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# Fandom: A Study on How College Students Selected a Favorite Professional Sports Team

Zachary R. Brown  
zacbrown9@yahoo.com

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## **Abstract**

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Fandom: A Study on How College Students Selected a Favorite Professional Sports Team

Zachary Brown

St. John Fisher College

**Abstract**

This research aimed to uncover key factors in how college students select a favorite sports team. An important issue in today's sport industry is recognizing fans motives for supporting their favorite sport teams. Sport organizations need to better understand fan's motives in order to address their needs and increase the fan base. Also, the team needs to cultivate a relationship for fan involvement to garner economic benefits. The subjects for this study were college students at St. John Fisher College. Using an online survey, the results of this uncovered that team factors were the most important in someone supporting their favorite sports team.

**Fandom: A Study on How College Students Selected a Favorite Professional Sports Team**

Throughout the existence of sports, fans have always been an important influence on the success or failure of the team. The backbone of every team is constructed by the men and women who devote their lives to their favorite sports team. Let me ask you a question, have you ever met someone and sports was thrown in the conversation? Have you ever wondered how they came to choose their favorite sports team? These various questions enter the minds of many individuals who come in contact with passionate sports fans. For example, someone who chooses to like a team in California when they live in New York, might do it because of a city, a player, or the success of the team. This research study explores the person, team, and social factors that influence how college students select their favorite professional sports team. Picture a party marking the opening of football season. Friends gather wearing jerseys of various colors, styles, and eras and engage in friendly banter about how the season will go for their team. Julie is excited that she and her dad are going to three games this season. Mark shares his road trip plans taking him from New York to California to see his beloved team. Ed and Rita are arguing the value of draft picks and how they will or will not measure up to the great athletes of the past. This is a scene that is replicated across many different settings many times per year. It doesn't matter if you've done it before, as sports are a major part of many people's identities, they choose to engage in these same discussions and same arguments year after year. One reason that this continues is that people's fandom originates in many different areas and can potentially change over time. This keeps the discussion different, but it is possible that there are commonalities.

This research topic is important to the marketing segment of the sports industry. Sport executives are always looking for effective ways to attract fans of all ages. By finding out that

information, franchises will then know how to successfully market their team to various demographic groups. This research study will extensively explore what factors are most influential in someone supporting a professional sports franchise and at what stage of life they do so.

While past research has explored adults and their fandom, very few studies have explored college students. Based on much research, it is still unclear what factor or factors are the most influential in someone liking a favorite sports team. This is a problem that needs to be solved in order for sport marketers, executives, and owners to effectively brand and market their sports team to the college students. This is important because young fans drive the sports team from a financial aspect. Team managers are always looking for ways to get more people to the stadium and also to sell more merchandise. If a team has a large number of younger fans, that team will reap the benefits of their popularity across the globe.

## **Literature Review**

### **Person Factors**

#### **Demographics.**

Existing research shows that there is a strong correlation between gender differences and the way a person identifies with a sports team; males have a stronger bond or identifiability to a sports team than females do (Melnick & Wann, 2011). This identification can come in the form of attending games, wearing team apparel, or even choosing a favorite team to connect with. While 74.7% of male respondents named a favorite team, only 47% of female respondents listed a favorite team. In a later study on gender and team identification, Koch and Wann (2016) dive into what ways gender predicts how people interact and choose their favorite sports team. For example, Koch and Wann (2016) say that males have a higher level of fandom and identification

then that of women, confirming the findings of Melnick and Wann (2011). In addition to the previous studies, Koch and Wann (2016) claim that race, age, and most importantly gender, plays an important role in predicting how sports fans will react in regards to their favorite team. “Female fans often report higher levels of family motivation while men report higher levels of eustress (i.e., positive stress) and self-esteem motives” (Koch & Wann, 2016, p. 280). This finding shows that females are heavily influenced by family opinions, and males are influenced by positive feelings. In past research done by Koch and Wann, they have concluded that men identify more with a sports team than women do (Koch & Wann, 2016). These findings can be seen in many articles that explain and agree that males identify the most with their favorite sports team. These gender differences can also be broken down into the psychological reasoning and motives for both males and females selecting a favorite sports team. Koch and Wann (2016) found that females select a favorite team in order to gain favorable and positive connections with people.

