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Abstract

As of late, researchers in the field of sport psychology have made efforts to deepen our overall understanding of sport fandom and what it entails. As a result, there has been a great deal of research conducted that relates directly to the examination of sports watching behaviors, fans' motivations behind their consumption of particular sports leagues, and team identification, but, at present, there has been minimal research conducted that has examined whether there is a correlation between one's sport fandom and political orientation. As such, the current study sought to explore the possibility of there being a relationship between college students' sport fandom and political orientation. In this study, a sample of 74 college-age students was used to assess whether their political orientation clearly indicated whether they would consume more of the National Basketball Association (NBA) or the National Football League (NFL). To that end, respondents were given a 61-question survey, which consisted of items pertaining to political orientation, sport spectatorship, sport fandom, overall consumption of each respective sport league, and an array of social and political issues. Preliminary results partially supported the hypotheses of this study. Sport psychologists and political scientists alike should further examine this phenomenon in an effort to definitively determine whether political orientation influences sport fandom and to what extent.

Keywords: Sport Fan; Political Orientation; Fandom; Fan Behavior

In recent years, the overall consumption of sports has become an intricate part of American culture (Kim et al., 2020). As a direct result of an increase in globalization and technological advances, sport fans are able to both follow and watch any given athlete, sport, and/or team across the length and breadth of the globe (Kim et al., 2020). On the whole, most sport fans engage with the athlete, sport, and/or team that they highly identify with by attending in-person games or watching via televised programs (Kim et al., 2020). For example, an estimated 38.5 million people outside the confines of the United States of America watched the 2015 Super Bowl (Gift & Miner, 2017), a game in which the New England Patriots defeated the Seattle Seahawks 28 to 24. Undoubtedly, this is just one of many examples that illustrates the universality of sport fandom and team identification.

Today, in one way or another, many sports venues reflect our "political values, priorities, sensibilities, and even neuroses" (Gift & Miner, 2017, p. 129). As a direct result of that reality, now is the most appropriate moment in time to carefully assess and investigate the interconnection between political orientation and sport fandom. On the one hand, both our political orientations and affiliations influence which sport league(s) (e.g., MLB, NBA, NCAA, NFL, or NHL) we watch on a regular basis. Oppositely, since each respective sport league has a distinct demographic, certain people are drawn to certain sports (Colormatics, 2022). For example, while a majority of the fans of professional basketball tend to be between the ages of 18 and 34, college-educated, and affiliated with the Democratic Party, fans of professional football tend to be between the ages of 18 and 49, college-educated, and are affiliated with the Republican Party (Colormatics, 2022). Moreover, fans of professional basketball are "notably more diverse in terms of ethnicity," but professional football fans are both males and females who "live in rural areas, small towns, or subdivisions outside mid-sized cities" (Colormatics, 2022). Be that as it may, sport leagues both directly and indirectly play a considerable role in the alliances that are formed in political arenas, the decision-making of our elected officials, and the overall order and stability of society as a whole (Gift & Miner, 2017).

Sport Fandom

Sport fans comprise people who find consuming sports an important part of their lives (Wann & James, 2018). Sport fans have a number of different motives that underlie their consumption (Wann, Grieve et al., 2008). Eight potential motives for consumption include: aesthetics, economic, entertainment, escape, eustress, family, group affiliation, and self-esteem.

How these motives influence attendance at sporting events has been extensively studied. For example, Wann, Grieve et al. (2008) found that different sports pulled different types of motivation for consumption. In this study, the economic motivation was higher for boxing than other sports; the eustress motivation was lower for figure skating and higher for professional football, hockey, and boxing; and the group affiliation motivation was lower for figure skating, gymnastics, golf, and tennis compared to the other sports.

Also, fans' consumption of different sport types was characterized by different motivational patterns. For example, respondents with an aesthetic motivation were more likely to watch individual sports than team sports. Eustress, self-esteem, group affiliation, entertainment, and family motivations were all recognized as factors for consuming team sports rather than individual sports. Aesthetic motivation was found to be consistent among fans of non-aggressive sports. Motivations relating to economics, eustress, group affiliation, and entertainment were an important factor in the respondents' consumption of aggressive sports. It must be noted, though, that eustress was the motive that was most likely endorsed when consuming aggressive sports (Wann, Grieve et al., 2008). Motives change across levels of sport. Rickard et al. (2008) found different that the entertainment motive and the family motive were the highest motives for fans of baseball games at different levels from Little League to minor league. Pugh et al. (2019) looked at motivational patterns for attending minor league baseball games and attending roller derby matches. They found that baseball fans were more motivated by the family motive than roller derby fans while roller derby fans were more motivated by the aesthetic motive than baseball fans. Mahoney et al. (2002) found that seven motives – drama, vicarious achievement, aesthetics, team attachment, player attachment, sport attachment, and community pride – predicted fans' attachment to Japanese league soccer teams. Dwyer et al. (2011) even looked at motives for playing fantasy sports and found that the entertainment and economic motives were the highest motivators for people in fantasy baseball leagues.

