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#THEMTOO: Two NFL Team Options for Not Exploiting Women Cheerleaders

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#THEMTOO: Two NFL Team Options for Not Exploiting Women Cheerleaders

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of why and how professional football teams in the National Football League (NFL) use cheerleaders, the vast majority of whom are women. From archival press reports, media guides, and team website content, we examine why some teams choose not to use cheerleaders; and among the majority of teams that do use cheerleaders, the purposes for which they employ them. Based upon the findings, we categorize teams into two groups: (a) NFL teams that do not use cheerleaders but that also fail to capitalize on this potential competitive advantage; and (b) NFL teams that present sexually exploited cheer squads but that complicate public perceptions by emphasizing cheerleaders' more legitimate roles (e.g., philanthropy). We conclude with two options for NFL teams seeking to avoid the sexual exploitation of women cheerleaders. We also urge cheerleaders to consider unionization.

Keywords

Cheerleaders, National Football League, Sexual Exploitation

Cover Page Footnote

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#THEMTOO: TWO NFL TEAM OPTIONS FOR NOT EXPLOITING WOMEN CHEERLEADERS

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This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of why and how professional football teams in the National Football League (NFL) use cheerleaders, the vast majority of whom are women. From archival press reports, media guides, and team website content, we examine why some teams choose not to use cheerleaders; and among the majority of teams that do use cheerleaders, the purposes for which they employ them. Based upon the findings, we categorize teams into two groups: (a) NFL teams that do not use cheerleaders but that also fail to capitalize on this potential competitive advantage; and (b) NFL teams that present sexually exploited cheer squads but that complicate public perceptions by emphasizing cheerleaders' more legitimate roles (e.g., philanthropy). We conclude with two options for NFL teams seeking to avoid the sexual exploitation of women cheerleaders. We also urge cheerleaders to consider unionization.¹

The #metoo movement, which began in the United States in 2006, continues to enable a sea change in gender norms as it highlights and objects to women's seemingly ubiquitous poor treatment and abuse by men in both personal and work settings (Nicolaou and Smith). The Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 to protest the police killings of Black people, underscores the importance of intersectionality and the unique experiences of Black women and people of color when it comes to understanding gender-based harassment and

¹The authors thank the Syracuse Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Engagement (SOURCE) for generous funding support for this study.

abuse (Gill and Rahman-Jones). These ongoing movements have dramatically reshaped norms and expectations in the U.S. with regards to the fair and equitable treatment of women. Sexist or misogynistic work climates and practices that may have been acceptable a few years ago, are now viewed as unacceptable and appalling.

In this context, we examine the treatment of a group of women who have been overlooked as potential beneficiaries of these social movements: women cheerleaders in the National Football League (NFL). Feminist scholarship and advocacy devote almost no attention to this population (for an exception, see Gu), despite the well-documented fact that professional cheerleaders experience substantial gender discrimination and sexual exploitation. Moreover, as management scholars, we observe that NFL teams with cheerleaders may be headed towards a massive business shock as their outdated, gendered use of cheerleaders collides with new gender norms and fan expectations catalyzed by the #metoo movement. With our study, we hope to build on the important contributions by documentary filmmaker Yu Gu (Pearce and Williams), as well as popular press articles on women cheerleaders in the NFL (Epstein; Kahler; Rhoden; Talmadge).

In our paper, we report an exploratory study of why and how professional football teams in the NFL use cheerleaders. We examine why some teams choose not to use cheerleaders, and among the majority of teams that do use cheerleaders, the purposes for which they employ them. Based upon our findings, we make the case that the NFL teams' poor treatment of women cheerleaders puts their organizational reputations and future revenue streams at risk, so far do teams diverge from acceptable business norms at present.

CHEERLEADING IN THE UNITED STATES

The activity of cheerleading at sporting events has a long history in the United States, originating in the late 1800s at the collegiate level. From there cheerleading progressed from informal spectator cheers, to "yell leaders" in uniforms, to co-ed pep squads by the 1920s, although the activity remained male-dominated through the 1940s (Hanson 9-27).

Dance troupes and acrobatics were an alternative path to cheerleading participation for women during this time period and, together with cheer squads, they marked the beginning of cheerleading's entertainment role in sport in the 1950s (Hanson 18). While cheerleading evolved over time to be an athletic combination of dance, tumbling, and cheering competition at the high school level, this is less characteristic of cheerleading at men's professional sporting events (Hanson 49).

In the U.S. sports context, the presence of cheerleaders predominates in professional football, although cheerleading and related forms of entertainment appear in other men's professional sports as well (e.g., Lurie "NHL Ice Girls"). By 1970, eleven of twenty-six (42%) NFL teams used cheer squads (Lurie "Sordid History of Cheerleading"), and currently, twenty-six of thirty-two (81%) teams do (Canedo).² In addition to the general diffusion of cheerleading squads across the League, a turning point occurred when the Dallas Cowboys replaced their collegiate-style cheerleaders with an all-female dance and cheer team outfitted in "risqué" uniforms in 1972 (Hanson 52). With this iconic turn, entertainment at professional football games arguably transitioned from sideline diversions for fans to more gendered, sexualized forms of entertainment.