In addition to this, Koch & Wann attribute socialization factors to play an important role in how women choose their favorite sport teams based on relationships (2016). Koch and Wann did a study in 2013 and found some socialization agents that influence females in selecting their favorite teams. They concluded “that women may be more likely to become fans of a team to bond with their socialization agents (e.g., peers, family, friends) while men become fans of the team both to bond with others and to be a member of the fan group” (Koch & Wann, 2013, p. 281). Women also set the latest fashion trends, strengthened family ties, speak their mind, and had an opportunity to meet new people by following a sports team (Melnick & Wann, 2011). Lastly, Koch and Wann (2016) reported that females rank social affiliation to people or a community group as a very strong reason on which sports team to identify with. This is in direct

contrast with what males said as social affiliation ranks at the very bottom for choosing a favorite sports team (Koch & Wann, 2016).

Aside from gender, race has also been shown to influence team identification patterns. Clopton & Finch explored race and how social surroundings influence their team identification (2013). “With white students possessing an advantage in social capital maintenance, numerous questions arise most echoing past sentiments towards the type of social capital being impacted by sport and fandom” (Clopton & Finch, 2010, p. 393). Both fandom and sport consumption is prevalent on college campuses in the fact that these college students showcase their fandom by wearing apparel with the team’s logo on it. This sport consumption will allow the college student to identify with a team that will, in turn, increase that individual’s social capital based on race because they will “fit in” with other individuals who follow the same team. For example, if a white male is looking to fit in with an African-American group that supports the New York Knicks, that white male has a better chance of fitting in if he supports the Knicks.

Age plays a key role due to the many various factors that could influence this choosing of a team. By including age in attempting to understand fandom, an important context of sporting era is provided. Koch and Wann found that

“older fans tend to be upset by athletes’ materialism, believe athletes should serve as role models, and feel that how a sport is played...is just as important as the outcome of an event (i.e., the product). In other research, younger fans were more likely to report disappointment in response to poor team outcomes” (Koch & Wann, 2016, p. 279).

This quote from their study determined that older fans do not care about team outcome as much as younger fans.

### **Relationship Influences.**

Many relationship factors, such as friends, family, and peers, can influence a person’s choice in favorite sports team. Melnick & Wann (2011) found that “family members (father,



mother, brother, grandfather, uncle, sister, cousin, and grandmother) had the greatest impact as sport fandom socialization agents as they accounted for a total of 65 percent of the responses” (p. 462). Spaaij and Anderson also attribute parents as the primary influence on their child selecting a sport to play as well as a favorite sports team to follow (2012). This shows how influential family members are in deciding what sport to play and what sports team that child could choose. Melnick & Wann (2011) approximated that “half of the male participants listed their father (53%) as the most influential agent” (p. 462). Some other factors that influence a choice of a favorite team could be the athletes that play the game in addition to family members (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011). For female participants, fathers and mothers were also the most frequently named socialization agent albeit less frequently than for males. Males were more apt to indicate that a star athlete influenced their decision to follow the sports team (Melnick & Wann, 2011).

In a study of Australian students, male peers were identified as the most influential people responsible for their decision to become a sport fan. “Specifically, males (e.g. father, brother, grandfather, uncle) accounted for 59 percent of the socialization agents chosen while females (e.g. mother, sister, grandmother) were identified by only 6 percent of the total sample (Melnick & Wann, 2011, p. 464). There were also several cases where fathers or other near family members had instilled a sense of team loyalty in their children from an early age (Spaaij & Anderson, 2012). Also, parents and grandparents spark a child’s sporting interests in the United States of America (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011). Their study attributes the parents as the most influential agent for someone choosing a favorite sports team. Spaaij & Anderson (2012) claim that the connection of children to a sports team is a direct result of the parental influences on the child. According to their study, parents instill an internal behavior in their children to remain loyal to that sports team with a hope that that child will remain a fan of the

sports team. This will also allow the parents and the child to be able to socially identify with others based on liking the same sports team (Spaaij & Anderson, 2012). In addition to family members, friends can have a heavy influence on one's team selection to identify with. Per Melnick and Wann, friends play a very important role to males as a key part of the socialization process related to team identification (2011). Spaaij and Anderson built upon Melnick and Wann's study and found that children become a part of huge social network which will then allow their friends to influence their thinking and interests of sports (Spaaij & Anderson, 2012). In another study, Dimmock attributes identification to a sports team based on the preferences of family and close friends. Another study shows how a person supports a team based on the relatedness of the team to that individual. In a recent study by Kwon and Armstrong (2004), they define relatedness as "a member defines him or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (p. 96). Have a concluding thought or transition before moving on.

