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Unifying Power of Sport Fandom

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Unifying Power of Sport Fandom

Abstract

Through previous research, it was known that sport has many physical and non-physical benefits to participants and is a powerful tool used to bring people together in light of social and political differences. However, little was known about the impact of sport fandom on feelings of social connectedness. The purpose of this study was to further the understanding of feelings of social connectedness in sport fandom within the context of the current polarized political environment in the United States. Survey methodology was used to capture demographics and other variables including political identity and behaviors, sport fandom identity and behaviors, and feelings of social connectedness. The survey was distributed on Twitter through the use of relevant hashtags and also sent to students, faculty, and staff at St. John Fisher College. Results found that there was a significant relationship between ratings of sport fandom identity and behaviors and reported feelings of social connectedness. There was also found to be a significant predictive relationship between the grand means of sport and politics to the grand mean of social connectedness. The results of this research study added support for the use sport and sport fandom as tools for bringing people together within a polarized society as these findings suggested that sport fandom was a strong unifying tool that transcended the divided sociopolitical culture of the US today.

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Executive Summary

Through previous research, it was known that sport has many physical and non-physical benefits to participants and is a powerful tool used to bring people together in light of social and political differences. However, little was known about the impact of sport fandom on feelings of social connectedness. The purpose of this study was to further the understanding of feelings of social connectedness in sport fandom within the context of the current polarized political environment in the United States. Survey methodology was used to capture demographics and other variables including political identity and behaviors, sport fandom identity and behaviors, and feelings of social connectedness. The survey was distributed on Twitter through the use of relevant hashtags and also sent to students, faculty, and staff at St. John Fisher College. Results found that there was a significant relationship between ratings of sport fandom identity and behaviors and reported feelings of social connectedness. There was also found to be a significant predictive relationship between the grand means of sport and politics to the grand mean of social connectedness. The results of this research study added support for the use sport and sport fandom as tools for bringing people together within a polarized society as these findings suggested that sport fandom was a strong unifying tool that transcended the divided socio-political culture of the US today.

Introduction

Sport has always played an important role in people's lives. There were many physical benefits to participating in sport (Quora, 2018) and Wann (1995; 2001) explored what motivates fans to engage in sport spectatorship. There have also been many examples of sport being used to bring people who come from very different backgrounds together (Lemke, 2016; Young, 2016). Social connectedness was important to understand because it had many physical and emotional benefits (Hoye, Nicholson, & Brown, 2015). Recognizing the current polarized socio-political environment within the United States talked about by Pierre (2018), this study was conducted to discover just how strong that connection was between sport, unity and social connectedness within the context of the current political environment.

It is understood through previous research that sport was a unique and strong way of bringing people together (Lemke, 2016; Young, 2016). But in light of the socio-political environment in the United States becoming increasingly more polarized and hostile in recent years, little to no research had been done examining if the unifying power of sport transcends the political environment. This study was important to conduct because there was a hole in the research which needed to be filled. Policy makers in government could also benefit practically from the study's findings by developing programs that use sport to bring people together to work through problems diplomatically.

The purpose of this study was to look closer at the relationship between social connectedness and sport within the context of the current political environment. The research question of the study was:

How much do sport fans feel socially connected given the current socio-political climate in the United States?

The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the power sport has to unite people on opposite sides of the political spectrum.

Understanding that sport has played an important role in people's lives since 1500 B.C.E. when the Egyptians held a horseracing exhibition (Polsson, 2017), research has been done to examine just how much of a role sport plays and the benefits received from sport participation and fandom. However, until this study, research had not been done regarding social connectedness through sport within the context of a polarized political society. This research filled gaps in the knowledge about the extent to which sport brings people with opposite political ideals together.

Background Information

The Role Sport Plays- Spectatorship and Participation

Sport has historically played an important role in people's lives, dating back to 1500 B.C.E. when the Egyptians held the first public horseracing exhibition (Polsson, 2017). Something about physical competition in pursuit of glory and honor has proved to attract all sorts of people throughout history. For years it has been known that there are benefits that result from participating in sport. Children are encouraged to be active and participate in sports when they are young because of the benefits to their development, and there are many reasons to continue being involved in sport while developing into adulthood. Quora (2018) specifically cited six reasons why team sport is good for overall health and well-being. The examples were either related to physical health, emotional health, or both at the same time, knowing they often go hand in hand.

