential premise underlying our analysis is decisions about sports marketing strategies and promotions can benefit from a consideration and appreciation of the fundamental needs and motives that are satisfied by sports fans' allegiance to a particular team.

Etiology of Sports Fandom

Given the ubiquity of and profound interest in sports fandom, an important question which has permeated the literatures on sports psychology and sports marketing concerns the specific factors that encourage individuals to identify with a particular team. In other words, what transforms people into fans? Considerable investigation into this question has illuminated a broad variety of means by which people become sports fans. Researchers have shown, for instance, that family, peers, and community play very prominent roles in the development of fandom (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Furthermore, identifications form for reasons of geography (e.g., the home town team), allegiances held by significant others (e.g., teams

supported by family members and friends), and school attendance (e.g., support one's alma mater).

However, these are but a small sampling of the vast array of factors that promote individuals to become fans. Other factors include liking for specific players (e.g., people often identify with sports franchises, like the Cleveland Cavaliers or the LA Galaxy, simply because of the popularity of a single player, like LeBron James or David Beckham), a team's strategy of play (e.g., people became fans of the 1970s Pittsburgh Steelers because of their notorious *Steel Curtain* defense), or mere exposure/accessibility (e.g., many viewers become fans of the Chicago Cubs and Atlanta Braves due to greater television coverage on their respective superstations). As an illustration of this point, Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) asked sports fans to list the reasons that they originally identified with their favorite team. Their data revealed over 40 distinct categories of reasons (not 40 different reasons, but 40 different categories!). Furthermore, over 90% of those reasons were listed by fewer than 10% of respondents, suggesting that people attribute their fanship to an immense variety of sources

Given the idiosyncratic nature of the etiology of sports fanship evidenced by these data, we believe that a more fruitful approach is to consider the broader, overarching motivations that underlie the appeal of sports fanship and sports spectatorship. This approach has a long history within the fields of communication and media research (cf. Goldstein, 1989; Raney & Bryant, 2006), and we find it especially relevant to the question of fan etiology given the wide array of factors that underlie why people watch sports and develop identifications with sports teams. Understanding the fundamental motives behind the appeal of sports fanship, then, should offer a taxonomy of core needs by which the voluminous antecedents of fanship can be summarized.

Motives Underlying Sports Fanship

Entertainment

Arguably the most basic and well-investigated motive at the core of sports fanship is that of entertainment (Gantz, 1981; Gantz & Wenner, 1991, 1995; Krohn, Clarke, Preston, McDonald, & Preston, 1998; Wann, 1995; Wenner & Gantz, 1998). More than any other reason, fans report that they watch contests involving their favorite team with the expectation of being entertained. The enjoyment and emotional satisfaction fans anticipate experiencing as they cheer on their favorite team to a hopeful victory is undeniably a primary driving force behind the appeal of sports consumption.

The *disposition theory of sports spectatorship* (Bryant & Raney, 2000; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993) states that a fan's affiliation with a team can be represented along a continuum of affect, ranging from intense liking through indifference to intense disliking. One's ultimate enjoyment of a sporting event, then, is a function of the outcome of the contest relative to the strength and valence of one's dispositions toward the competitors (Raney, 2006). Maximal enjoyment occurs when one's favored team defeats a disliked opponent. Indeed, fans know that rivalry games between traditional foes, such as Ohio State-Michigan, USC-Notre Dame, and Army-Navy in college football, are games by which these teams evaluate the success of their entire season. Fans of the victors of these games enjoy the bragging rights over their rival that a victory accrues them for the rest of the year. Conversely, the ultimate disappointment or negative enjoyment is experienced following the loss of a loved team to its hated rival (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

One of the most fascinating aspects of the disposition theory is how fans react to individual plays through the course of the game or contest. Given fans' vested interest in seeing their favorite team win, it comes as no surprise that sports fans' perceptions of plays are strongly skewed in favor of their team. Numerous studies have demonstrated that fans display selective perception and biased interpretation of events that transpire during a game such as calls by officials or umpires (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) and decry the "hostile media biases" against their team displayed by television announcers, reporters, and sports writers (Lau & Russell, 1980; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Beyond this prevalent paranoia among sports viewers and consumers, we also witness a perverse emotion exhibited by sports fans known as *schadenfreude*. This German term refers to taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. That is, not only do sports fans relish in their own team's success, they also enjoy with intense pleasure situations in which their own team's rival takes a beating (particularly when it is at the hands of their favorite team). Anecdotally, we see this emotion displayed routinely in the community around Indiana University. A popular bumper sticker that appears prominently on numerous cars reads: "My favorite teams are Indiana and whoever is playing Purdue." Indeed, the hatred and ill-will that sports fans feel toward disliked competitors, opponents, or rivals is quite striking.

