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# Fan Identification in Professional Sport

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# Fan Identification in Professional Sport

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to find out the relationship between professional sport fans and either the team or player they most support. The goal of the research was to find out whether fans of professional sport go out to games or watch games at their house because of their support for their favorite organization or their idol player. The reason behind the research was because out of all the psychology and sociology studies surrounding professional sport, 95% of all those studies included an athlete, team, or coach. Only 5% of all those mentioned studies were involved with the fan side. It is important to understand the reasoning fans have for each of their favorite leagues and why they watch the sport they love. Sports give every fan the opportunity of escapism. Whether at the game or watching from home, each game represents a new start for each fan base to rally for a win.

The method used for drawing conclusions was through an anonymous survey with participants from a small college. The sample was completed through participants from age 18-23 with a mix of 56% male and 44% female. Along with this, fandom level was also surveyed to see what kind of professional sport fans were participating. What was found only established the idea more that the NFL is by far the most popular sport league in North America, and a hypothesis before the study was ran guessing the NFL is so popular because fantasy football is so widespread and allows for so many people to watch the games. It was believed fantasy football participation led to NFL viewing. However, what was learned in the survey was that fantasy football did not play as big a role on NFL fans participating as much as anticipated prior to the beginning of the research.

What is known throughout the study is that the NFL and NBA are by far the more popular leagues compared to the other professional leagues in North America. Part of that reason is due to the fact that both those leagues do an exceptional job of promoting their players through other advertisements, while other leagues like MLB have their best player not promoting themselves to their full ability.

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Do fans of professional sport identify with teams or individual players?

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### **Executive Summary**

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## **Introduction**

Sports have been around for centuries and with that have been sport fans and fanatics. From the early days of chariot racing and discus throws to the latter years of the modern day National Football League and College basketball (Golden, 2004). Fanatics stand by their favorite team and players through thick and thin. From painting their faces team colors, like the Oakland Raiders fan base did during their winning stretch in the 1980's to Cleveland Cavaliers fans throwing up chalk in symbolism of their own LeBron James in the first decade of the 21st century (Miller & Mayhew, 2005). The research paper included the engagement between fans following specific teams and fans following individual players. The research was based off specific examples from real professional sport events.

The setting of the paper used modern day college students describing their fandom. The recipients of the survey described their favorite professional sport leagues in the United States as well as what and who they identified better with. The recipients of the survey were also given a variety of questions to answer how they relate. An

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example of the questions would be who they root for when they watch a sport game on their television. College students were the ideal subjects due to the fact there are thousands of professional sport fans on every campus, as well as the convenience factor as well.

The purpose of the research was to identify why fans of professional sport identify better with teams and organizations for some leagues and favorite players for other leagues.

This is important due to the popularity of National Basketball Association players and National Football League players compared to the popularity of Major League Baseball players and how the NBA and NFL can be considered more popular from a fan perspective. This research paper provided examples of times where fans have identified more with teams and where fans have identified better with individual players of professional sport. The beneficiaries of this research are the General Managers and owners who can utilize this data in order to bring in more fans for their home games and bring in a better fan base in general. This better fan base can correlate to more wins, especially at home, due to the deciding factor of fanatics (Raper, 2018).

The research question of this study was:

Do fans of professional sport identify with teams or individual players?

The aim of this research was to understand the mind of a professional sport fan more than past researches. Only 5% of all psychology and sociology of sport research used fans and spectators as subject opposed to the 95% containing athletes, coaches, or others involved in the team (Wann, 1995).