## **Team Factors**

### **Team Success and Athletes**

Many fans attribute their following of a sports team to the recent or current success of the team. One such study took place in the large metropolitan area of New York City (Dwyer, Eddy, & LeCrom, 2014). They concluded that people who classify themselves as highly identified fans, have strong feelings of self-worth and are closely linked to their teams if the team they support has positive performance on the field (Dwyer et al., 2014). In addition to that finding, they also concluded that these highly identifiable fans form internal connections with the team if they are successful (Dwyer et al., 2014). Further, this bond does not seem to be dependent on the success or failure of a team (Wann, Keenan, & Page, 2009). Both internal and external factors

consist of the team performance coaching staff, organizational personnel and fans of the sports team and can vary based on the team you follow. In a study done on the New York Giants and New York Jets sports franchises, there were varying levels of influences for fans of both teams. New York Giants fans found that team performance, other fans, and the coaching staff were more influential to their level of team identification than that of New York Jets fans (Dwyer et al., 2014). In addition to that, these authors also found that team success or failure was related to external attributions of the team (Dwyer et al., 2014). These attributions are related to organizational decisions that are made. For example, if the Buffalo Bills hire a winning coach, this will attract new fans to support the team because the Bills chance of winning increases greatly.

Another factor that results in people choosing a favorite sports team would be if their favorite player is on the team's roster. In a study done by Li-Shiue and Jong-Chae, they attribute team identification with the athletes that are on the team (2011). According to the authors, "Because some Taiwanese baseball players currently playing in major league baseball (MLB) are well known in Taiwan, they have become role models and their success is encouraging Taiwanese residents to watch more sport" (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011, p. 593). This finding is very relevant for many reasons. Most of the team identification, when it comes to the athlete factor, comes from international players. When these international baseball players come from overseas to the USA and play in one of the power 5 leagues, this opens a whole new fan base for the franchise (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011). This example shows that athletes on the team can be a huge factor for people to follow a specific sports figure wherever they may play.

**Team History and Location.**

In addition to the factors previously mentioned, many people choose a favorite sports team for the rich history that surrounds a sports franchise. Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, and Luellen found that fans attribute history, tradition, and past success of the franchise as main attractors in someone supporting a sports team (2012). In this study, they are not only saying that teams with a great historical track record have attractiveness for people liking and following that team, but also if the team is known to be an underdog (Theodorakis et al., 2012). They gave the example of the Chicago Cubs and how their historic failures have made them to be known as the “lovable losers” because people are known to follow the team regardless of their win/loss record in the past (Wann et al., 2009).

A final factor influencing fandom is geography as the proximity to a franchise may influence an individual in choosing to follow a team (Melnick & Wann, 2004). Another study found that “fans can and do develop strong attachments with distant teams, it is far easier to gain and maintain relationships with other fans of the team when fans identify with local teams” (Theodorakis et al., 2012, p. 28). For example, a person residing near Chicago may become a fan of a team in New York, but it is far easier for them to identify with, find support for, and ultimately follow a team based in Chicago. These authors also found that there was a significant positive relationship with people following the local basketball team in their area attributing it to high levels of needing to belong to something (Theodorakis, et al., 2012). Lastly, these authors also found that relocation factors do have an influence on an individual supporting a team or not. The authors state claim that people with lower levels of team identification are more likely to adopt a new team if their current favorite relocates to a different city (Theodorakis et al., 2012). In addition, Melnick and Wann said that for areas that do not a professional sports team, the

people of that community tend to follow a team that has the most availability and visibility to them (2004). This tells us that people tend to identify with the most popular of teams if a team is not present within their surrounding communities.

## **Social Factors**

### **Community Groups.**

There are many social factors that have a strong influence on how people select their favorite sports team and how they follow them. These community groups comprise of many people who love a sports team and can have a tremendous influence on an individual. Melnick and Wann (2011) they found that peers play a prominent role in the influence of someone liking a favorite sports team. “They suggest that peer influence may extend well beyond recognition and acceptance within friendship, school and community social networks to also include interest in spectator sports and identification with a favorite team” (Melnick & Wann, 2011, p. 462-463). In another study, authors found that sport fandom is a social activity that people take part in and feel the need to identify with a team as their motives to spectate (Theodorakis et al., 2012). They attribute these community groups in supplying an individual with a strong bond to other fans that will positively impact their social interaction wants and needs as well as giving that person a sense of belonging (Theodorakis et al., 2012).

By being a fan of a local team, a fan can garner social capital. Social capital is the relationship that was frequently mentioned in many of the articles that were researched. Social capital is the relationships that people form in a community or a society where they live, which will enable that society to function at its best (Melnick & Wann, 2011). In a study by Wann, Polk, & Franz, they claim that there are two types of social connections in a community; enduring and temporary (2011). “Temporary social connections occur when a fan who does not

reside in a community with enduring connections temporarily finds him or herself in the company of other fans of the team” (Wann, Polk, & Franz, 2011, p. 190). Both social connections provide a community with a strong social capital system in which the society functions. Social capital or connection can be directly distinct from a fan’s personal connection to the sports team (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). In addition to social capital, “By identifying with a team, a fan gains additional associations with others, connections that can be important in facilitating psychological well-being” (Wann et al., 2009, p. 114). Dhurup attributed positive social groups to be the leading cause for someone to follow a sports team if that person sees themselves as similar to the other group members of the group (2011). In another study, Lock (2011) explored what factors led season ticketholders to form a bond with the Cleveland Browns. His findings showed that this connection with other season ticketholders formed this bond with the Browns that was strong (Lock, 2011). This psychological wellbeing can greatly enhance the social capital of a community. If people in the community are happy emotionally, the community will function with sustainability.