To replicate the marketing success of the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, many professional football teams began opting for all-women cheer teams in revealing and sexualized outfits. Today, all of the teams with cheerleaders employ them not only to provide game day entertainment, but also to extend the team brand and raise additional revenues. However, the strategic choice to utilize cheerleaders comes with several risks for the NFL team organizations: the devaluing and exploitation of women workers, grounds for employment disputes, and the creation of a culture of toxic masculinity among fans, players, and employees (Berdahl et al.; Pearce and Williams). The #metoo and Black Lives Matter intersectional movements have (justifiably) heightened these risks.

² Our research concluded on December 31, 2020. Subsequently, the Washington Football Team announced it was disbanding its cheerleading squad (Epstein).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A firm's business strategy is the approach that it takes to maximize profits and outperform competitors (Porter 1). Like other organizations, NFL teams either intentionally or unintentionally use specific strategies to achieve their objectives (Mintzberg 12-14): (1) revenue and wealth generation for team owners; and (2) competitive success in League play.

NFL teams vary in their business strategies, including their approaches to game day entertainment and fan engagement. Most teams in the NFL use professional cheerleading squads as a key component of these approaches. Teams appear to use cheerleaders for both business and non-business reasons. Cheerleading squads have the potential to generate interest and enhance the experiences of fans watching the game at home or at the stadium, including those participating in tailgating activities. In addition, cheerleaders typically perform a number of fan engagement duties outside of game days. All of these efforts are intended to enhance brand recognition and fan commitment to the team and to translate into increased television viewers, and ticket and merchandise sales. However, there appear to be some non-business reasons for using cheerleading that do not so clearly benefit the interests of the NFL teams. It is a fine line between business- and non-business-related reasons, but we differentiate based upon whether cheerleaders are utilized as professionals or whether teams exploit them sexually in the form of "actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including ... profiting monetarily" (*Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*). With the former, the connection to revenue is clearer; with the latter, the connection is questionable.

We examine teams with and without cheerleaders for purposes of identifying the various approaches that NFL teams use with regard to using cheerleaders. We study this issue in an exploratory manner, with the goal of classifying cheerleader entertainment strategies and identifying implications of these strategies for NFL team organizations and their women cheerleaders. We begin by examining teams that do not have cheerleaders at all, to see if their rationales are grounded in business-and/or value-based principles. Then we examine teams with cheerleader

squads to infer the degree to which the teams present and use cheerleaders as professional entertainers versus the degree to which teams adopt a more sexually exploitative tack.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Teams That Do Not Use Professional Cheerleaders

Rationales for Not Using Cheerleaders

Cheerleading has become a staple of American men's professional football. Out of the thirty-two teams in the NFL, only six do not have cheerleaders: Buffalo Bills, Chicago Bears, Green Bay Packers, New York Giants, Cleveland Browns, and Pittsburgh Steelers. For each of these teams we examine why they choose not to use cheerleaders. Subsequent to conducting our research study, a seventh club – the Washington Football Team -- disbanded its cheerleading squad (Epstein).

The Buffalo Bills have a complicated history with cheerleading. The Bills began with college cheerleaders, using them during the years 1960-1965 before transitioning to the professional cheer squad "The Buffalo Jills," from 1967 to 2014. The Buffalo Jills filed a lawsuit against the organization in 2014 after recognizing the unfair treatment which they endured (O'Shei; Rodak). The cheerleaders were disrespected, sexualized, and underpaid during their time with the Bills. In fact, every so often the women were required to partake in what they called "The Jiggle Test." This test judged how much fat moved when they jumped, and this would determine who would be cheering on the field that weekend and who had to sit (O'Shei). On top of the emotional distress that they endured, the women were not paid hourly for all of their work-related duties. After the lawsuits were filed, Stejon Productions, the subcontractor who employed the Jills, stated that the reason the team closed was because they no longer had the funds to pay the cheerleaders minimum wage, despite the Bills having a \$192 million dollar payroll (O'Shei; Rodak). Although the squad has been disbanded, its lawsuit alleging violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act continues. The Bills now use a primarily male drumline, better known as "The Stampede," to keep fans engaged (Canedo).

The Chicago Bears used to have cheerleaders called the “Honey Bears,” but in 1985 the owners decided not to renew their contract with them (Bernstein). There is some evidence that the Bears are opposed to having cheerleaders because the owners (after George Halas) believe that the use of the squads is sexist and degrading towards women. Sunderbruch (qtd in windycitygridiron.com) conveys the following: “An official reason has never been given by the Bears organization, but it has been said that Virginia McCaskey, the daughter of George Halas, was known to think that cheerleaders were sexist and degrading to women and that inevitably, she was the one who made the final decision.” A former Honey Bears choreographer was told that “The Bears wanted to get back to blood and guts football and get rid of the fluff” (Cathy Core qtd. in Bannon and Rumore).

Similar to the Bears, the Green Bay Packers team president Mark Murphy is not comfortable using cheerleaders due to their company values. He said that he has seen how other teams have profited from their cheerleaders through swimsuit calendars and so on and commented, "Not to be critical of anybody, but you look at what some of the other teams do with their cheerleaders and I just don't think we'd feel comfortable doing some of those things" (McGinn). However, the Packers did use professional cheerleaders at different times from 1931 through 1987 (McGinn), and they faced some controversy for cheerleader weight requirements, which included a specified allowance for 5 additional pounds for each inch of height (Palzewic). The team now uses collegiate squads to cheer at their home games (Canedo).

