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## An Examination of Motivation and Identification of Football Fans

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the fans motivation to attend the National Football League (NFL) games and how it relates to fan identification. Data from 158 fans who attended regular season games in a Midwestern city in the United States were analyzed using regression to determine the degree to which fan identification could be explained by motivation factors. It was found that self-esteem, entertainment, escape, and eustress explained 40.1% of the variance in fan identification. Understanding that fans have different levels of identification and different types of motivations will enable sport marketers can better tailor strategies to more effectively reach target markets.

Keywords: Motivation, identification, fan involvement

### INTRODUCTION

Sports play an important role in many aspects of American culture. Examples of the how sports is entwined in daily life include participation in Little League Tee Ball by children as young as 4 years old, watching sports themed movies such as Remember the Titans which grossed more than \$115 million, to attracting 20,000 visitors and 10,000 athletes to the 2009 National Senior Games in San Francisco. In the international sporting arena, Pilipino boxer Manny Pacquiao and Finnish driver Kimi Raikkonen earned \$40 million and \$45 million respectively in 2009.

Mega sporting events such as the Summer Olympics and Formula One attract Fortune Global 500 corporate sponsors such as General Electric, Samsung and Siemens. In the United States, the sports business industry is one of the largest and fastest growing industries. Smith and Street's (2012) survey of the size of the sports business industry was estimated at \$262 billion, which equates to approximately twice the size of the automobile industry. And specifically, 12.2 % of that \$262 billion was generated by sports spectators' expenditure on tickets, luxury seating, concessions, etc. Hence the impact of sports fan behavior is significant. This research investigated the relation between fan motivation (i.e. self-esteem benefits, eustress as positive levels of arousal, entertainment, economic opportunities for gambling and betting, sport as an aesthetic art form, group affiliation, family needs, and sport as an escape from everyday life) and level of fan identification.

Sports studies with multi-disciplinary socio-psychology emphasis have been conducted within the sport, leisure, and tourism discipline. Firstly, external or environmental factors such as, and not limited to, alternative entertainment choices and venue characteristics can affect fan motivation for attending and watching sports. For example, Zhang, Smith, Pease, and Jambor (1997) reported that people were more likely to attend a sporting event if there were few competing events. Mak and Cheung (2010) stated that if the team's schedule showed playing with similar performance, nationally ranked and rivalry schools that could attract consumers to buy season tickets. Tomlinson, Buttle, and Moores (1995) investigated venue characteristics and reported that aesthetics, seating comfort, etc. affected attendance. Moreover, Mak and Cheung (2011) found seating comfort and access, parking convenience, and concession access were important in predicted ticket consumption. A relatively large body of research also exists on the other set of factors, which are viewed as internal to the sport fan. They include aspects of sports spectators and fans attendance motivations, known in basic psychology as behavior, affect and cognition. Examples of such fan patronage and attendance motivation studies included Mak, Lee, and Donahue (2007), Pifer, Mak, Bae, and Zhang (2015), Wann, Schrader, and Wilson (1999) and Trail and James (2001).

Researchers have used the term fan motivation to examine how sport "consumption" is affected. In the last two decades, several scales have been developed to measure fan motivation. For example, there is the Scale of Attendance Motivation (Zhang et al., 2001), and the Sport Interest Inventory (Funk et al., 2001). The Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) by Wann (1995) is one of the earliest and widely used scales hence it was used for purposes of this study. It is a reliable and valid measure of sport spectator motivations (Wann et al., 1999) that measures eight factors of motivation of sport fans: Self-esteem, Eustress, Entertainment, Economic, Aesthetic, Group Affiliation, Family, and Escape.

Another overlapping area of study in sport fandom is the concept of "fan involvement". Other common socio-psychological terms include fan identification, attachment, commitment, loyalty, etc. Different types of fans, ranging from casual to highly identified, may have different types and levels of motivations. Similar to the concept of the Fan Involvement Ladder (Rein et al., 2006), Funk and James (2001) conceptualized the Psychological Continuum Model which is grounded in theoretical and applied research. It provides a frame work to account for a fan's movement from initial awareness of a sport or team to eventual allegiance, through four stages of connections. Based on the sport literature, it was assumed that extent to which a fan identifies with a team is an indicator of the depth of sport fan involvement. In this study, fan identification was measured using selected items from the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) by Gould, Moore, McGuire, and Stebbins (2008). SLIM is designed to examine depth of involvement and commitment to leisure activities. The 3 SLIM items that measure identification were adopted for purposes of this study.