Eustress

Several studies indicate that another contributing motivation to the appeal of sports fandom is the increased arousal and excitement experienced during viewing. Many fans revel not only in the "thrill of victory" (Gantz, 1981), but also in the uncertainty and suspense associated with competitive sports (i.e., "the thrill of the experience"). Fans, for instance, report getting "psyched" or "pumped up" (Wann, 1995) prior to games or contests by their favorite team.

Interestingly, this so called *eustress* motivation has been argued by some researchers to be driven by a chronic under-stimulation experienced by many individuals in their daily lives. This need for stimulation hypothesis represents a specific example of what we view to be a broader class of mood management concerns from which the *eustress* motive seems to derive. For instance, Dolf Zillmann and colleagues (Biswas, Riffe, & Zillmann, 1994; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) have repeatedly shown that people intentionally select media that will make them feel an intended emotion. Following this logic, sports fans should strategically select events that evoke desirable emotional reactions in them, such as arousal, which by doing so fulfills their mood management goals.

However, the intriguing aspect of sporting events is that the outcome itself is unknown, and sports fans realize that the desired outcome is quite often very much in doubt. For most non-fans, this facet of sports might lead to distress and irritation, and such individuals might shy away from choosing sporting events (or only witness events where the outcome is less uncertain) as their means of satisfying their mood management needs. For the sports fan, on the other hand, the unscripted, suspenseful nature of sporting events makes them particularly appealing and enhances their enjoyment (Depalma & Raney, 2003). Close, hotly contested matches evoke feelings of investment and satisfaction—feelings which are *independent* of the final outcome. Thus, it seems as if the sports fan has a profound respect and admiration for intense competition, and exposure to events that are involving are sufficient to result in a highly favorable response.

Indeed, beyond simply rooting for one's favored team, sports fans display a pervasive appreciation for the philosophy that, on any given day, anyone can win. One of the most appealing features of sports is that David can beat Goliath—i.e., that the dominant team *on paper* doesn't always win. This perspective is clearly illustrated by the widespread appeal of the annual NCAA men's college basketball tournament. Deemed *March Madness*, the tournament draws tremendous interest from viewers and gamblers (of all levels of expertise) who play tournament pools. Every year, it seems, a "Cinderella" team emerges from the field and captures the imagination (and attention) of sports spectators everywhere. These underdogs cause viewers to jump on their bandwagon and root for them as they continue in their improbable attempt to knock off perennial powerhouses (cf. Kim, Allison, Eylon, Goethals, Markus, Hindle, & McGuire, 2008; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007). The uncertainty of the underdog even leads fans who fill out their tournament pools to agonize over their selections as they attempt to pick the inevitable upsets that routinely occur throughout the tournament (McCrea & Hirt, in press).

Because increased arousal and excitement facilitates fandom, it is important for researchers to identify markers that signal stimulation. One such marker that has received considerable attention is the perceived violence contained in the action of a sporting event. Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1981) compared the appeal of violent and nonviolent plays from

professional American football games and found that sports fans' enjoyment increased with the degree of violence in the play. Similar results have been obtained with regard to enjoyment of hockey games (DeNeui & Sachau, 1996): in one study, the number of penalty minutes assessed in the game correlated more strongly with reported enjoyment than which team won the game. Indeed, sports broadcasters seem to recognize this fact, as evidenced by the consistent replaying of the biggest hits or most ferocious tackles for viewers. Even the commentary provided by announcers can further accentuate the intensity and drama surrounding rough, aggressive play (Comisky, Bryant, & Zillmann, 1977; Sullivan, 1991). In particular, highlighting the teams or players as enemies in describing the action elevated ratings of how enjoyable, exciting, involving, and interesting the game or match is perceived.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the physiological effects of the reported appeal by sports fans of the arousal and excitement associated with sports spectatorship. Many may wonder, for instance, whether it is in fact positive to put oneself through such stress (win or lose). There is a good amount of evidence within social psychology to suggest that people are very poor at forecasting the potential affective consequences of events in their lives (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Thus, there is little reason to assume sports fans will accurately predict, let alone realize, how they might react to or be affected by viewing sporting events. Anecdotally, it seems that many sports fans often exhibit a perplexing, ambivalent reaction as they watch suspenseful sporting events (e.g., uttering responses like: "I can't watch" prior to critical plays). These sorts of reactions are reminiscent of the reactions that many viewers have to other media, such as horror movies. At one level, these sports fans may wonder why they put themselves through such misery. Clearly, the relief and euphoria experienced by sports fans after a close, suspenseful win would seem to make the stress worthwhile. Furthermore, research by Bernhardt, Dabbs, Fielden, & Lutter (1998) has illustrated clear physiological effects that occur after sports fans watch their team win: male fans of the winning team show increases in mean testosterone levels, a response closely tied to expressions of dominance (Mazur, 1985). The flip side, however, is that male fans of the losing team displayed decreases in testosterone level, illustrating a potential cost associated with watching one's favorite team lose. Nonetheless, evidence of these physiological changes after team victories versus defeats suggests that the stress and excitement associated with sports spectatorship may have a broader range of consequences than previously assumed.