The New York Giants also appear to have decided to not have cheerleaders due to their philosophical values and team morals regarding how they treat women, although it appears they had cheerleaders for a brief period from 1959 to the early 1960s (“Giants Attempt at Cheerleading” 2012). In a New York Times article, Giants co-owner John Mara was quoted as stating, “Each team has got to make its own decision on that...Some teams are comfortable with not only having cheerleaders but selling cheerleader swimsuit calendars or, in a couple cases, lingerie calendars. It’s not something you’re going to see the Giants do. Not while I’m around, anyway” (Rhoden). However, they do permit an unofficial

spirit squad, not sanctioned by the team, to interact with fans who are tailgating outside of the stadium. This squad is known as the Gotham City Cheerleaders (Canedo).

The Cleveland Browns used a collegiate cheerleading squad sporadically until 1971 (Lubinger). The Cleveland Browns are unique in explicitly citing the cold weather as a reason to not use cheerleaders (Rubottom). Pat Modell, the wife of a previous Browns owner remarked, "We had [cheerleaders] one year. They looked crazy. It was ridiculous. It was so cold in Cleveland that it almost looked like they were wearing wooly pajamas" (Lubinger). Like the Giants, the Browns had an unofficial spirit squad, at least through 2013.

Finally, the Pittsburgh Steelers used college cheerleaders from Robert Morris Junior College from 1961-1969 (Brookline Connection). At the time the Steelerettes, clad in modest attire, were considered the trend setters in NFL cheerleading, and they appeared to create a fun, energizing environment for everyone. The context for the demise of the Steelerettes was a confluence of factors affecting the team, including a terrible record and the move to a new stadium. Perhaps more directly, a trigger for this change was owner Art Rooney, Sr.'s disgust at a request for the cheerleaders to wear shorter skirts (Finder).

In summary, of the six teams without cheerleaders, three teams have explicitly referenced company values and/or their respect for women as the reason for not utilizing cheerleaders (Chicago Bears, Green Bay Packers, New York Giants), and there is some evidence that this was a factor for the Pittsburgh Steelers as well. However, this reasoning is only rarely mentioned by the clubs. One team, the Cleveland Browns, refers to the poor weather as the reason for not using cheerleaders, although it should be noted that all teams not using cheerleaders experience similar weather at home. It is possible that some teams that simply do not replace disbanded cheerleading squads may also have been influenced by company values, the weather, or concerns about legal issues. In the case of the Buffalo Bills, however, cheerleader lawsuits and the resulting controversy appear to have directly influenced the disbanding of the squad (O'Shei). And in a postscript to our paper, the Washington Football Team

also just disbanded its squad in response to cheerleader lawsuits and widespread criticism of its misogynist culture (Epstein).

Characteristics of Teams that Do Not Use Cheerleaders

Next, we paired each of the six teams without cheerleaders with a team in the same geographic area to see if these comparisons yielded additional insights. We examined the following organizational characteristics: stadium type, fan engagement rank, payroll, the number of women executives, the number of minority executives, and team age. Table 1 presents these pairings, results from which are reported in Appendix A.

Table 1. Paired Comparisons of Teams Without and With Cheerleaders

Teams Without Cheerleaders	Comparable Teams <i>With</i> Cheerleaders
Buffalo Bills	New England Patriots
Chicago Bears	Indianapolis Colts
Green Bay Packers	Minnesota Vikings
New York Giants	New York Jets
Cleveland Browns	Detroit Lions
Pittsburgh Steelers	Philadelphia Eagles

After collecting the data on each team, visually examining it, and using averages or counts where applicable, we found just one difference between the two groups: franchise age. Teams without cheerleaders were on average 86.2 years old, while franchises with cheerleaders were an average age of 72.8 years, a substantial gap of 13.4 years. From this finding, we infer that teams with earlier founding dates may have historically emphasized competitive football rather than entertainment and marketing of the sport, as compared to teams founded later. This suggests that the idea that cheerleaders are an integral part of American football is not necessarily true.

There were no other clear differences between characteristics of teams with cheerleaders versus teams without cheerleaders. It was noteworthy that teams with cheerleaders seemed to have a better track record on hiring women and minority executives, although this could not be

examined statistically. On the other hand, we note that there was no publicly available data on additional characteristics that might have mattered for these two groups, such as team culture, fan culture, or the percentage of women fans (Cueto). In short, based upon our initial examination with limited data, teams look very similar with or without the presence of cheerleaders. We have summarized our geographic comparisons in a series of tables in Appendix A.

Teams that Use Cheerleaders

Twenty-six NFL teams utilized professional cheerleaders at the time of our study. We discovered that there are a few main business aspects of how cheerleaders are used in the NFL: on-field entertainment, off-field entertainment and appearances, charitable and community work, and revenue-generating calendars along with other content. Providing on-field entertainment is a primary responsibility. On game days, cheerleaders cheer for the players and often perform choreographed routines. They also provide fan engagement by interacting with the crowd and taking pictures with them. Cheerleaders act as a unifier between fans and team franchises by making people feel included and involved throughout the game in its entirety. Off-field entertainment and appearances are very popular amongst team franchises as well. Most of these appearances involve events outside of game day and at venues other than the stadium.