### **Popularity of the Sport/Team.**

In the research done, there was an underlying theme that positive team identification is correlated based on how popular the sport or team is within a region or country. In a study done by Melnick and Wann, they attribute team identification by how popular the sport is within a country (2011). They claim that many Australian university students chose one of the sixteen teams in in the Australian football league as the team they identify with the most (Melnick & Wann, 2011). This shows that because of how popular Australian football is in the country, those people are more apt to choose one of those teams as their favorite. Although Australian football isn’t the most popular sport in the world, this sport identifies well with the people of the

country. This logic is supported by them saying, “We believe the answer is very much related to the fact that Australian rules football is far and away the most popular spectator sport in the country, and enjoys a very close historical relationship with the state of Victoria and the capital city of Melbourne” (Melnick & Wann, 2011, p. 465). They claim that, “the favorite sports selected by the UK sample is noteworthy as only one of the four most popular participation sports for adults (association football) provided the favorite sports team for the subjects” (Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014, p. 263). Again, this shows that the popularity of the sport within a community or country plays a role on which teams that society will be most prone to choose from.

As the previous review of literature suggested, there are many factors that attribute to someone selecting a favorite sports team. These factors include person, team, and social factors in which they influence an individual. Based on past research, person factors seem to have the most influence on an individual when selecting a favorite sports team, but this was confirmed for a broad age range. While these factors will provide the basis of the current study, intentional narrowing of the age range is important to target understanding to those who still have decades of fandom ahead of them. Sport managers will be able to use this information as a foundation to build their long term fan bases per the factors that influence people to choose a favorite team to support. The findings of this will give us a better understanding how college students select a favorite sports team. There are five research questions that will be answered:

1. What factor has the most influence on someone selecting a favorite sports team?
2. Do these factors vary among the different levels of fandom?
3. Which variables are positively correlated with the age level that someone selected their favorite team?

4. Does level of fandom vary between male and female sports fans?
5. Does gender attribute to family relationships being the leading factor for selecting a favorite sports team?

### **Method**

This research is explanative as it is attempting to explain to us what factors go into someone selecting a favorite sports team to support (Jones, 2015). This research is classified as post-positivist in design because we recognize that it is not possible to have truly objective understanding through observation and measurement, and bias is inherent, but controllable. We can have elements of control and replication across many different populations, but recognize that absolute true/false isn't possible (Jones, 2015). This project used primary data because this data is original in nature and is collected directly from the researchers work. This research is also pure because it does not set out to solve a particular problem. This research is intended to reveal what factors are most influential in someone liking a sports team (Jones, 2015).

### **Sample Selection**

To gain more information on what factors attribute to people selecting a favorite sports team, this project worked with undergraduate students from St. John Fisher College. St. John Fisher College is a private institution located in Rochester, New York. It is home to twenty-three varsity programs that participate in the Empire 8 conference at the Division III level of athletics (Forbes, 2014). This school comprises around 2,700 undergraduate students and around 1,000 graduate students that will allow easy access to a firm sample of sport fan participants for this study (Forbes, 2014). This sampling is purposive in nature because participants have a set of characteristics that this project will need to gain access or knowledge of (Jones, 2015).



Convenience sampling is another procedure that was present in this project because these participants are easily accessed (Jones, 2015).

Prior research into this topic indicated that the appropriate sample size this project was between 100-150 participants. Existing studies on college students has sample sizes based on the institutional profile (Melnick & Wann, 2011). At maximum, sample sizes were 163 college students (Melnick & Wann, 2011), but at minimum, they were 75 college students (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Based on these parameters the target sample size for this study was between 50-100. This projects' targeted sample size was attainable and sufficient to conduct this research study.

### **Variables and Measures**

When conducting this research study, there were many variables and measures to consider. The three general categories of factors listed prior, person, team, and social, consist of several variables. These unique variables were computed as a nominal scale when designing the survey. In addition, there are also family relationships and the level of fandom that influences how and why people chose that favorite sports team. Family relationships can be defined as someone selecting a favorite sports team based on their family supporting that favorite team (Melnick & Wann, 2011). Level of fandom was also measured with a nominal scale of five choices (disengaged fan, casual fan, intermediate fan, avid fan, super fan) that segmented and classified people according to their level of fandom (Rein, Shields, & Grossman, 2015). All person factors were measured in ordinal scale.