Escape

A distinct but related motive to those of entertainment and eustress is the fact that sports spectatorship affords sports fans the opportunity to escape the stresses of daily life. Few would argue that we live in an increasingly stressful and anxiety-provoking time. In such high pressure lifestyles, people often look to various media content to help them take their mind off of the pressure. For many, sports fanship serves as a cathartic release in which fans can lose themselves in the events on the playing field, alleviating the monotony and boredom of everyday life (Gantz, 1981; Gantz & Wenner, 1991, 1995; Wenner & Gantz, 1998). Indeed, many wives lament the fact that they lose their husbands as they religiously watch the weekly NFL games for entire Sundays.

Of course, in these venues, fans are typically not simply passive observers. Fans rabidly cheer, yell, and shout for their team while watching the action. They heckle and boo the opposition and express their displeasure at the referees and officials when calls go against their team. In addition to merely evidencing their allegiance to their team, these actions have been argued to allow fans a release of their pent-up emotions and frustrations. As Smith (1988) noted, "While engrossed in the sporting event a fan's mood may fluctuate, but any pain is temporary and minor compared to the relief of gaining a respite from a wearisome existence" (p. 58).

Despite these benefits, there are some notable downsides to the escape behaviors of sports fans. As we all know, fans can get out of hand; fights erupting in parking lots, riots in the stands (or outside stadiums), even debris being tossed onto playing fields, at opposing players, or

at officials all exemplify negative behaviors attributed to escapism. Consequently, these sorts of behaviors are not solely instigated by the despondent fans of losing teams; fans of victorious teams set fires, vandalize, and loot businesses during celebrations.

To understand such antisocial behavior, researchers should keep in mind that sports spectatorship is often associated with other escape behaviors which may impair the judgment of sports fans, such as excessive drinking or the use of recreational drugs, (Steele & Southwick, 1985). In addition, the fact that escapism is often a product of identification with a large fanbase affords the sports fan conditions of relative anonymity and *deindividuation* (Zimbardo, 1970). When a sports fan is made to feel “just like one of the crowd,” the individual feels less accountable for their actions and will often lose their inhibitions against acting in an aggressive or antisocial manner (especially if others in the crowd initiate such behavior). Finally, although most sports fans believe that escape through watching violent or aggressive games lowers their own level of aggression, a large body of research in social psychology indicates just the opposite (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Goldstein & Arms, 1971; Russell, 1981). If anything, watching aggressive or violent action primes aggressive thinking and interpretation of subsequent events, which results in a greater likelihood of aggressive behavior when someone is angry or frustrated (Berkowitz, 1993). Thus, while sports spectatorship may serve as an effective means by which sports fans can escape the stresses of everyday life, it may come at some danger and cost to themselves and those around them.

Aesthetics

Individuals are also motivated to be involved in sports from the sheer aesthetic appreciation of the skill, grace, and beauty of the athletes themselves (Krohn et al., 1998; Smith, 1988; Wann, 1995). The awe and delight inspired by watching a perfectly executed gymnastic or ice skating routine by Olympians underscores the role that this motive plays in encouraging and sustaining sports fanship. Although many scholars tend to pigeonhole this motive to certain individuals (e.g., women as opposed to men) or to certain sports where competitions are largely evaluated on standardized, aesthetic criteria (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating, diving, skateboarding, surfing), research shows that fans of both genders and of all sports report that aesthetics has an important role in their fanship in the form of a broad appreciation for the beauty and style of the play involved in athletics (Wann & Wilson, 1999). For instance, fans will always marvel at the extraordinary athleticism displayed in mainstream sports, such as Julius ‘The Doctor’ Erving and Michael Jordan dunking from the free throw line or Barry Sanders and Adrian Peterson making defenders miss tackles by acrobatic moves and quick acceleration through the holes in the defense. Indeed, ESPN and other sports broadcasting networks routinely televise highlight reels of exceptional plays (diving catches, acrobatic one hand grabs, sick crossover dribbles, and amazing cutbacks) in their Play of the Day countdowns for the simple reason that audiences appreciate the aestheticism inherently in athletics.