## **METHODS**

### **Respondents**

A non-probability convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. The sample consisted of fans who attended the regular season National Football League (NFL) games in a Midwestern city in the United States. Individuals attending NFL games were approached prior to the start of the games, and paper questionnaires were administered in person. The investigators asked each participant to complete questionnaires on a voluntary basis. Participants took approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire which was returned immediately to the investigators. In order to ensure anonymity, participants were not asked to identify themselves by name on the questionnaire. A total of 176 questionnaires were completed, and 18 (10%) were discarded because of missing data. The final sample size computed in this study was n=158.

### **Instrumentation**

Sport fan identification was the dependent variable. Selected items from the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) by Gould, Moore, McGuire, and Stebbins (2008) were used to measure Identification. The SLIM is a 54 item questionnaire that is purported to assess involvement in leisure activities, and three items that are relevant to measuring identification were adopted in this study. These items were rated on 9-point Likert scales (1 = completely disagree, and 9 = completely agree), and the responses were summed to produce a total score. Sample questions included “Others that know me understand that the team that I support is a part of who I am,” and “I am often recognized as one devoted to the team that I support.” Higher scores indicate greater level of identification with the team. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .93. Sport fan motivation was the independent variable and it was measured using Wann’s (1995) SFMS. The instrument contains 23 items, and those items inquire about fans’ motivational factors to watch, read, or discuss sport events. The SFMS has eight motivational factors - Eustress, Self-esteem, Escape, Entertainment, Economic, Aesthetic, Group Affiliation, and Family. It is based on an eight-point Likert scale (1 = not at all descriptive of me, and 8 = very descriptive of me), and sample items include “One of the main reasons that I watch, read, and/or discuss sports is that doing so gives the opportunity to temporarily escape life’s problems” and “I like the stimulation I get from watching sports .”

## RESULTS

The study sample composed of 100 males (63.3%) and 58 females (36.7%). The age of the fans ranged from 18 to 66 years ( $M = 35.66$  years;  $SD = 11.74$ ). 79.1% of the participants had beyond college education, and 86.7% of the participants were Caucasian. With regard to marital status, 55.7% were either married or partnered and 32.3% were singles (See Table 1).

**Table 1**

**Frequencies of Participant Characteristics**

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18-30	65	41.1
31-40	40	25.3
41-50	34	21.5
51-60	12	7.6
Over 61	6	3.8
Gender		
Male	100	63.3
Female	58	36.7
Race		
Caucasian	137	86.7
African American	9	5.7
Asian	6	3.8
Hispanic	3	1.9
Education		

High School	24	15.2
College	102	64.5
Graduate School	23	14.6
Marital Status		
Married/Partnered	88	55.7
Single	51	32.3
Other (divorced/widowed)	15	9.5

Pearson correlation analyses were computed to determine the associations among the major variables. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients and it shows that there were a number of statistically significant relationships among the variables. Identification was positively related to the following motivation factors - Eustress, Aesthetic, Self-esteem, Group Affiliation, Entertainment, and Family. Most motivation factors were significantly related to each other with the exceptions of Escape and Economic factors.

**Table 2**

**Bivariate Correlations among Study Variables**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Escape	11.46	6.59	1	.38	.38	.41	.53	.30	.10	.49	.12
2. Economic	8.47	6.43		1	.12	.33	.43	.22	-.06	.29	.09
3. Eustress	15.67	5.13			1	.62	.57	.40	.58	.29	.50
4. Aesthetic	12.53	5.87				1	.45	.27	.30	.27	.22
5. Self-Esteem	13.58	4.85					1	.45	.36	.36	.53
6. Group Affiliation	16.21	4.87						1	.49	.33	.36
7. Entertainment	18.58	4.49							1	.19	.48
8. Family	8.54	4.3								1	.17
9. Identification	18.19	7.43									1

*Note.* Bivariate correlations of .17 and above are significant at  $p < .05$ ; bivariate correlations of .22 and above are significant at  $p < .01$