Physical benefits were often the most obvious when thinking about positive effects of participating in sport. Participating in team sports provided access to a regular workout routine

with a built-in support system. Lifestyles had become increasingly sedentary and obesity was at an all-time high, but getting regular exercise of the right intensity on a daily basis could decrease the odds of getting diseases like diabetes, heart-disease, and arthritis (Quora, 2018).

One could argue that non-physical benefits of team sport are even more impactful than the physical reasons listed above. Quora (2018) went on to state that athletes who participate in team sports (competitive or recreational) report having higher self-esteem and an increased satisfaction with their lives. Much of this comes from the idea of belonging to a team and that increased sense of being accepted and supported by a group of people. If that weren't reason enough, Quora also suggested that athletes who participated in team sports are often smarter than those who didn't. Athletes often reported higher grade point averages, a higher percentage of high school graduates, and increased skills that help with daily activities (Quora, 2018).

Until the 1990s, most of the literature about sports was based around a participant's point of view. But athletes are only one side of the story. Fans and spectators often have a very different experience with sport and have different benefits and motivations. Wann was one of the most prominent researchers when it comes to studying sport fans and spectators. He has done work regarding internal motivation versus external motivation (Wann, Ensor, & Bilyeu, 2001), and also developed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (Wann, 1995) which quickly became a foundation for measuring and classifying fan motivation. Wann (1995) compiled a list of eight motivations for sport fandom; eustress, self-esteem benefits, escapism, entertainment, economic factors, aesthetic qualities, group affiliation, and family needs. Eustress was just another term for a "good stressor", so it represented being motivated by the adrenaline and excitement of watching a team play. Some fans were motivated by self-esteem because they felt better about themselves when the team was doing well or after a win. Escapism described how sports create

an escape from everyday life. Some fans were also motivated solely by entertainment, and others were motivated by economic factors, which were often related to sport gambling and betting. Aesthetic qualities represented the beauty of sports and the athletic abilities some have, because some fans thought of sport as an art form. The group affiliation motive drove some people to become sport fans because of the connection it created between one person and other fans. The last motive was family needs and represented those fans who watched sport as a way to bond with their families. These included the fans who “grew into” their fandom with the guidance of their parents or siblings (Wann, 1995).

In 2001, Wann, Ensor, and Bilyeu performed a study looking deeper into whether people were more intrinsically motivated to become a fan of a team or extrinsically motivated. Wann understood intrinsic motivation as reasons that lie within a person and have no outside reward. If someone was intrinsically motivated to do something, they did it purely for the enjoyment of the task itself. Extrinsic motivation involved receiving some kind of benefit or reward for completing the task. Using the accepted eight factors of motivation from the Sport Fan Motivation Scale, Wann classified three motivations into an intrinsic category, and left the other five motivations to an extrinsic category. Intrinsic motivations were aesthetic, eustress, and entertainment. Escape, economic, self-esteem, group affiliation, and family were therefore classified as extrinsic motives. The study concluded that highly identified fans were more likely to be motivated intrinsically than lowly identified fans. (Wann, Ensor, & Bilyeu, 2001).

Social Connectedness Through Sport

In short, social connectedness was the idea that people have an innate need to feel connected to other people or feel as if they belong. Social connectedness was correlated with better mental health and overall well-being, and sport was one of the most powerful ways for

people to feel socially connected to one another (Hoye, Nicholson, & Brown, 2015). Hoye, et al. (2015) found that involvement in sport was largely a better predictor of social connectedness than involvement in non-sport organizations.