Though work on this motive is less developed than others, the research that has been done focuses on the facets of play that inspire such aesthetic appeal. In other words, what is it that we—as fans—are drawn to? This is not a question unique to sports; clearly any domain in which aesthetic enjoyment has a role in people’s involvement must understand this question. However, the specific facets that make people appreciate a bicycle-kick in soccer, a triple-axel in ice-skating, an aerial in surfing, or a knuckleball in baseball offer a unique analysis to the domain of sports. In this regard, Zillmann et al. (1989) find that fans express significant appreciation for the novelty, riskiness, and unexpectedness of the play. Fans report greater enjoyment of novel and uncommon plays, particularly ones that involve a greater risk of failure. When such plays prove to be successful, fans are elated. In general, fans are drawn to sporting events where they feel that they “might see something they’ve never seen before.” Thus, it would seem that the aestheticism of sports is driven by fan’s desire to witness something novel, something unexpected, and something dangerous.

Self-esteem

Another key motivation underlying sports fanship concerns the potential benefits to one's self-esteem. We know that people have a profound need to feel that they have value (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice 1993; Maslow 1968; Rogers 1961; Rosenberg 1979), and considerable evidence illustrates the importance of self-esteem in how effectively people manage their everyday lives (Leary & Baumeister 2000; Taylor & Brown 1988). People with high self-esteem, for instance, try harder and are more successful than their low self-esteem counterparts (McFarlin & Blascovich 1981). Moreover, we know that people seek to maintain a positive sense of self-worth (Tesser 1991). Indeed, a great deal of research, including much of our own work, has been devoted to showing the myriad of ways people try to maintain self-esteem in the face of different challenges and threats (cf. Crocker & Park 2004).

Robert Cialdini and his colleagues have discussed how people seek to satisfy their self-esteem needs not only by direct means (in the form of their own accomplishments), but by indirect means (in the form of the accomplishments of others). This latter strategy is referred to as *basking in reflected glory* (often referred to by its acronym BIRGing), and BIRGing is often best exemplified in fans who feel intense pride in the accomplishments of their favorite sports team. For instance, Cialdini et al. (1976) had researchers survey fans of Arizona State University football about the team's recent performances. They found that after wins, fans used the pronoun "we" to describe the outcome of the game (e.g., "we beat Stanford, 31-14"), but used the pronoun "they" (or other third person pronouns) after losses (e.g., "They lost that one, 28-21"). Note that fans are distancing themselves from the team after losses, displaying what Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1985) called *cutting off reflected failure* (or CORFing). But BIRGing goes beyond linguistics. In another study, Cialdini and colleagues examined the extent to which Arizona State students wore school-identifying apparel on the Mondays following college football games. Indeed, they observed that students were far more likely to wear school-identifying apparel on the days following team wins as opposed to team losses. Based on these results, Cialdini et al. argued that fans were proclaiming their association to the team following successful performances as a means of basking in reflected glory of the team's accomplishments.

We see many examples of fans BIRGing following their team success. The community pride exhibited by fans after winning championships is certainly evidenced by the increased sales of team merchandise and paraphernalia. Moreover, people are proud to identify themselves with their community ("I'm a Kansas Jayhawks fan") and use these products and logos to visibly display their association with the team to others (Oliver 1999). Interestingly, success not only boosts the likelihood for fans to bask in reflected glory, but also the tendency to derogate their team's rival (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). That is, fans have been shown to rate the quality of various aspects of their university (e.g., academic programs, athletic programs, educational resources, social and cultural environment, and graduate placement) more favorably than that of rival institutions. This result coincides with research on social identity theory. This work shows that people have a profound tendency to value and praise groups that they belong to or affiliate with (their "ingroups") while derogating and distancing themselves from groups that they do not belong to or affiliate with (their "outgroups"). Tajfel and Turner (1979) view this tendency to show ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation as reflective of the fact that we often derive self-esteem from our group memberships—memberships which would include team affiliations.