**Background Information**

Professional sport is the highest level of competition an athlete can achieve, therefore professional sport is the highest level of competition a fanatic can achieve cheering for their respected organization or players. Sport fandom can be achieved in two different ways, those who root for their favorite teams to do well as a whole, and those who root for certain individuals to do well on their own with the benefit of the club as a secondary to the performance of the player. There is no secret that professional athletes from some sports are far more popular in the United States than other professionals from different sports. There was not a single professional baseball player ranked in ESPN's World Fame 100 for the second consecutive season. This annual ranking breaks down the world's most popular athletes by using data from Google searches, player endorsements, and social media following. According to the social media data analysis done by the measurement firm Hookit, there were no active Major League Baseball players in the top 100 of popular athletes, as of last year. Not only this, but no MLB player had a strong enough brand to make Charge's top 25 under 25 (Fischer, 2018). This ranking is measured by social media engagement and followers with news stories and search results being taken into consideration. This data shows baseball players are less popularized as individuals in today's professional sports world.

The more popular a player, the more likely a fan will root for their individual success, rather the teams. The commissioner of Major League Baseball, Rob Manfred, believes that the main attraction for MLB games are the teams, from where they play and what uniforms they wear, opposed to the individual players. However, most players believe they are the ones who bring in the revenue and should be the ones marketed to

the fans and general public (Newman, 2018). According to a handful of MLB all-stars, in order for baseball to become a more popular sport, the MLB must promote its players individually like other professional sports (NBA and NFL) do. Carlos Gonzalez, outfielder for the Colorado Rockies, has been quoted as saying when he gets home to his native country of Venezuela he is treated as a superstar and a rock star, however when he walks around Denver and America in general, he isn't recognized nearly as enough.

Statistically, Mike Trout is one of the greatest baseball players of all time yet is barely a household name (Newman, 2018). This is due to the fact he is not promoted as much as other stars in other leagues and isn't nearly as promoted by his league enough. The argument made by Trout in his favor for why he doesn't promote himself like LeBron James or Odell Beckham Jr. do is because baseball has nearly twice as many games in a regular season than what the NBA and NHL have and almost ten times more games than what the NFL regular season is (Fischer, 2018). This causes Trout to not find the time to market his professional brand as much as others do as he prefers to spend his time practicing his skills to become better and spending time with family and friends. Baseball is his only priority and doesn't care for individual recognition (Anderson, 2018).

Football is considered the most popular sport in the United States (Monahan, n.d.). NFL viewership has even gone up in the recent years raising from an average 14.9 million views per national televised game crowd during the 2017-18 season to 15.25 million views this year (Porter, 2018). One reason football is so popular compared to other sports is because fantasy football is so popular. Over 59 million people partook

in fantasy football this past year (Hall, 2017). 59 million fans rooted for the individual players on teams to perform well opposed to rooting for the teams they're playing on to play well. Due to this fact, NFL players receive more recognition on a national stage compared to every other sport.

There were three main concepts looked at during the process of this research paper. Fan identity, Fan engagement in professional sport, and marketing and competition for consumers. The first concept evaluated what made a fan a fan and where their influence of fandom came from. The second concept broke down the fan of professional sport and how their impact during games help the team or players they cheer for. The third concept describes the market competition for consumers in professional sport.

### **Fan Identity**

Sutton (1997) defines fan identification as the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization. When the customer closely identifies with an organization, a sense of connectedness ensues as the customer begins to define themselves in terms of the organization. Sport team identification is also important as it displays the fans overall self-concept after games and how the result in said game will indicate how the fan behave. A fan will perceive themselves as being personally less competent after a loss by their favorite team than after a win (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson & Kennedy, 1992). Also fans with higher levels of team sport identification are likelier to have higher group-based self-esteem more so than those fans whose identification levels are generally lower (Wann & Branscombe,

1993). An example of the definitions can be shown in professional sport with New York Knickerbocker super-fan, Spike Lee. Lee is the Knicks more famous fan (Scacco, 2015). He has attended hundreds of Knicks games held in Madison Square Garden purchasing his first season tickets on June 18, 1985, the day after the Knicks selected Patrick Ewing with the first overall pick of the 1985 NBA Draft (Carlin, 2016). Spike Lee has even been considered the Knicks unofficial mascot because of his high attendance at Madison Square Garden for home games as well as making the trips for away games as well. His identification with the Knicks was shown due to fact he would connect himself with the organization by referring to the two parties as “we” when mentioning himself and the Knicks.