There are many practical examples to support the idea that sport is one of the most powerful tools for uniting people. Lemke (2016) described the unprecedented power of sport and how many people it can reach. He specifically talked about an initiative called “Four Countries 4 Peace”, a football tournament involving people from Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. These four nations were very much at odds with each other, so the participants would not normally socialize with one another at all. One of the most unique aspects about this tournament is that there were no referees, which essentially forced the participants to interact with each other and solve any disagreement diplomatically. Along the same lines, Mel Young, the President of The Homeless World Cup, believed that sport was powerful enough to bring about change that can last a long time (Young, 2016). Young co-founded The Homeless World Cup, which was a soccer tournament held once a year that brings different people together from all over the world to compete in a World Cup. The participants were all homeless, but that is quite possibly the only thing they had in common. They came from different backgrounds and different areas but joined together to represent their countries playing football. What strikes people the most though, is that 90% of the people who participate in The Homeless World Cup completely turn their lives around afterward. They get jobs, get clean and sober if they battled with addiction before, and their lives are changed just from participating in the tournament one year (Young, 2016).

McConnell (2015) also looked at the absurdities and randomness of sport allegiances and alliances and the psychological effects that carried into other aspects of people’s lives. He

observed fans attending the 2015 All-Star Game in Cincinnati, and how they interacted with each other. Fans of one team felt immediately connected to other fans of the same team. He talked about a conversation he overheard between a fan of a National League team and a fan of an American League team discussing the designated hitter rule. Normally, ordinary people who do not play professional baseball would not place judgement on a rule about whether a pitcher must bat or if a designated hitter can bat in his place. The rule was different for American League teams and National League teams, and not something that would personally affect the lives of fans, but since the fans were so identified to their team, they held very strong opinions on the matter. McConnell questioned the degree to which the arbitrary connections formed could lead to accepting broader ideas as one's own.

Current Socio-Political Climate

Within the last 10 years, the line between “us versus them” has become increasingly clearer when considering the socio-political climate in the United States. Political polarization has seemingly skyrocketed in the last couple decades, and citizens had strong feelings about people sitting on the other side of the fence. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) examined political polarization from the angle of how we feel about “the other”, not about how certain policies are viewed. The study found that regardless of how one feels about policies, hatred of “the other” political party has increased since the late 1980s. This suggested that much of the distaste with people who differ from us politically comes from an “us versus them” attitude, not backed in facts or reason.

Some could argue that the United States has always been like this, and that there has always been polarization between the political stances of citizens. But there is evidence to support the idea that the United States has become increasingly polarized in the last few decades.

PEW Research Center (2017) found that the divide between political parties has increased significantly since the 1990's.

Recently, with the help of social media, there has been an obvious increase in celebrity involvement in with politics. (Sikorski, Knoll, & Matthes, 2017). Kanye West showed support for President Trump, and Taylor Swift voiced her disdain for Trump. Athletes, like LeBron James, are also coming out with their opinions on political matters. When celebrities voiced their concerns and opinions, it strengthened the opinions of the average person who already had feelings about the celebrities themselves. Social media has provided a platform for anyone and everyone to voice their opinions, whether they are educated on the subject or not. The Spark Group (2018) discussed how social media posts have become increasingly more political. Not only are the posts political, they also seem to be judgmental and disrespectful of anyone who thinks differently.

Summary

For years, sport has played an important role in keeping people happy and healthy. Studies have supported the fact that sport is a strong social connector, and therefore it has been used many times to bring people together (Lemke, 2016; Young, 2016). The current United States political environment has been called polarizing and divisive. With the help of social media, more citizens are able to voice their opinions on political matters, which often leads to closed minds and hearts. The aim of this research was to discover just how strong the unifying power of sport fandom was, and if it was strong enough to overshadow any political distaste with another fan sitting on the other side of the political fence.

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the strength of the unifying power of sport within the context of the current socio-political climate in the United States. The research question of this study was:

How much do sport fans feel socially connected given the current socio-political climate in the United States?

The aim of this research was to develop a better understanding of whether sport is powerful enough to bring people with different political views together. The desired sample was registered voters who identified themselves as sport fans, representing a variety of ages and geographic regions throughout the United States. Convenience sampling was used. Respondents were invited to participate through a tweet. Hashtags were used to try to identify key informants.

Procedure

Survey methodology was used to gather data from Twitter users. Twitter users were targeted through the use of hashtags about politics and sport. Examples of some of the hashtags used were #MAGA, #Politics, #Liberal, #Democrats, and #sports. Due to extraordinarily low participation, distribution method had to be changed to emailing the survey to students, faculty, and staff of St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY. Demographic variables measured were age, gender, race, income level, voter registration, party registration, and sport motivation. All demographic variables were measured categorically, except for age which was measured on a continuous scale.