Furthermore, Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, and Kennedy (1992) directly examined the effects of a team's winning and losing on the mood and self-esteem of its fans. Fans of the Indiana University and University of Wisconsin men's basketball teams watched live broadcasts of away basketball games as part of a research study. After the game, fans' mood and self-esteem were assessed. Not surprisingly, fans' mood and self-esteem were elevated after a win but depressed after a loss. Fans were then introduced to a series of different performance tasks and asked to estimate how well they could do at these tasks if asked to perform them. Interestingly, fans were optimistic about their ability to successfully perform these tasks after wins, whereas fans'

predictions about their performance were far more pessimistic after losses. Moreover, the effects were most striking for fans that were highly identified with the team. The transference of team success to personal success (and team failure as personal failure) offers striking evidence for the link between people's fanship and their feelings of self-worth.

Companionship

An undeniable facet of sports fanship is that fans typically view or attend sporting events with others (family members, friends, others at the local sports bar). We all know fans that routinely tailgate before weekend football games or host Super Bowl parties. Watching sporting events with others provides fans with the opportunity to socialize and spend time with others who share their affiliation (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). Indeed, many sociologists argue that viewing sports programming with others provides a broader and more compelling set of opportunities for communication and information sharing than most other forms of media content (Wenner & Gantz, 1998).

Melnick (1993) discussed the unique communicative experience between sports fans which he called the *sports encounter*. Fans (whether they are lifelong friends or complete strangers) share a body of common knowledge in terms of teams, players, and even the sport in general. They also share a commitment to and an enthusiasm for the game. They even share and abide by common set of assumptions about the appropriate moments during which conversation can take place (e.g., talk only when there are breaks in play). In addition, sports fans share their emotions with their companions in a manner that is unprecedented in other social encounters. Many sociologists comment that watching or participating in sports is one of the few outlets in which men in particular demonstrably share their emotions with other men (cf. Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989). Beyond these shared experiences, however, sports encounters afford one of the few conversational topics (unlike politics or religion) that allow for friendly disagreements. Sports fans can and often do endlessly debate with one another about all manner of mutable behaviors, albeit a player's decision to call a timeout with none remaining, a coach's decision to leave an ace pitcher in the game, or an owners decision to spend millions of dollars on a temperamental free-agent. These friendly disagreements even extend to the unknowable: Who was the greatest Olympian of all time? Who would win a fight between Muhammad Ali and Rocky Marciano? What if steroids were better regulated? Of course, it is not the content of these conversations we find so intriguing (though that is not to say we haven't engaged in them), but rather the fact that we allow ourselves—as a culture—to openly engage in these debates/disagreements as part of common social discourse.

In short, then, there are few other ties that express the same similar degree of camaraderie and emotionality (outside of one's own family) than shared alliances in sports. Based on the research reviewed, it is hard not to argue that the bonds of fanship are comparable to the bonds between people from the armed services, various religious groups and social organizations, and the same school/alma mater. Regardless of where the bonds of fanship fit socially, it seems clear that sports fans derive a profound sense of camaraderie and companionship from sharing their fanship with others in a manner that is somewhat unique in contemporary society.

Group affiliation

A final but critically important motive that permeates sports fanship is the sense of group affiliation it provides. We are social beings who have a need to feel a sense of connectedness or "belongingness" with others. Traditional psychological theories have long argued that once our basic needs (hunger, thirst, sex) are met, people strive for higher-order needs in the form of love and belongingness (Maslow 1968). More recently, researchers have shown that this fundamental need leads people to form and maintain strong, stable connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

One way we can connect ourselves to others is to share something in common. People who share the same alma mater or hometown feel a common bond with each other, as do owners of the same product or brand (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen 1995). Given that people like

those who are similar to themselves (Byrne 1971; Byrne & Nelson 1965), anything that creates a bond between ourselves and others can facilitate liking (Jones & Pittman 1982). Moreover, for those who are able to satisfy these belongingness needs, there appear to be significant advantages for both psychological and physical health. People who feel connected get sick less (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus 1988) and have a more positive sense of well-being (McAdams & Bryant 1987). Those who don't feel connected experience a sense of loneliness and disconnectedness from others, resulting in poorer overall health and psychological adjustment (Argyle 1987; Tambor & Leary 1993). Fans have access to broad community of similar others that often develops into a sense of pride in their common bond with those who share their same allegiance.