Consistent with theories of business strategy, we expect that individual team organizations will vary in the purposes for which cheerleaders are used. To examine this question, we relied upon several archival sources of data: news articles pertaining to cheerleaders in the NFL, NFL team media guides, and cheerleader roster pictures. For context, we also examined the team website, including material pertaining to cheerleader calendars, appearances, and auditions.

We analyzed information on six comparator teams that were in similar geographic regions to the teams without cheerleaders: In addition, we studied the Dallas Cowboys, as the iconic influencer of other teams' approaches to cheerleading squads, and the Washington Football Team organization, due to its recent notoriety regarding the treatment of their cheerleaders and sexist workplace culture (Macur). We believe that these

eight teams, plus the six teams without cheerleaders, represent a sufficient number and breadth of NFL teams for our study.

Purposes: Entertainment, Engagement, and Philanthropy

We examined 2020 media guides for information about the cheerleading squads of the eight teams identified above (National Football League).³ In general, teams devote few pages in these guides to the cheerleading squads, but we perused these pages for indications of the purposes for which cheerleaders were used. NFL team media guides are extensive documents, typically hundreds of pages long, that are produced annually for the media and fans.

Of the teams we examined, Dallas seemed to most clearly envision their cheerleaders as a key component of their marketing and fan engagement activities, and its media guide had the most extensive coverage of their cheerleading squad, in terms of the number of pages, pictures, etc. (Dallas Cowboys). They present a vision for the cheer team, and they have at least two executives and multiple staff members managing the squad, all of whom were listed as regular staff members of the Dallas Cowboys. The New England Patriots listed their staff as well, and they were the only team to highlight the names of their returning cheerleaders, listing them as “veterans.” However, New England’s staff and cheer team were not included in the media guide’s regular Patriots’ staff directory (New England Patriots). On the other extreme, the Detroit Lions, New York Jets, and the Washington Football Team virtually ignored their cheerleading squads with the exception of brief staff mentions, devoting not even a page of the 300+ pages of the media guide to them.

Several teams described the cheerleaders with words emphasizing professionalism rather than just sexualized entertainment. The New England Patriots’ media guide referred to cheerleaders as “entertainers”

³ The National Football League presents the media guides for all thirty-two teams annually. For teams included in our 2020 media guide analysis for which we have more direct links to the 2020 media guides, we have included these citations in text as well. The 2020 media guides we analyzed are available by request from the authors.

and interestingly, grouped them in the section of the guide that contained Pat the Patriots mascot. Grouping them with the team's mascot may portray them in a more positive, wholesome, family-friendly type of way. Yet at the same time, equivalence with the mascot may be perceived as invalidating their hard work and athletic abilities to a degree. In the Indianapolis Colts' media guide (Indianapolis Colts), the cheerleaders are described as "athlete-performers" and the guide focuses on their athleticism, talent, and character. The Minnesota Vikings also recognize the cheerleaders' talent and athleticism by referring to them as "dance athletes" (Minnesota Vikings). "Athlete" terminology helps reduce sexualization and emphasizes their entertainment contributions to the organization.

Charitable philanthropic work and community outreach were heavily emphasized by the teams that devote space to their cheerleading squad in the media guides. This allows the team to promote their brand and have a positive effect on their surrounding community. It was noteworthy that most of the media guide pictures of cheerleaders featured them in modest workout clothing or other dress, not the sexualized game day uniforms featured on the NFL teams' websites. Of the teams we examined, the Philadelphia Eagles seemed to feature their cheerleaders' philanthropic and community service the most in terms of examples and visuals, including work with an autism foundation, a junior cheer clinic, and a charitable foundation.

Purpose: Sexual Exploitation (Rosters, Appearances, Calendars)

In contrast to the media guides, the cheerleader rosters on team websites were dominated by sexualized poses of the women cheerleaders in revealing outfits, including cleavage and torsos showing. Any men members of the cheerleading squads were pictured smiling and fully clothed in athleisure team garb. All rosters included a photo of individual cheerleaders, usually with their first names only. Appendix B provides internet links to the cheerleading rosters for the teams included in our analyses.

The Philadelphia Eagles' roster stood out by including professional pictures of their squad's members' "day jobs" rather than in cheer

uniforms. In this vein the Minnesota Vikings featured professional head shots of their cheerleaders, rather than a sexualized presentation. The Indianapolis Colts and the New York Jets cheerleader roster photos featured more modest uniforms that covered their chest and shoulder area and had a looser, slightly longer skirt. To summarize, six of the eight teams examined exhibited at least somewhat sexualized or sexually exploitative roster photos for their women cheerleaders. Figure 1 provides examples of the sexually exploitative versus professional approaches to cheerleader roster images, taken from three of the eight teams with cheerleaders that we studied.