To construct an idea of respondents' political identity and behaviors, other variables measured were political party identification, political perspective, strength of political identity, and political engagement. Political engagement referred to following politics, engaging in political conversations in person and on social media, and identifying where and how often participants engaged in political conversation while watching sport. Political party, political

perspective, and where they were likely to have a political conversation while watching sport were measured categorically. All other variables regarding the concept of politics were measured continuously through a five-point Likert scale with anchors of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Under the overarching idea of sport identity and behaviors, variables measured were sport following, sport identity, and likelihood of engagement in sport conversation in person and on social media. All sport identity variables were measured continuously with a five-point Likert scale with anchors of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, except for sport following which was measured categorically.

Social connectedness variables that were measured were awareness of others’ political affiliations, connection to other fans at sporting events, engagement with other fans at sporting events, and focus at sporting events. Participants were also asked an open-ended question about what made them feel connected to other fans at sporting events. All social connectedness variables were measured continuously using a five-point Likert scale with anchors of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Analysis

A variety of descriptive statistics were collected with the data. Means were collected for age, political identity and behavior, sport identity and behavior, and feelings of social connectedness. Modes and frequencies were collected for gender, race, income, sport motivation, which political party, and which sport the fandom lies within. The age range of respondents was also collected.

In order to be able to use the overarching variables of “political identity and behaviors”, “social connectedness”, and “sport identity and behaviors”, variables within each category were averaged together to create a grand mean for each overarching theme.

There were three main inferential tests conducted in this study. In order to see if participants differed in their ratings of social connectedness with respect to their political affiliations, an F test for ANOVA was used. In order to see if participants differed in their ratings of social connectedness with respect to their political perspectives, another F test for ANOVA was produced. Correlations were produced to determine if there was a significant relationship between grand mean politics and grand mean sport, grand mean politics and grand mean social connectedness, and grand mean social connectedness and grand mean sport. A regression was used to determine if there was a predictive relationship between levels of sport and political identities and feelings of social connectedness.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The average age of respondents was 29.44 (SD=12.01) and had a range of 18 years old to 66 years old. There were 24 male participants (42.9%) and 32 female participants (57.1%). Ninety-six percent of participants were registered voters (n=54) and 69.6% were registered with a political party (n=39). Most respondents reported entertainment as their primary reason for attending sporting events (n=30), followed by group affiliation (n=8) and family (n=8). Thirty-two percent of respondents were republican (n=18), and 43 percent self-identified as democratic (n=24). Forty-four percent of survey respondents identified themselves as having a moderate political perspective (n=25).

When asked about where participants were most likely to engage in political conversation while watching sport, 62.5% reported that they were not likely to engage in political conversation while watching sports anywhere (n=35). Thirty-four percent of respondents said that the sport they follow the most was professional football (n=19). The mean for the variable grand mean politics was 2.34 (SD= .91). The mean calculated for the variable grand mean sport was 3.20 (SD= 1.22). The calculated mean for the variable grand mean social connectedness was 3.91 (SD= .53).

Ninety-six percent of study participants were white (n=54). Forty-one percent of respondents reported an average yearly household income of over \$100,000 (n=23).

Inferential Statistics

There was no significant relationship between grand mean politics and grand mean sport, $r = .147, p > .05$. There was also not a significant relationship between grand mean politics and grand mean social connectedness, $r = .118, p > .05$. The third correlation found a significant relationship between grand mean social connectedness and grand mean sport, $r = .492, p < .05$.

There was no significant difference of ratings of grand mean politics based on political party affiliation, $F(2,51) = 3.02, p > .05$. There was no significant difference of ratings of grand mean sport based on political party affiliation, $F(2,52) = 3.94, p > .05$. There was no significant difference of average ratings of grand mean social connectedness based on political party affiliation, $F(2,52) = .87, p > .05$.

There was no significant difference of ratings of grand mean politics based on political perspective, $F(2,51) = 3.26, p > .05$. There was no significant difference of ratings of grand mean sport based on political perspective, $F(2,52) = .72, p > .05$. There was no significant

different of ratings of grand mean social connectedness based on political perspective, $F(2,52) = .97, p > .05$.