Although identifying commonalities with others has clear benefits—benefits largely accessible from the fanbase afforded to any fan—people are also motivated to identify differences between themselves and others. Marilyn Brewer's (2003) *optimal distinctiveness theory* posits that people must balance the need for inclusiveness and belongingness with the need for distinctiveness. In other words, we don't like to feel as though we are clones of everyone else, yet at the same don't like to feel too different from those around us (cf. Markus & Kunda, 1986). Sports fanship, like other forms of group affiliation, fulfills our desire to balance these two different needs (Wann, 2006). A great deal of research in social identity has revealed that individuals are motivated to view their own ingroups (groups which they belong to) as distinct from outgroups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). These concerns have been argued to motivate sports fans to not only perceive themselves as part of something special or unique, but also believe that fans of their team are qualitatively different from fans of other teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1995).

Beyond the opportunity to satisfy identification needs, however, the affiliation motive of fanship allows the fan the opportunity to connect to something beyond ourselves. Intriguing research shows that this broader connection, if made, allows people to transcend their innate fear of death (cf. Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, and Schimel (2000), for instance, demonstrated that when the salience of one's mortality is increased, sports fans identify more strongly with their sports teams. In other words, when confronted with the inevitability of their own death, fans clung to their team allegiances, arguably in an attempt to grasp hold of something that would extend beyond their own existence.

The Fundamentals of Fandom

Of the multitude of reasons people have for their fanship (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996), we have reviewed a selection of the more prominent motives in the previous section. We believe that these motives can be subsumed under a broader taxonomy of core needs that people often turn to sports to satisfy, thus transforming them into fans. These core needs reflect a consolidation of prior research that has identified these needs as fundamental for all human beings and has illustrated how these needs can be satisfied through a variety of means. As depicted in Table 1, this taxonomy consists of three central needs: validation, pleasure, and arousal.

- *Validation* refers to the need to confirm or substantiate oneself and can be satisfied, for instance, by claiming Manchester United's success as your own. We believe fans seek out validation not only through the ways in which they view themselves directly, but also indirectly through the ways in which they view their family, friends, and group allegiances. This need for validation thus subsumes the self-esteem, companionship, and group affiliation motives discussed previously. Validation can come through actual interaction—or even perceived association—with others (e.g., as a Florida Gator fan, I have shared experiences with other Florida Gator fans across the country). Mark Leary's sociometer hypothesis (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) argues that our self-esteem is best construed as a barometer of how connected we feel to others in our social world. Thus, by aligning themselves with their team, fellow fans, and its rich history and legacy, fans are able to feel a part of something special and unique, serving to validate

their self-worth, sense of belongingness, and optimal distinctiveness as well as to provide a means by which they can transcend feelings of loneliness, isolation, and even existential fears of mortality and death. Fanship satisfies this fundamental need for validation by serving as an avenue by which we can bolster one's sense of low self-worth (after experiencing some challenge or threat to our self-esteem or an event like 9-11 that arouses mortality concerns in the general populace) as well as a mechanism to sustain one's sense of high self-worth when things well.

- *Pleasure* refers to the hedonistic need to experience satisfaction or enjoyment and can be satisfied, for instance, by rooting one's team onto victory or by appreciating the technical skill and grace of a gymnast. This need for pleasure underscores the entertainment and aesthetic motives discussed previously. Human beings crave pleasure and gravitate toward stimuli that have produced rewarding or reinforcing outcomes in the past. Fans can derive pleasure from external factors, such as reveling in the pomp and circumstance surrounding sporting events (e.g., fireworks, cheerleaders, music, game rituals). Fans also derive pleasure from internal factors, such as one's own idiosyncratic criteria for what is deemed novel, unexpected, or risky (and thus more inherently pleasing) in an athlete's performance. Of paramount importance, though, this need for pleasure highlights the fact that sports fans garner a tremendous amount of enjoyment from simply the experience of athletic competition.
- *Arousal* refers to the desire for stimulation and excitement and can be satisfied, for instance, by watching a daredevil skateboarder launch over the Great Wall of China. Fans satisfy their need for arousal by seeking out events and shared experiences that elicit stimulation, thereby alleviating the boredom and monotony of their everyday lives. In this way, the need for arousal subsumes the eustress and escape motives discussed earlier. However, the physiological aspect of this need leads to both constructive (i.e., heightened loyalty, enthusiastic support for one's team) and destructive (i.e., rioting, taunting, derogating opposition and opponent) behaviors in fans. Yet the desire for stimulation remains an important—and arguably unique—facet of fanship.

Strategic Implications

This taxonomy offers clear implications to those interested in developing strategies targeted to fans. We first address specific strategies that could be derived from this taxonomy. We then identify situations in which these various strategies may be most effective.