Example NFL Cheerleader 2021 Roster Photos

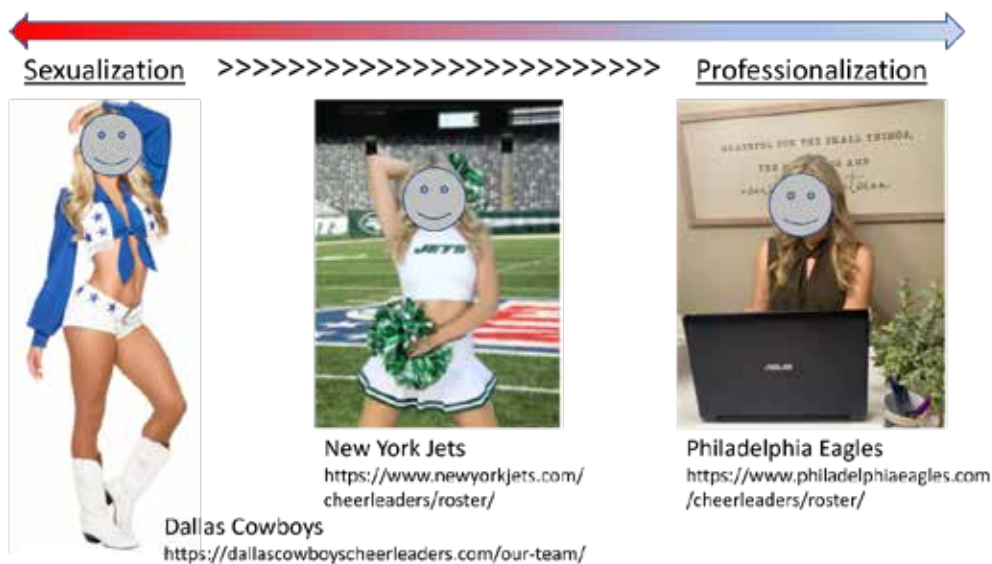


Fig. 1. Sexualization – Professionalization Continuum of Cheerleading Rosters

NFL teams with cheerleaders had a number of revenue-generating activities dependent upon the sexual exploitation of cheerleaders. Probably the most emblematic of this use of cheerleaders is the annual cheerleader calendar. Many NFL teams host calendar release parties to celebrate the cheerleaders and their new calendar. The content of these calendars varies by organization, with some being revealing swimsuit

calendars in the *Sports Illustrated* tradition and others portraying the cheerleaders in a more modest or athletic manner.

Similar to the variation of content within the calendars, the party atmosphere differs as well. Celebrations of the annual calendar release can range from a family environment to a club atmosphere. Within these last two business aspects, lots of non-business-related things occur. The charity events in which the cheerleaders participate benefit the community, but at the same time, these events exploit the cheerleaders. To raise money at the events, some organizations capitalize on the attraction of male fans and their obsession with these cheerleaders to boost revenue. This is where the business aspects blur into the side of non-business-related intentions. Cheerleaders have been intentionally placed in skimpy outfits at certain events for the purpose of public attention and revenue generation.

Sexual exploitation is a huge non-business aspect that is directly linked to the attraction of male fans. These behind-the-business aspects are questionable at best and unethical at worst, but vastly practiced across the industry. Cheerleaders themselves have spoken out publicly as well as through lawsuits about their pay and working conditions (e.g., O'Shei). For example, former Seattle Seahawk cheerleader Mhkeeba Pate described low pay, out-of-pocket expenses for hair styling and makeup, and rules about appearance, "down to lipstick shade" (Pearce and Williams 14:33).

DISCUSSION

NFL teams have a strategic decision to make regarding whether or not to use cheerleaders and if so, for what purposes. Their choice has implications for ticket and merchandise revenue, brand recognition, and the game day experiences of fans. Arguably, this decision also has implications for the gender mix of fans drawn to teams with cheerleaders, the degree to which these fans hold sexist or misogynistic views, the teams' work culture, and corporate reputation (Cueto). Despite the potential importance of the cheerleader question, NFL teams do not appear to have spent much time considering whether they should continue to use cheerleaders and if so, how they should be deployed. The overlapping

#metoo and Black Lives Matter Movements have exponentially increased the reputational stakes of NFL teams' choices regarding cheerleader entertainment and their treatment of women cheerleaders.

We studied intensively the six teams that do not use cheerleaders (subsequently, Washington disbanded its team in March 2021), but we did not find evidence of a unified, purposeful organizational strategy among them. Owners or founders of three of the teams without cheerleaders (Chicago Bears, Green Bay Packers, and New York Giants) had each stated at some point that the use of cheerleaders was inconsistent with their organization's values, and Green Bay may have been motivated by this reason as well. Additionally, our finding that teams without cheerleaders were substantially older than teams with cheerleaders, suggests that founding values matter.

Not using cheerleaders may increase the numbers of women fans and create a more welcoming stadium and work environment (Cueto; Graham, et al.). However, none of the six teams without cheerleaders appears to invest resources in communicating or marketing this fact. In fact, the New York Giants with their unofficial cheerleading squad and the Buffalo Bills, with their ongoing wage theft lawsuit with former cheerleaders, would risk criticism for doing so. For the other four teams, however, this decision is somewhat puzzling given the foregone reputational benefits and the potentially unrealized competitive advantage of attracting women workers and fans. We suspect that teams without cheerleaders are currently utilizing more wholesome entertainment and brand extension initiatives that could be bolstered by a "we don't use cheerleaders" message. However, either because of a lack of strategic vision, or nervousness about marketing this team feature, teams fail to capitalize on the potential undiscovered revenue and reputational benefits of not using cheerleaders. We characterize this approach as the "ignore the goldmine strategy."