Grand mean of politics and grand mean of sport had a significant predictive relationship to the grand mean of social connectedness, $F(2,52) = 9.99, r = .53, R^2 = .28, p < .05$.

Discussion

Sample and Participation

A total of 56 responses were collected and used. The desired sample was registered voters who self-identified as sport fans, representing a wide variety of ages and geographic regions throughout the United States. The sample did provide a somewhat equal breakdown of gender with 43% male and 57% female, but because the sampling method was altered to distributing the survey to people associated with a private northeastern college, all participants reported being from New York State. Since only one state was represented, the results could not be applied to the entire population. The results also cannot be considered representative of the population because 96.4% of the respondents were white, representing a huge lack of diversity.

Answer to the Research Question

Ultimately, the goal of this research was to determine the extent to which sport fandom brings people together in light of the current polarized political climate in the United States. Based on the results found, sport fandom did seem to be a factor contributing to feelings of connectedness among respondents. There was a correlation between the grand mean of social connectedness and the grand mean of sport, $r = .492, p < .05$, which suggested that there was a significant relationship between feelings of social connectedness and strength of sport identity and behaviors. The regression used also found that, together, the grand mean of politics and the grand mean of sport had a positive predictive relationship to grand mean of social connectedness,

$F(2,52) = 9.99, r = .527, p < .05$. This meant that feelings of social connectedness were related to the ratings of political and sport-related identities and behaviors. The positive results of these tests suggested that sport fandom played a large role into feelings of social connectedness reported.

Fitting the Research Question into Background Information

Although there were many examples of organizations that used sport as a way to unify people in light of either political or social differences, there was no previous knowledge about whether sport actually contributed to feelings of social connectedness. “Four Countries 4 Peace” and the Homeless World Cup were two sporting events talked about in existing studies that were created to bring about social or political change. Hoye, et al. (2015) suggested that sport was one of the most powerful tools to increase feelings of social connectedness. The research done in this study has provided support for using sport as a tool for change, as it pointed to the idea that engagement in sport fandom was significantly related to reported feelings of social connectedness.

Limitations and Delimitations

Throughout this study, decisions were made that likely impacted the research. When deciding on a method of collecting data, Twitter was chosen because of its potential for reaching a diverse sample through the use of relevant hashtags. This may have been a delimitation in the study because the researcher was not as familiar with Twitter as a social media platform as they were with other platforms. If another platform or distribution method were chosen, the response rate might have been much higher. After altering the distribution method to sending individual emails to faculty, staff, and students at a private northeastern college, more responses to the survey were collected. If the study were to be repeated, a different sampling method and

distribution method might yield more results. Another delimitation of this study was the hashtags chosen for each Tweet. If this method is used for future research, it would be beneficial to learn more about specific hashtags that get more reactions from people.

The major limitation of this study was the low response rate. Regardless of how the survey was distributed, there was a large portion of the population that chose not to participate in the research. Many people may not have wanted to participate in any sort of political discussion or study, as politics were a sensitive subject due to their polarized nature in the United States today (PEW Research Center, 2017). To get better results, future researchers will want to find new ways to encourage participation from their population.

Conclusion

Recommendations for future research include examining any potential differences in feelings of social connectedness based on gender or income level. The desired sample of this study was to be a diverse representation of voters in the United States, but the majority of respondents were white and reported that they lived in New York State. In order to get results that may be more relatable to the entire desired population, future researchers should prioritize getting responses from a more diverse sample. To further general understanding of the concept of sport fandom being correlated to feelings of social connectedness, future researchers may also want to look into different ways that political and social leaders can capitalize on this relationship to further their causes.

Sport has previously been used as a tool for social and political change, as in the cases of “Four Countries 4 Peace” and the Homeless World Cup (Lemke, 2016; Young, 2016). Social connectedness was known to be a positive influencing factor in the overall health and well-being of people (Hoye, et al., 2015). Prior to this study, no research had been done on the social

connecting power of sport fandom within a political context. This study provided insight into the social connecting power of sport fandom despite a polarized political climate in the United States. From the results of this research, government bodies and social justice bodies can be encouraged to use sport as a way of bringing about change in a polarized political environment.

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