What strategies do these specific needs inform?

Validation

The key elements of fanship that a need for validation informs surround the identity that fans accrue from their team allegiances. In many ways, sports team affiliations can be construed as brands and, as such, sports marketing efforts must focus on the creation and articulation of the features of that brand. For instance, what defines a specific group of fans, such as a Cubs fan, and distinguishes them from fans of other teams? Strategies to create a distinctly positive in-group identity for the fans of a particular team, something that offers fans something unique relative to fans of other teams (out-groups) can simultaneously satisfy the belongingness and self-esteem motives of the individual as well as optimal distinctiveness needs to differentiate oneself. Indeed, we see teams attempt to create the sense of identity among their fans in a variety of ways (e.g., by having fans all wear the same team colors and logos, act out rituals or sing fight songs in unison at games, etc.). Often, these campaigns are used to try to motivate fans to support capital projects for new stadia or arenas or efforts to come out and “pack the house” for special events. These efforts reinforce the idea that fans are part of something larger than themselves, linking them to a history and tradition that extends beyond the past and present into the future. Obviously, the best ways to accomplish these efforts will vary depending on such factors as: (1) the longevity and past success of the franchise, (2) the changes that occur to the team due to coaching changes, free agency pickups, scandals, and/or (3) even franchise relocations, necessitating a revision of a past

identity or even the reinvention of a new identity. Nonetheless, these approaches all share a common focus on the creation and accentuation of a shared positive identity among fans, validating their common allegiance to the team.

Pleasure

The key elements of fanship that the need for pleasure informs are the sheer enjoyment and entertainment value fans derive from watching their favorite team play. Clearly, the most notable facet of entertainment based on disposition theory is the success of the team: fans will jump on the bandwagon and come out in droves to see a winning team, so efforts to encourage fans to join in the fun of supporting a successful team throughout the season and/or during the playoffs is relatively straightforward. We know that people are profoundly influenced by and conform to the behavior of others, and campaigns that simply display the fact that many others are attending and enjoying particular sporting events provides “social proof” (Cialdini, 2000) that fanship is the right thing to do. However, beyond simply wins and losses, there are many avenues available for strategists to illustrate the unique entertainment opportunities of sports fanship. Creating a fun and entertaining atmosphere at the game (e.g., cheerleaders, upbeat music, halftime shows, etc.) is an obvious investment to generate entertainment. Also, fan involvement serves to heighten fan enjoyment and increase team allegiance and thus should be maximized where possible. Minor league franchises have been quite successful, for instance, in their efforts to accentuate the entertainment value for the whole family by basing their season on gameday themes. These themes are often predictable and offer a host of interactive activities, such as giveaways, prizes, and contests throughout the game. Photos with players and/or team mascots have been used to add to the enjoyment of kids who, at some parks, are even permitted to enter the field and run the bases following the game. Similarly, franchises with outstanding players often highlight the ability or the determination of the athletes that sports fans appreciate and admire, as well as advertise the possibility that fans may see something they’ve never seen before. Aesthetically pleasing arenas and stadia in which every seat is a good seat to view the action contributes to enjoyment. Efforts to reconnect with the past by commemorating outstanding former players or wearing retro uniforms also allow fans to relive past glories and nostalgic memories that make fanship something uniquely enjoyable and appealing.

Arousal

The key elements of fanship that the need for arousal informs are the unique stimulating and energizing aspects of sports fanship. Fanship affords a means to alleviate the routine of everyday life in a unique and enticing way: fans experience game time as a chance to let loose, feel adrenaline (e.g., get pumped up), and can lose themselves in the excitement of the action on the playing field. Fans display their allegiance by wearing team-identifying apparel, wearing costumes, or even painting their face/body to help get into the appropriate frame of mind for the game. Efforts to emphasize the escape and release aspects that sports fanship provides will successfully highlight the ways fanship satisfies the need for arousal.