However, fan identification does not directly influence the on field success no matter the amount of community following there is. The Knicks themselves are a prime example as they were the NBA’s most valuable team for the 2018 season (Forbes, 2018), yet have not won a Larry O’Brien Trophy since 1973 and have only made it out of the first round of playoffs once since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (basketball-reference, 2018).

Sports are important to American society as professional sport can be also be an escape for real life and have the potential to make the fans forget about everything else for just a few moments (Jacobson, 2003). A clear cut example of this is on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 where New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C., were under terrorist attacks leading to the National Football League and Major League Baseball both suspending play. The first home game for the New York Yankees since the attacks

were exactly two weeks later where fans, employees, and players gave an emotional pre-game salute that eventually overshadowed the game.

Fan identification begins for most professional sport fans at early ages. Based off the cognitive development study by James (2001) between children aged 5-6 and 8-9, it was discovered that the children had knowledge and loyalty to their favorite team. Cognitive development is the construction of thought process, problem solving, and remembrance from childhood to teen hood to adulthood. The study showed transitional, concrete operational, and preoperational children had the ability to demonstrate psychological commitment to favorite teams. This was due to the fathers of the children having the biggest influence on what kind of fan their child would be and who they would eventually root for. An example of this would be in Kraszewski (2008) where lifelong diehard fan Mr. Smith received national news for his unusual funeral route when his life came to an end. Mr. Smith was born in Pennsylvania then moved to San Diego for business. He never considered California to be his home yet just a place he lives. His home would always be in Pennsylvania, the home of the Pittsburgh Steelers, his favorite professional sports team. Instead of having a regular funeral in a church with a large group of family and friends and other impacted by his life, his wish was to be put in his Steelers pajamas with his Steelers blanket in his reclining chair located in his living room with his few best friends and immediate family with the Steelers last Super Bowl win playing on the television. Mr. Smith's identity as a fan was so severe he wanted more than nothing to be able to watch his beloved Steelers one last time. This was all relative information in the paper as it displayed his level of fandom and how he identified more with the team's organization as a whole compared to individual players.

**Fan engagement in professional sport**

The second concept taken into consideration throughout the paper was the concept of fan engagement in professional sport. The Cheese heads of the Green Bay Packers are some of the most famous sports fanatics in the world (Allen, 2018). They are as diehard as they come wearing hats that resemble the shape of cheese to show support for their Packers (Langemo, 2015). Fansided, a site that ranks the best following in pop culture, music, and sports, ruled the Cheeseheads the 18th most loyal fan following in the United States and the fourth most loyal fan base in the National Football League (Allen, 2018). This was important to the paper because the diehard fans, such as the Cheeseheads, have been game changers when it comes to their team or players performance. This was best exemplified with the Packers home field attendance selling out every home game since the 1960 season and winning every playoff home game for the first 45 years of existence in the organization. This relates to the paper as the Cheeseheads identify more to the Packers as a team opposed to a singular player on the roster.

**Marketing and competition for consumers**

The third concept mentioned throughout the research paper was the market competition for consumers. This was best exemplified with LeBron James signing with the Los Angeles Lakers in the summer of 2018. The NBA apparel website Fanatics, had one of their top 10 days in merchandise sales history from jersey sales due to the LeBron signing (Badenhausen, 2018). The jersey sales were up 600% from when LeBron signed in Cleveland for his second stint as a Cavalier within just three hours of

his signing in 2018. Not only jersey sales went up but the price of tickets also increased due to the signing. According to Darren Rovell's Twitter, just one day after signing with the Lakers, someone bought two season tickets to the Staples Center for \$114,960.50 coming out to \$1,401.95 per game to sit courtside and watch LeBron play (Twitter, 2018). Another example of this is in 2013 when opening day television ratings were at 4.6 million and the second day saw 2.6 million viewers (Brown, 2014). LeBron James happened to play on opening day of the season and not the second day. However, in 2014 when he signed with the Cleveland Cavaliers they did not play on opening day and the total viewers of NBA basketball was 2.3 million, a 48% decrease, but on the second day when they hosted the New York Knicks the viewership reached 4 million. This data all related to the research paper in how fans of the National Basketball Association identify better with individual players, such as LeBron James, more than with the organization as a whole.