We also intensively examined eight of the teams that use cheerleaders. These teams employed a variety of strategies when it comes to their cheerleaders; however, exploitation appears to be the norm. We found that all eight teams with cheerleaders presented them in a sexualized way, particularly in the form of game day outfits and performances, calendars,

and some events. It appears that many NFL teams simply imitated the Dallas Cowboys' and other early adopters' use of sexy style, costumes, and restrictive work practices for their cheerleading squads, and that this has had an enduring impact on NFL teams' approaches for their cheerleaders. Cheerleaders receive low pay, sometimes below the minimum wage, and ten of twenty-six teams with cheerleaders have been sued by them for wage theft or harassment (Uhler and Conlon). Cheerleaders also have a high degree of job insecurity, few protections from fan harassment, and restrictive, sexist work rules (Pearce and Williams).

All eight teams utilized cheerleader calendars, a popular revenue raiser and event focus. Like cheerleader rosters, calendar photos ranged from more professional (e.g., Minnesota Vikings Cheerleaders in athletic gear) to exploitative (e.g., Washington in bathing suits and seductive poses). Teams sometimes used "calendar reveal" parties when a new calendar was created, many of which were loud, adult-party-style events, but some were more family-oriented. We found that in general the calendar and associated marketing events, as well as some cheerleader appearances, were among the more exploitative of the cheerleader duties. They were geared to the male crowd and sent a signal that women's worth lies substantially in their sexual value.

We characterize this dominant strategic approach as the "exploitation with decoupling strategy." Decoupling is when an organization wishes to pursue two different, opposite courses of action, one more formal and visible, and the other an equally central organizational practice, but less prominently displayed (Meyer and Rowan). For example, most NFL teams with cheerleaders feature a professionalized, family-friendly description of their cheerleading squads in their official media guides, while at the same time featuring women cheerleaders for exploitative entertainment purposes via their rosters, calendars, and related videos. This strategy appears to work well for NFL teams with cheerleaders "to have it both ways": the use of popular, women-dominated entertainers whose brands are indelibly associated with their respective NFL teams and exploitative throwback entertainment that appeals primarily to male fans, including harassers and misogynists.

We observed a variety of decoupling approaches in our study, and we offer two examples here. First, the Philadelphia Eagles' roster featured cheerleaders in their professional "day jobs" and job titles, in contrast to the sexualized presentation of the cheerleaders on the field on game day. Second, the New England Patriots presenting a "wholesome" version of their cheerleaders in their media guide versus their sexualized game day outfits. These examples are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3, respectively.

We found that all eight teams decoupled their cheerleader initiatives in one form or another. Additional efforts at decoupling included enhanced emphases on cheerleaders' community engagement and service, the professionalization of biographies of cheerleaders and their coaches, and the potential for career accolades. For example, each team selects one cheerleader to attend the NFL Pro Bowl annually, a prestigious honor. Another form of decoupling is teams running junior cheer camps or sponsoring cheer squads for children, which do not appear to clothe the children in sexualized attire. A number of cheerleading squads have added men to their rosters, possibly to dilute gender-related criticisms. However, women still predominate on these squads and the uniforms of men versus women remain quite gendered.

Recent social justice movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter raise the question of just how much longer that NFL teams' game-day entertainment and fan engagement strategies will feature women cheerleaders in sexually exploitative ways. While NFL teams with cheerleaders are currently in the middle of the normative pack for the League, changing gender norms suggest that this may not be the case much longer, presenting enhanced risk to their business operations. This shift may be abrupt and not leave teams time to adjust gradually, a risky and potentially crisis-inducing situation. To this point, the Washington Football team, included in this study as a clear exploiter of women cheerleaders, suffered severe reputational damage and disbanded its cheer squad in 2021 (Epstein). At the same time, NFL teams without cheerleaders, including Washington, are in a prime position to market the fact that they do not have the exploitative version of cheerleaders for which the NFL is known.

Decoupling Example: Philadelphia Eagles Cheerleader

Sexualization



Game Day Photo⁴

Professionalization



Roster Photo⁵

Fig. 2. Example of Decoupling: Philadelphia Eagles 2021.

Decoupling Example: New England Patriots Cheerleaders

Sexualized



Team Photo⁶

Wholesome



Representation in Team
Media Guide, 2020⁷

Fig. 3. Example of Decoupling: New England Patriots, 2020.

⁴ <https://www.philadelphiaeagles.com/photos/eagles-cheerleaders-on-gameday-kansas-city-chiefs#df6a0c19-44cb-4748-83e9-4bb2b608782e>

⁵ <https://www.philadelphiaeagles.com/cheerleaders/roster/>

⁶ <https://www.patriots.com/cheerleaders/roster/>

⁷ New England Patriots 484

Alternatives to NFL Team Exploitation of Women Cheerleaders

NFL teams with cheerleaders employ a remarkably similar strategy when it comes to their use of women cheerleaders, which we have labeled “exploitation with decoupling.” This approach has been used for years by NFL teams, achieving popularity among fans, but also resulting in multiple cheerleader lawsuits and potential estrangement of subsets of fans. Gender norms have shifted dramatically, and NFL teams with cheerleaders are now at risk of being completely at odds with standards of doing business ethically and acceptably.