In addition, we cannot deny the emotional exhilaration that sports fans feel during sporting events themselves. The unscripted nature of the action provides mounting tension and uncertainty regarding the final outcome. Fans relish nail-biting, competitive matches that keep them on the edge of their seat (after all, “it’s never over ‘til it’s over!”, right?). Anyone who can recall the aftermath of March Madness upsets like NC State’s 1993 victory in the title game over a heavily favored University of Houston (Phi Slamma Jamma) team with exuberant NC State coach Jim Valvano running onto the court after an improbable buzzer beater can attest to the emotions evoked by such events among viewers as well as spectators and players. Indeed, these facets of sports spectatorship are regularly pitched to fans by ads that encourage them to “catch all the action.” Furthermore, specific aspects of play are highlighted to draw-in fans, aspects that appeal directly to this need for arousal. The violence and aggressiveness of play in several sports (e.g., the hard hits and bone crushing tackles in football, the jaw rattling checks in hockey, the fiery crashes in auto races) are often promoted with pride, to elicit excitement and emphasize the

stimulating aspects of sporting events. Indeed, we believe that any of a broad range of features of sports – the physical, sensual, the controversial, the unexpected – all serve to illustrate the myriad of ways strategists can engage fans through their need for arousal.

When should these strategies be most effective?

We believe that one of the most beneficial aspects of this taxonomy of basic needs is that it provides a framework to inform and guide sports marketing efforts to draw in new fans and to sustain and enhance the allegiance of incumbent fans. Indeed, psychological research has consistently pointed out that the importance of different needs varies as a function of time and context (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 2003; Maslow, 1968). Thus, it is critical to consider the parameters that might affect the relative priority and salience of these needs for fans of different teams in order to optimize the effectiveness of sports marketing efforts. For instance, in the aftermath of 9-11, a resumption of Major League Baseball in the days immediately following the tragedy was deemed crucial for fans' psyche as it served to satisfy our need for validation and to allow a return to normalcy, epitomized by the "grand old game." In other situations, fans' need for entertainment or arousal may take precedence, and strategies to accentuate these facets of sports fandom will be most effective. A comprehensive list of these different parameters is certainly beyond the scope of the present chapter. However, in this final section, we briefly discuss a few key parameters that we feel deserve attention.

Value of needs should vary with the specific sport

The relative importance of needs clearly varies with the specific sport under consideration. A sport like figure skating or gymnastics, in which we know that aesthetics are highly valued, is one in which the need for pleasure should be highlighted. Conversely, sports like football, hockey, and boxing, whose appeal may reside primarily in terms of the eustress of violent and aggressive play, would be ones in which the need for arousal is paramount. Thus, it would be valuable for sports marketers to determine the primary motives and needs satisfied by particular sports in order to most effectively develop campaign strategies. This is not to say that one cannot acknowledge or even cultivate additional need served by fandom to those sports, and indeed efforts to do so might broaden the appeal of that sport to a larger constituent of the population. However, in order to sustain and enhance the allegiance of fans of a sport, efforts to highlight the fundamental needs met by that particular sport would seem to be most advisable.

Value of needs should vary with level of fandom

Indeed, another variable that should affect the relative importance or value of particular needs is an individual's level of fandom. New fans might be drawn to a particular sport (like MMA) to satisfy their need for arousal and stimulation, whereas incumbent fans might have developed an entirely different appreciation of the aesthetics of the sport and find that it satisfies their need for pleasure. In such cases, sports marketers may want to promote the arousal aspects of the sport to attract new fans, but highlight the pleasure (aesthetics, enjoyment) aspects of the sport to sustain or enhance the allegiance and devotion of current fans.

Value of needs should vary with team success

One would also expect that the relative importance of particular needs would depend on the level of success of the team or franchise. Losing teams or franchises in the midst of rebuilding may need to devote efforts to enhance the validation needs served by fandom. Efforts to stress the loyalty and identity of the team's existing fan base may enable the team to better weather poor performance or scandals. Conversely, efforts to illustrate the pleasure needs satisfied by joining the bandwagon of a successful team may entice new fans to the team.

Conclusion

Fandom is an intriguing field of study, and it is clear from this analysis that the motives that underlie sports fandom are quite broad and pervasive. Sports fandom satisfies a variety of different motives for individuals, justifying the growing numbers of people who turn to sports as a means to address what we believe are a handful of fundamental core needs. A consideration of these needs can not only provide a richer and more thorough appreciation of the appeal of sports

fanship, but also serve to inform efforts on the part of sports marketers to develop campaigns that capitalize on the particular needs that fans garner from their allegiance. We hope that researchers and practitioners alike can build upon this analysis to further understand the psychological makeup of fans as well as to design more effective strategies to attract new fans as well as to sustain and deepen the identification and allegiance of current fans.

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Table 1. Core needs of fanship.

Need	Selected Examples of Motives Subsumed Under These Needs
<i>Validation</i>	Self-esteem Companionship Group Affiliation
<i>Pleasure</i>	Entertainment Aesthetics
<i>Arousal</i>	Escape Eustress