There are also team factors that were measured during this research process. These factors included the location, history, success of the sports franchise as well as the athletes that are on the team. The location of the team can be defined as someone liking a team based on

solely on the city they play in. For example, someone could support a Los Angeles based team just because of the city they play (Theodorakis et al., 2012). The history of the team can be defined as the team's past successes or failures (Dwyer et al., 2014). The last team factor would be the athletes that play on the team. Many people of younger age choose their team based on star athletes that are on the team (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011). These factors will be measured in ordinal scale formatting. The survey questions for these were measured from least to most important on how these factors influence someone liking a sports team.

There are also some social factors that influence an individual supporting a sports team. These factors include the popularity of the sport within a society. This can be defined as people choosing to like a sport and/or team based solely on the popularity of the sport and/or team within a region (Melnick & Wann, 2011). For example, someone in Alabama could be a diehard Crimson Tide fan because of how popular both football and the team are in the state of Alabama. This will help an individual decide what team they will support based on how popular the sport and/or team is in the region or country. Another factor under social factors is community groups. Community groups can be defined as a group of collective people within a region of the team that someone can go and feel a part of. This could be youth sport activities or team support groups at a bar (Theodorakis et al., 2012). These groups have a tremendous amount of influence on an individual. Peer pressure is one of the leading causes for someone supporting a certain team. Both social factors will be measured in an ordinal scale just as the team factors.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

An electronic cross-sectional survey was used in this project and consisted of seven questions. The reasoning behind this is to keep it as concise as possible. This allowed people to take the survey quickly and accurately for and for the researcher to report the results. The survey

began with a quick and concise statement that reflected the purpose of the survey and an option if the participant consented to take the survey. Next, the survey consisted of some questions pertaining to the individual's favorite professional sports team. This included both the league and when they first starting supporting their favorite team. These questions led into the main part of the survey where they will then signify the level of importance each of the variables listed above. A Likert scale formatted question was then asked, which gave them an option of not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, and extremely important. After the Likert scale questions, there were a few demographic questions about their gender and level of fandom. See Appendix A for the complete survey document.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The design and distribution of this survey was done through the online software, Qualtrics. As it is a platform supported by the institution, both the participant list and the instrument itself were created in the same software. After the survey was created, it was pilot tested to improve clarity, flow, and design. The researcher then made the necessary corrections to the survey before the final distribution. The survey was then distributed to the emails of the sample, with a cover letter with all of the details (see appendix B), the researcher then sent out a follow up email a week later to remind the sample to participate (see appendix C; Jones, 2015). This ensured that people do not forget to take the survey. After the survey's closing date, the survey data was downloaded into an Excel file for initial cleaning and coding. All of the empty data was then labeled with a 999 according to answers to the questions to better the accuracy of the results.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

After the data collection process is completed, the researcher then download the results into the Excel worksheet that had originally been created. Once these results have been imputed

into the Excel worksheet, they will then be uploaded into SPSS. This software program ciphered through the coding that the researcher had set up within the tables. Once this is done through SPSS, the researcher then ran some descriptive statistics for all survey questions. In the descriptive statistics piece, the researcher will have the mean (ordinal scale items), mode, and frequency (nominal scale items) to see what patterns are present with all of data. Next, some inferential statistics, correlations, an ANOVA and Chi-square test, will be run. This allowed the researcher to make statements about possible relationships, similarities and differences between the demographics of the individuals that participated and various factors. With the correlation testing, level of fandom was tested against person, team, and social factors to test for the presence of relationships across all levels of fandom. Next, the ANOVA test was run to see if there were any differences between gender and level of fandom. Also, an ANOVA test was run to see if there was a difference between timeframe in life when their team was selected and the variable of family relationships. According to Melnick & Wann (2011), family relationships played a key role in someone in their younger years selecting a favorite sports team.

### **Results**

Overall, the responses uncovered an understanding on how demographics and other factors affect college students in selecting a favorite sports team. The main themes revealed, after analyzing the data, how certain demographics react to person, team, and social factors in how they selected their favorite team. Responses also revealed the answers to the researcher's questions concerning sport team selection in college students and which factors are the most prevalent among this age group.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

When gathering the test results, the researcher organized and listed the descriptive data first. After gathering and analyzing the results of this data, there were 205 (116 female and 89 male) respondents that participated in the survey. The first test that was run, showed the mean in how the respondents answered the Likert scale question based on the importance of factors in why they picked their favorite professional sports team. These variables were scaled so that 1=most important and 5=least important, and showed the relative importance of the variables tested. Appendix D, table 1 displays the mean of each of the factors and variables that were explored in this study. According to respondents in this study, family relationships (person factor) revealed to be the most important variable out of the eight that were listed ( $\mu = 2.4709$ ) and popularity of the team (social factor) within the region, proved to be the least important variable tested ( $\mu = 3.8058$ ).