One recommendation for all NFL teams, with and without cheerleading squads, is to develop an entertainment strategy (Kunz et al.). The advantages of a strategy are clear-cut (Porter 11-12): the ability to align your organization’s efforts towards organizational goals, and to help outcompete other NFL teams on business results. Of the fourteen NFL teams we examined in this study, it appears that only the Dallas Cowboys had a vision for their cheerleading squad and had integrated it throughout the organization’s operations. Treating the cheerleading squad as a sideshow or nuisance is a major missed opportunity to enhance NFL teams’ numbers and diversity of fans. Instead, careful strategizing about the organization’s entertainment portfolio and how this fits with the team’s overall business strategy is highly recommended. In addition to crafting an entertainment strategy, we offer two better alternatives to NFL teams with cheerleaders, discussed next.

Reduce Exploitation or Replace Cheerleading Squads

For game day entertainment and brand outreach, there are more progressive, creative options besides cheerleading squads staffed primarily by women in revealing outfits. In addition, while some cheerleading squads sport visible racial and ethnic diversity, they appear to be dominated by white women. As an alternative, teams could create a more gender and racially inclusive squad, including equal numbers of women and men, people of different sexual orientations, and those with transgender identities. The Los Angeles Rams seem to be leading the way in this regard (Talmadge).

NFL cheerleading squads have at most a handful of male cheerleaders. Even then, the males are clothed in comfortable athleisure clothing while the women wear skirts and a cropped shirt exposing a majority of their body. Thus, a related suggestion is to have women and men on cheerleading squads wear the same or comparable gear and outfits. If male cheerleaders are able to perform while simultaneously wearing clothes that do not exploit their bodies, there is no reason why women cannot. Making cheerleading squads gender inclusive can change the narrative of how cheerleaders are portrayed altogether. This will appeal to more fans, not just a targeted audience, and will create a family-friendly atmosphere that everyone can enjoy.

A related option is to utilize amateur cheer squads or other forms of entertainment. The Green Bay Packers utilize visiting college cheer teams for their home games, for example, which is how many NFL team cheerleading squads began. College squads tend to be less sexualized than NFL cheer squads (Hanson 49) and it is thought that rotating them helps to avoid groupies who follow or harass cheerleaders. The NY Giants skirt the issue by permitting an unofficial spirit squad that cheers in the parking lot of MetLife Stadium. While quite similar to NFL cheer squads, the Giants' approach reduces the official connection between the team and the exploitation of women cheerleaders.

Entertainment options focusing on a professional ability or talent have the potential to reduce gender exploitation, as the entertainment is less about appearance and more about athletics, or gymnastics or dance routines (Kahler). To this point, the Washington Football Team has just decided to replace its cheerleaders with a co-ed dance team (Epstein). The Dallas Cowboys, while not ready to drop their iconic cheer squad, has diversified its entertainment offerings, including the addition of a co-ed dance team called "Rhythm and Blue." Relatedly, teams may want to take advantage of the tremendous amount of audiovisual, technical innovation involved with NFL games, including greater use of social media and analytics to engage fans with their entertainers in non-exploitative ways.

Improve Conditions

A second option for teams looking to strategically update their approach to women cheerleaders and avoid a potential tsunami of gender-related criticism is to treat their cheerleaders as valued employees. We suggest to NFL teams that there is another accessible model of management at their disposal: worker empowerment and participation. The women on NFL team cheerleading squads are educated and talented, yet NFL team management has opted for a command-and-control style of supervision over a more progressive and inclusive one (McGregor; Hackman and Oldham). The latter would involve allowing cheerleaders' input into some aspects of their jobs, including their attire and work rules; asking for their ideas for fulfilling the entertainment and brand strategies of the organization; and providing opportunities for recognition, professional development, and potential career paths in the organization.

According to the human resource management literature, this includes compliance with employment laws, fair pay and benefits, some job security, and professional and fair supervision and coaching (Saradakis et al). Indeed, almost all of these issues are at the heart of the many lawsuits filed by cheerleaders. Improving these conditions will not only benefit the cheerleaders, but it conveys the message that women are valued members of the NFL team operation rather than devalued objects who should be grateful for the chance to bask in the NFL glow.

Better conditions also include the elimination of degrading contract terms and selection procedures (e.g., the jiggle test). For example, many NFL teams require that cheerleaders hold a separate full-time job or attend school full-time in addition to their cheer duties. In the NFL universe, these contract terms apply to only women-dominated NFL cheerleaders, and they pertain to no other jobs, even when those jobs and workers are part-time. Teams continue to utilize these contract clauses to exploit vulnerable women workers and because it is common across the industry. Kahler makes the case for referring to cheerleaders more professionally by using their first and last names, like all other organizational members featured in team media guides or on team websites.

The cheerleaders themselves may have to pressure NFL teams to adopt a more enlightened management stance, as they have begun dealing with lawsuits and at least one attempt to unionize (Pearce and Williams). The cheerleaders are permitted to act collectively and unionize according to the National Labor Relations Act. The advantages of a union are a shift in power dynamics, as well as the establishment through collective bargaining of the basic terms and conditions of employment, which often include higher pay, better benefits, and less management idiosyncrasies. In fact, there is substantial movement in this regard after the transformational documentary entitled “A Woman’s Work: The NFL’s Cheerleader Problem” was released (Gu). The challenge is that unionization is not a simple process, and it is very likely that there will be some resistance from the teams. Nevertheless, unionization may be the best path to obtaining the most comprehensive work improvements for cheerleaders.