According to the MVPindex (2018), the athletes who best turned their social media exposure and following to their advantage turning it into sponsorships included LeBron James and Odell Beckham Jr. in the NBA and the NFL, respectively (Fischer, 2018). The researchers examined the level of engagement on social media platforms over the time period of July 2017 to July 2018. The Los Angeles Lakers superstar was able to turn his social media engagement into \$285,932,539 in sponsorship money and the New York Football Giants wideout reeled in \$153,931,676 in sponsorship money. The two were the highest grossing athletes in their respective sports. However, they were not the highest ranking athlete on the list. MMA is a sport that is based off the competition and popularity of individual athletes, and Conor McGregor is by far the

sport's biggest star. He grossed in over \$610,635,000 of sponsorship money. The reason these three athletes did so well and produced so much is because their sports they play and leagues they are in prioritize on the star power of the individual over the star power of the team. The three stars were able to best turn their engagement into money by the promotion from their individual leagues as well.

Baseball, by far, has the lowest amount of sponsorship money of the three main sports (Fischer, 2018). Meaning the average baseball player makes less money than the average professional athlete in the other main three leagues. This data also shows the highest sponsorship receiving baseball player receives less than the highest sponsorship receiving basketball or football player. Marcus Stroman, for example, is the leading MLB player in terms of sponsorship money and he made \$9,524,134, ranking him 40th overall on the MVPindex rankings. Bryce Harper was the second highest ranked MLB player and 64th overall with \$5,650,750. Yasiel Puig, one of MLB's most infamous players, ranked fifth in the league and 81st overall with \$4,579,572.

Data was found to represent when fanatics and fan groups identified better with teams and organizations and when they identified more with the individual player.

### **Method**

The research throughout this study included the engagement between fans following specific teams and fans following individual players. The purpose of this research was to better understand how and why fans focus on the teams and the individual players.

The desired sample for this research was made up of college students. Most specifically, undergraduate students attending a small, private college in the North East. College students were chosen for the sample due to convenience. The study also specifically calls for fans of professional sport only.

The quantitative data was collected through a Qualtrics survey via emails that were sent to a sample of the student body of undergraduate students. The answers given by the participants in the survey were on a nominal scale as the subjects were grouped into different categories. The answers were listed out in multiple choice format for each student to choose the answer that best represented themselves. Some demographic variables measured were gender and year in school for the participants, for example. The responses were 56% male and 44% female. 14% of the participants were completing their freshman year at the college with 29% sophomores, 18% juniors and 38% were in their senior year of college.

The questions were broken down into three different sections. The first section being the demographics. This section of the questions was important as it got more information on the survey taker. Some questions listed were what their gender was, what class they were currently in while attending the college, and what their level of fandom was. The second grouping of questions described what the participant's favorite leagues. The third and final section of the survey was about if they watch games, buy apparel, play fantasy sports, or even get tattoos because of their favorite team or player.