The next test that was run in the descriptive statistical category, revealed the frequency of gender differences according to the individual's level of fandom. Males demonstrated higher levels of fandom than females did with 35 respondents classifying themselves as a superfan and only 4 claiming to be disengaged (see Appendix E. table 2). In contrast, females associated themselves as a casual fan=36 the most, and a disengaged fan=5 the least. Through this gender specific test, we can conceptualize that males have higher levels of fandom than do females. Across both genders, we can see that the respondents associated themselves as avid fans=58 the most, and disengaged fans=9 the least (see Appendix E. table 2).

In another test of descriptive statistics, the researcher uncovered the differences in gender among the most important variable in selecting a favorite sports team, family relationships. Appendix F, table 3 displays gender across the many levels of importance in accordance to the

likert scale question. According to the table, males listed family relationships as extremely important=31 being the greatest, and slightly important=10 as the least important (refer appendix F. table 3). In contrast, females said that family relationships were extremely important=43 in selecting a favorite sports team, and slightly important=11 as the least important on the likert scale. Overall, the respondents listed family relationships extremely important=74 as the most, and slightly important=21 as the least (refer appendix F. table 3).

### **Inferential Statistics**

Tests of relationship between factors and demographic differences were also important so several inferential statistics were used. Appendix G, table 4 shows the relationship between factors and consumer demographics and also displays the  $r$  values of gender, level of fandom, and when the individual selected their favorite sports team (year). In appendix G, table 4, there is a positive relationship between level of fandom and the relatedness of the team to the individual ( $r=.172$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Also, there is a significant negative correlation between the individual's level of fandom and the popularity of the sports team ( $r=-.155$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In addition, there is an extremely significant positive correlation between level of fandom and the athletes on the team ( $r=.187$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Tests of correlation were done on gender and all team, social, and person factors. None of the correlations were statistically significant. There was a significant correlation between "year" and family relationship ( $r=.281$ ,  $p<.05$ ), however a significant negative correlation between "year" and popularity of the sports team found ( $r=-.243$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Also, there is a significant negative correlation between "year" and success of the of the sports team ( $r=-.180$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

In an attempt to understand differences among consumer demographics, several chi-square tests were done. In the first testing, the data showed to be not significant in differences

among fandom with all of the person, team, and social factors (see Appendix H. table 5). The next testing revealed many differences between the year a team was identified as a favorite and the various factors. Individuals who identified their favorite team at different points in their lives rated the importance of family relationships very differently ( $\chi^2=35.345$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Another strong significant difference is “year” and the popularity of the sports team ( $\chi^2=24.943$ ,  $p<.05$ ). There was also a strong significant difference between the geographic location of the team and the “year” they selected their favorite team ( $\chi^2=21.618$ ,  $p<.05$ ). This test also revealed a very strong difference between “year” and the success of the sports team ( $\chi^2=27.552$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Lastly, there were no significant differences between gender and any of the factors that were tested (see Appendix H, table 5).

Also, the tests that were run with level of fandom and gender against the different factors, revealed that the correlations were not significant. The last test that was run encompassed the total person, total team, and total social factors in this study. This test’s objective was to uncover the overall importance of factors in consumer demographics. Results found that there were significant correlations between “year” and person and team factors ( $r=.261$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $r=-.226$ ,  $p<.05$ ; see Appendix I, Table 6), but not with social factors.

### **Discussion**

The first research question asked which factor (person, team, and social) had the most overall influence on someone selecting their favorite sports team. After the analyzing the results, the tests revealed that combination of person factors were the most important in someone selecting a favorite sports team. In this testing, we saw that the majority of the participants identified themselves as high level fans. According to Dwyer, Eddy, & Lecrom, highly identified fans have a strong positive connection to their sports team (2014). Athletes on the

team also played a key part in why team factors were the most important for someone selecting a favorite sports team. These athletes become role models for people of all ages and encourage their fans to engage in the sport (Li-Shiue & Jong-Chae, 2011). As seen in the results section of this study, success of the team was also an intricate part of team factors being the most important out of all the factors (Appendix G, table 4). Teams are more attractive to an individual if they have a history of success and tradition (Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, & Luellen, 2012).