CONCLUSION

Due to seismic shifts in gender norms in the U.S., we suggest that all NFL teams reconsider their stance on the use of women cheerleaders, guided by a comprehensive entertainment strategy. Teams not using cheerleaders should consider this feature of their operations as a source of competitive advantage. Teams with cheerleaders should consider eliminating or adapting their current cheerleading squads. Teams that fail to do so will miss out on strategic advantages with corporate reputation, particularly among women and progressive-minded fans who are just putting up with the current state of affairs. More importantly, teams that fail to question and act to remediate this gendered form of entertainment strategy risk sudden and detrimental fallout from stakeholders as team organizations recognize too late that new norms have raised the bar for the treatment of women in the organization, even those who are cheerleaders.

APPENDIX A

Geographic Comparators for NFL Teams with No Cheerleaders

Buffalo Bills - NO CHEERLEADERS	New England Patriots - CHEERLEADERS
Open stadium	Open stadium
Fan Engagement Rank: 19	Fan Engagement Rank: 2
Payroll (2018-2019): \$192 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$212 million
Women executives 2019: 2	Women executives 2019: 3
Minority executives 2019: 0	Minority executives 2019: 0
Franchise Age: 60 years	Franchise Age: 61 years

Chicago Bears - NO CHEERLEADERS	Indianapolis Colts - CHEERLEADERS
Open stadium	Retractable roof
Fan Engagement Rank: 8	Fan Engagement Rank: 12
Payroll (2018-2019): \$271 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$174 million
Women executives 2019: 2	Women executives 2019: 2
Minority executives 2019: 0	Minority executives 2019: 1
Franchise Age: 100 years	Franchise Age: 67 years

Green Bay Packers - NO CHEERLEADERS	Minnesota Vikings - CHEERLEADERS
Open stadium	Enclosed stadium
Fan Engagement Rank: 6	Fan Engagement Rank: 24
Payroll (2018-2019): \$245 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$247 million
Women executives 2019: 2	Women executives 2019: 3
Minority executives 2019: 0	Minority executives 2019: 2
Franchise Age: 101 years	Franchise Age: 59 years

NY Giants - NO CHEERLEADERS	NY Jets - CHEERLEADERS
Same stadium (open)- MetLife	Same stadium (open)- MetLife
Fan Engagement Rank: 4	Fan Engagement Rank: 20
Payroll (2018-2019): \$226 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$225 million
Women executives 2019: 2	Women executives 2019: 1
Minority executives 2019: 1	Minority executives 2019: 1
Franchise Age: 95 years	Franchise Age: 61 years

Cleveland Browns - NO CHEERLEADERS	Detroit Lions - CHEERLEADERS
Open Stadium- FirstEnergy Stadium	Indoor stadium- Ford Field
Fan Engagement Rank: 27	Fan Engagement Rank: 22
Payroll (2018-2019): \$245 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$195 million
Women executives 2019: 2	Women executives 2019: 4
Minority executives 2019: 2	Minority executives 2019: 1
Franchise Age: 74 years	Franchise Age: 90 years

Pittsburgh Steelers - NO CHEERLEADERS	Philadelphia Eagles - CHEERLEADERS
Open Stadium- Heinz Field	Open Stadium- Lincoln Financial Field
Fan Engagement Rank: 5	Fan Engagement Rank: 3
Payroll (2018-2019): \$214 million	Payroll (2018-2019): \$204 million
Women executives 2019: 0 Minority executives 2019: 1	Women executives 2019: 7 Minority executives 2019: 1
Franchise Age: 87 years	Franchise Age: 87 years

Data Sources:

1. *NFL Fandom Report 2019*, Michael Lewis, 24 June 2019, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/esma/category/fan-base-analyses/nfl-fan-rankings/>. Note: The Fan Engagement Rank reflects a ranking of the 32 NFL teams on “which city’s fans are more willing to spend or follow their teams after controlling for factors like market size and short-term changes in winning and losing,” with low numbers indicating very good rankings and high ranks being relatively poor.
2. *Player Payroll in the National Football League 2019/20 Season (in million U.S. dollars)*, Christina Gough, 27 Oct. 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/240074/player-salaries-of-national-football-league-teams/>
3. *The 2020 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Football League*, Richard E. Lapchick, The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, 2020, <https://www.tidesport.org/nfl>

APPENDIX B

Links to 2021 Cheerleader Roster Information on Teams in the Study

Team	Link
Dallas Cowboys	https://dallascowboyscheerleaders.com/our-team/
Detroit Lions	https://www.detroitlions.com/cheerleaders/meet-the-squad
Indianapolis Colts	https://www.colts.com/cheerleaders/roster/
Minnesota Vikings	https://www.vikings.com/cheerleaders/roster/
New England Patriots	https://www.patriots.com/cheerleaders/roster/
New York Jets	https://www.newyorkjets.com/cheerleaders/roster/
Philadelphia Eagles	https://www.philadelphiaeagles.com/cheerleaders/roster/
Washington Football Team	The team disbanded its cheerleading squad in 2021.

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