## Results

There were a total of 36 participants after all the emails were sent for the study. Out of the 36 participants who clicked on the link, 34 of them were fans of professional sport. The other two answered “no” when asked if they were a fan of professional sport and due to the fact the research was only for fans of professional sport, their answers were unneeded and their data were deleted out. The study attracted 19 (56%) male participants and 15 (44%) female participants. The mode for school year throughout the survey was 4. This number corresponds to senior year in college, meaning the most frequent response to school year was senior. The median answer, however, was a 3 corresponding to junior year in college. Five (14.7%) of the participants were freshmen in college, ten (29.4%) of the participants were sophomores in college, six (17.6%) were juniors, and the last thirteen (38.2%) were seniors in college. For fandom level the mode and median both were 4, meaning an invested fan (knows what’s going on most nights). Half of the participants stated that when they purchase merchandise items, such as hats, they prefer to buy only their team items, while 35% of participants buy both team and player merchandise as well as no one answering their favorite player influences what kind of merchandise items they buy. 62% of all the survey takers said that they would go to games live and in person to watch both their favorite player and favorite team play. The percentage was the same (62%) for when watching games over the television they watch for both the player and their favorite team. 21% and 27% of the participants stated they watch games both in person and over the television, respectively, to support their favorite team. When the participants were asked about what kind of collectors’ items they own, 9% answered they buy collectors’ items based

off their favorite player, 24% said they buy items that represent their favorite team, 21% stated they like to buy both and 47% of the participants said it does not apply to them what kind of collectors' items they purchase. The two odd survey answers however came from 68% of the participants saying their favorite players and team do not apply to how they play fantasy sports and 68% of the participants also said that they are influenced by both their favorite player and favorite team on what kind of tattoos and body art they get.

Throughout the survey the following options were listed for each question; your favorite player, your favorite team, both, and does not apply. The total number of answers for each option was calculated and the total for favorite player added up to 15 with the total amount of favorite team answers at 55. Professional sport fans relate better to their favorite team rather than favorite player, according to the data represented.

### **Discussion**

The sample came from undergraduate students located at a private college in the north east. In the sample there were 55.9% male and 44.1% female, however in the population there is a percentage of 40 male and 60% female for undergraduates at this private college.

The answer found in the survey about the research question was leagues such as the NBA and NFL received a total of 61.8% of votes from the participants as their favorite league opposed player sided leagues such as the MLB and NHL, which

received a total percentage of 29.4% throughout the survey. This showed that the general public was more interested in watching sport leagues, such as the NBA and NFL, where they can root on and watch their favorite team.

There was not a single MLB player ranked in ESPN's top 100 for the year 2018 (ESPN, 2018). This can be represented by the data in the survey by how baseball is not a popular sport through the eyes of college students and professional sport fans. People are more fans of leagues such as the NBA and NFL as that is where the majority of the top 100 athletes come from on ESPN's list. Football has been widely considered the most popular sport in the United States (Monahan, n.d.). This can be shown throughout the survey in NFL receiving over 55% of the total votes for favorite league. One reason football is so popular because over 59 million people participated in a fantasy football league in 2017 (Hall, 2017). However, throughout the survey, 67% of the participants stated that their favorite team and favorite player played no impact in their fantasy league participation. The answer fits into what is already known due to the fact the NFL is the most popular professional sport league in North America and professional sport fans relate better to their favorite professional sport teams seeing as players come and go but the organization still remains strong.

Limitations faced throughout the research process was due to the survey format, there were no chances to answer questions any participants had. All participants were anonymous meaning there was no way to communicate to the survey director what questions they had. Some answers can be misleading because of this and both sides having misunderstandings. Another limitation was the lack of survey responses. After the first day there were 24 responses and the total of completed surveys two weeks

later only jumped to 34. Without the access to gain interest within the sample it was difficult to obtain participants. Delimitations faced throughout the process was after the pilot study, survey questions were rearranged in an order that would be better looking and easier on the participants eyes. Another delimitation throughout the project was to define a population of interest and to set up boundaries of the population leaving people 17 years and younger and 24 years and older to be excluded from this topic of research.

The research was important due to the fact that there has been a limited amount of research done on just the fans of sport (Wann, 1995). With the survey being ran and the study being done, it has better opened the doors to learning about how professional sport fans relate to their favorite team or player.

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