Exploring differences in levels of fandom compared to prevalence of influence of person, team, and social factors constituted the second research question. According to the tests run, there was no difference between the levels of fandom and any of the factors mentioned above (appendix I, table 6) however some factors and level of fandom were correlated. This level of fandom is closely tied with team identification because of the psychological connection to a sports team that a fan exhibits (Dwyer, Eddy, LeCrom, 2014). Each person has their own reasoning and logic on how and why they chose that team to be their favorite. Because the person, team, and social factors are a part of every level of fandom, there is no clear distinction that can be made regarding certain factors being classified with certain levels of fandom.

The third research question attempted to uncover which variables were positively correlated with the age range that someone selected their favorite sports team. According to appendix G, table 4, there is a strong significant positive correlation between family relationships, and the “year” in which they chose their favorite team. Because more of the participants were indeed females, this attributed to the positive correlation between family relationships and “year.” According to Melnick and Wann, parents were the most frequently named social agent in someone selecting a favorite sports team to identify with (2011). This can also be said that close family members cultivate and entice the female child to play sports and to



identify with a favorite sports team (Li-Shie & Jong-Chae, 2011). It can therefore be understood that for our population, those that listed family as a most important factor also began identifying as a fan at a younger age.

The fourth research question explored variations in gender and levels of fandom. According to appendix E, table 2, more males identify at higher levels of fandom (super fan and avid fan) than do females, whose most populated categories were interactive and casual fans. According to prior research, this can be attributed to males being more involved within their respective communities and having a sense of belonging that females do not take advantage of (Clopton & Finch, 2010). Males have a stronger tendency to fit in and be more social with other individuals who follow the same team. This will then allow those individuals to become more closely tied to the organization and become higher level fans (Wann, Keenan, & Page, 2009). Also, we can see that females classify themselves more as a casual fan (appendix E, table 2). This can be supported by Koch & Wann's study in which they reported that females have a higher tendency to identify with a team based solely on socialization incentives, and males have higher levels of fandom (2016). Females will then only engage with the sports organization if their counterparts or also doing so. This conclusion supports the hypothesis that level of fandom varies among males and females.

The last question attempted to resolve the contradictory findings about the importance of family relationships based on gender. For this population of college students, there was no significant correlation between gender and family nor significant differences between gender on their rating of the importance of family. Koch & Wann state that female fans have a higher family motivation when it comes to supporting a favorite team rather than males (2016). In the same study, they uncovered that females are more likely to become fans to associate and bond

with family members rather than males (Koch & Wann, 2016). The results of our study does not support these claims by Koch and Wann. However, Melnick and Wann found that gender played no role in selecting a favorite sports team (2011). This claim supports our findings in that gender plays no role in family relationships being the leading variable in how someone selects a favorite sports team.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

**Purpose and Description:** This survey has been designed to gather information on how college students at St. John Fisher College select their favorite sports teams. Of particular interest is to understand factors that are part of the decision-making process.

You are part of a carefully selected group of individuals that has been asked to assist with this survey. Your honest input is critical to the success of the project. The survey will take approximately five minutes to complete. There is no known risk for involvement with the survey and there is no direct benefit of participation. All responses will be evaluated anonymously and only reported as collective information.

Please indicate your disposition towards involvement with this study below and click the arrows to the right to proceed. Thank you.

---

Yes

No

---

Do you currently have a favorite professional North American sports team?

Yes

No

---

During which time frame did you become a fan of your favorite team?

During elementary school or younger

During middle school

During high school

During college

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What league does your favorite team play in?

NFL

NBA

MLB

NHL

MLS

Other

How important was each of the following factors in influencing you to select that team as your favorite?

	Extremely Important	Very important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Family Relationships (Dad, Mom, Grandparents, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Geography (You like the team based on the city they represent)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Success (You like the team's performance in the last 15 years)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
History (You like the team based on the franchise's actions in the last 15 years)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Athletes (You like the team based on a certain player or players on the roster)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Groups (You like the team because of the engagement of their fans)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relatedness (You like the team because they feel like "my kind of people")	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Popularity (You like the team because of how popular they are within the country or the world)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- I prefer not to indicate

Which of the following best represents your level of fandom with your favorite team?

- Superfan (frequent supporter, closely tied to team, watches all games in person or on television)
- Avid fan (engaged with team, has favorite team/franchise, sports are high priority)
- Interactive fan (engaged through preseason and season)
- Casual fan (randomly watch and catch up on team activities, aware of seasonal trends)
- Disengaged fan (prioritize other items rather than sport, rarely watch)

## Appendix B

Dear Participant,

My name is Zachary Brown and I am a senior Sport Management major at St. John Fisher College. For my final project, I am examining how students select their favorite sports team. Because you are a student here, I am inviting you to participate in this research study by completing the linked survey.