A summary of the results of the sequential regression analysis is presented in the Table 3. Criteria variables were entered in the following sequence: Self-esteem, Entertainment, Escape, and Eustress. This estimation procedure maximized the incremental explained variance at each step of model building. After examining the correlation matrix, the independent variable that had the highest bivariate correlation (Self-esteem) with the dependent variable (sport fan identification) was entered in the first step. This initial model shows that Self-esteem accounted for 27.1% of the variance in identification scores. By inspecting the variables with statistically significant partial correlation, additional variables were added to the regression equation in the subsequent blocks. Each variable in the model uniquely explained a significant portion of variance in identification, and produced significant improvement (40.1% of the variance) in  $R^2$  ( $p < .05$ ) in the predictive power of the regression model.

$$\text{Predicted Identification Score} = .211 + .678(\text{Self-esteem}) + .372(\text{Entertainment}) + -.238(\text{Escape}) + .292(\text{Eustress})$$

**Table 3**  
**Comparison of the Four Sequential Regression Models**

Step	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the estimate	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Change	<i>F</i> Change	<i>df</i> <sub>1</sub>	<i>df</i> <sub>2</sub>	sig. <i>F</i> change
1	.525	.276	.271	6.345	.276	59.402	1	156	.000
2	.611	.373	.365	6.822	.097	24.104	1	155	.000
3	.629	.396	.384	5.834	.022	5.68	1	154	.018
4	.645	.416	.401	5.755	.02	5.302	1	153	.023

Dependent Variable was Identification

Model 1 Predictor: Self-esteem

Model 2 Predictors: Self-esteem, Entertainment

Model 3 Predictors: Self-esteem, Entertainment, and Escape

Model 4 Predictors: Self-esteem, Entertainment, Escape, and Eustress

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the motivation factors that influence identification among fans who attended NFL games. Results showed that Self-esteem, Entertainment, Escape, and Eustress were major contributors to fan identification. It provides support for previous fan studies by Daniels and Norman (2005), Mak, Lee, and Donahue (2007), Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008), and Wann, Royalty, and Rochelle (2002). In Wann et al.'s study of college basketball fans, it was reported that Self-esteem and Eustress had the highest relationship with Identification. The present sample of NFL fans also showed that Self-esteem and Eustress had the highest correlation coefficient with Identification. This study is also consistent, to a limited degree, with Wann et al.'s work of sport fan motivation profiles of different sport. According to Wann et al., Eustress, Self-esteem, Entertainment, Group Affiliation, and Family motivation were more prevailing factors for team sport than individual sport. Since NFL is considered a team sport, this study partially supports Wann et al.'s findings.

Given the plethora of spectator motives, researches have tried to parsimoniously compare motivations by narrowing the types of sports settings such as collegiate or pro sports (Bernthal and Graham, 2003) and types of sports such as artistic or combative sports (Kim et al., 2008). As more sport fandom research is done, Crawford (2004) reiterated that the sport consumption experience is complex. Hence it is difficult to compare results across the board for all sports. For example, attendance at sports events has been associated with the opportunity to socialize with friends and family (Robertson and Pope, 1999; Fink et al., 2002). The SFMS Family subscale centers on the desire to be with family members. It was not a significant factor in this study and the dissenting results could be due to the type of sports and associated price points. Tickets to NFL games are priced higher when compared to the Major League Baseball, National Hockey League or National Basketball Association game tickets. Hence it can be understood that attending a professional football game for purposes of being together with family was not a key motivator. It should be noted that Dietz- Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte (2000) reported that women were motivated to attend sports for social reasons such as being with family and friends while men were motivated by competitive aspects. The higher ratio of men to women sampled in the study should be further investigated for gender interaction effects.

Although the scales used in this study were validated, the sample size of this study may limit the robustness of the statistical analysis. It is also suggested that sampling procedures involve the study of spectators both at home and away games. This study was limited to spectators attending games at

a National Football League venue and regional differences may exist. Hence it is suggested the findings of this study be limited to other area teams of the same competition level.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS**

The findings of this study have important implications for understanding sport fandom within the Midwest NFL context. Studies centered about sport spectator behavior are of increasing interest to sports industry professionals, mega events facility managers, and destination planning professionals, etc. Understanding that fans have different levels of identification and different types of motivations will enable sport marketers can better tailor strategies to more effectively reach target markets. Marketing and advertising executives will have more success when advertising NFL games as events that address Self-esteem and Eustress instead of Family motivation factors.

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