The questionnaire will require approximately five minutes to complete. There is no compensation for responding nor is there any known risk. All information will remain anonymous and your answers will be combined with others'.

If you choose to participate in this project, please answer all questions to the best of your ability. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse to participate at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my educational endeavors. The data collected will provide useful information regarding undergraduate students and how they selected their favorite sports team. If you require additional information or have questions, please use the contact information provided at the end of this email below.

Follow this link to the Survey:

[Take the survey](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[https://sjfc.co1.qualtrics.com/SE?Q\\_DL=bvanAAfqlahKtuJ\\_0NVbP4KtXjDawND\\_MLRP\\_9HL5otIKcLLU9Fj&Q\\_CHL=email](https://sjfc.co1.qualtrics.com/SE?Q_DL=bvanAAfqlahKtuJ_0NVbP4KtXjDawND_MLRP_9HL5otIKcLLU9Fj&Q_CHL=email)

Sincerely,

Zachry Brown

[zrb00617@sjfc.edu](mailto:zrb00617@sjfc.edu)

Dr. Emily Dane-Staples

[edane-staples@sjfc.edu](mailto:edane-staples@sjfc.edu)

## Appendix C

Dear participant,

Last week, you were sent an invitation to participate in my senior thesis project exploring how students select their favorite sports team.

If you have already completed the survey, please accept my sincere thanks. If not, please click the link below to complete the brief survey. I am especially grateful for your help because it is only by asking people like you to share your experiences that I can understand how students select their favorite sports team.

If you cannot connect to the survey using the link, please email me at the below address and I will get another format of the survey to you quickly.

Sincerely,

Zachary Brown

[zrb00617@sjfc.edu](mailto:zrb00617@sjfc.edu)

Dr. Emily Dane-Staples

[edane-staples@sjfc.edu](mailto:edane-staples@sjfc.edu)



**Appendix D**

Table 1  
Relative Importance of Factors

	$\mu_{\text{Males}}$	$\mu_{\text{Females}}$	$\mu$
Person Factors			
Family	2.5506	2.4224	2.4709
Relatedness	3.1124	3.2328	3.1845
Social Factors			
Community Groups	3.1457	2.832	3.0825
Popularity	3.9326	3.7155	3.8058
Team			
Geography	2.7978	2.9138	2.8592
Success	3.5730	3.4483	3.5097
History	3.1685	3.2586	3.2184
Athletes	2.4719	2.6121	2.5485

Note. Table values indicate level of importance with 1 most important – 5 least important

**Appendix E**

Table 2  
Gender differences according to level of fandom

	Male	Female	Total
Super Fan	35	17	52
Avid Fan	30	28	58
Interactive Fan	11	30	41
Casual Fan	9	36	45
Disengaged Fan	4	5	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>205</b>

Note. Values indicate and affirm which level of fandom each gender specifies them as.

**Appendix F**

Table 3  
Gender attribute to family relationships being the leading variable

	Male	Female	Total
Extremely Important	31	43	74
Very Important	20	26	46
Moderately Important	12	19	31
Slightly Important	10	11	21
Not at all Important	16	17	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>205</b>

Note. Values indicate and affirm how each gender lists family relationships based on importance.

**Appendix G**

Table 4  
Relationship between factors and consumer demographics

	<i>r<sub>year</sub></i>	<i>r<sub>fandom</sub></i>	<i>r<sub>gender</sub></i>
Person Factors			
Family	.281*	-.001	.080
Relatedness	.051	.172*	-.046
Social Factors			
Community Groups	-.122	.073	.067
Popularity	-.243*	-.155*	.057
Team Factors			
Geography	.063	-.016	.037
Success	-.180*	-.128	-.087
History	-.007	.072	.011
Athletes	.020	.187**	.028

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Appendix H**

Table 5  
Differences of factors based on consumer demographics

	$\chi^2_{fandom}$	$\chi^2_{year}$	$\chi^2_{gender}$
Person Factors			
Family	16.972	35.354*	1.755
Relatedness	18.451	9.534	5.084
Social Factors			
Community Groups	21.468	5.566	2.504
Popularity	19.954	24.943*	3.220
Team Factors			
Geography	14.206	21.618*	3.495
Success	16.350	27.552**	2.281
History	14.153	14.866	2.627
Athletes	22.031	10.902	2.445

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Appendix I**

Table 6  
Overall importance of factors in consumer demographics

	$r_{year}$	$r_{fandom}$	$r_{gender}$
Person Factors	.261*	.090	.022
Social Factors	-.025	.044	.000
Team Factors	-.226*	-.038	.077

Note. \* $p < .05$ .