Another potential motivation for consuming sports would be whether the sport matches people's political orientation. That is, it could be that some sports differentially attract conservative versus liberal individuals.

Team Identification

Team identification is defined as a fan's psychological connection to a team (i.e., the extent to which the fan views the team as an extension of him- or herself; Wann & James, 2019). Numerous studies

have indicated that activities that are group-based are positively related to one's overall well-being (see Wann, 2006, for a review). For example, since most social activities lead to an eventual sense of belongingness with others and a connection to the society in which they live, people who highly identify with a group or organization reap psychological benefits (Wann, 2006), including decreased loneliness (Wann, Brame et al., 2008) and stress (Lee et al., 2011).

Political Orientation

A political ideology (or political orientation) is defined as "a view about what ought to be thought, said, and done about politics in terms of a sole criterion, where that sole criterion is a suggestion about to what or whom a fundamental debt is owed, and where this view is contested by views dependent on rival criteria within a situation which is constituted by the continual contestation (i.e., the action or process of disputing or arguing) of criteria" (Alexander, 2015, p. 983). On the whole, having a political ideology is considered to be neutral. There are three basic ideologies in the United States – conservatism, liberalism, and socialism (Alexander, 2015). With each distinct ideology, there is a corresponding political party. By and large, conservatism is predominantly associated with the Republican Party, which is often referred to as the GOP (i.e., Grand Old Party). Liberalism is closely linked to the Democrat Party. Lastly, socialism is primarily bound to the Socialist Party. Conservatives embrace concepts such as free enterprise, limited government, limited regulation, low taxes, and personal freedoms (Course Hero, n.d.). Liberals support initiatives that establish a fairer economy, a high-quality health care system, and reform our current criminal justice system (Course Hero, n.d.). Socialists in the U.S. "stand for the abolition of every form of domination and exploitation, whether based on social class, gender, race or ethnicity, age, education, sexual orientation, or other characteristics" (Socialist Party USA, n.d., para. 1). While socialism is a viable political orientation, the most common political orientations in the United States are conservativism and liberalism; thus, this study focused on those two orientations.

Initiatives of the NFL. As a sport league, even though the National Football League's (NFL) main objective is to provide fans across the world the gift of football, the NFL has also come to fully accept its role when it comes to uniting people from all walks of life. Toward that end, the NFL launched Inspire Change, an initiative that demonstrates "how players, owners, and the league work together to create positive change in communities across America" (NFL Football Operations, n.d., para. 1). Through this particular initiative, the NFL both encourages and supports players in their efforts to engage with team owners, public officials, law enforcement, academic institutions, community partners, and so many others to identify ways to fortify local communities and society as a whole (NFL Football Operations, n.d.). More noteworthy initiatives of the NFL are as follows: Huddle at Home, My Cause My Cleats, and Salute to Service. Through Huddle at Home, the NFL offers digital education resources to commission children, parents, and teachers to urge children to stay active. Many NFL players have organizations and movements that they are passionate about, so My Cause My Cleats gives the players the opportunity to showcase an organization of their choosing on custom-designed cleats. Lastly, Salute to Service is an initiative that the NFL uses to both empower and honor our nation's service members, veterans, and their families (NFL Community, n.d.). These initiatives tend to be organized to support conservative causes such as stable communities and the military. Additionally, football is, many times, seen as an analogy for war (see Kellett, 2002). Thus, it is likely that football draws conservative fans to consume it.

Initiatives of the NBA. As a sport league, the National Basketball Association (NBA) seeks to address social issues that seemingly plague this country and world. Primarily, this is achieved through NBA Cares, the league's global social responsibility program. Other noteworthy causes of the NBA are as follows: Fast Break for Small Business, Hoops for Troops, and the National Basketball Social Justice Coalition. The underlying purpose of Fast Break for Small Business is to change the game for small business owners and remove the barriers that are often faced by minorities, women, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Hoops for Troops is an initiative that involves the NBA, its players and teams in conjunction with the Department of Defense, United Service Organizations (USO), Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), and other organizations that seek to honor active and retired service members and their families. The National Basketball Social Justice Coalition is at the forefront of the NBA family's collaborative efforts to advance social justice and dismantle systemic racial inequality. Social justice and LGBTQIA+ issues tend to be issues that are supported by people with a liberal political orientation. Further, professional basketball's fan base is drawn from people who generally identify as Democrat (Thorson & Serazio, 2018). Thus, it is likely that basketball draws liberal fans to consume it.

For decades, many have implied that there is a relationship between attending a higher education institution and political engagement. To that end, political scientists have consistently found that pursuing a higher education "increases political

participation, electoral turnout, civic engagement, political knowledge, and democratic attitudes and opinions" (Hillygus, 2005). Political engagement, by definition, is understood as any given "action or activities by ordinary citizens that, in some way, are directed toward influencing political outcomes in society" (Matthes, 2022). Historically, researchers have utilized three theories – the Civic Education Theory, the Social Network Theory, and the Political Meritocracy Theory – to assess the relationship between education and political engagement. The Civic Education Theory asserts that education "provides both the skills necessary to become politically engaged and the knowledge to understand and accept democratic principles" (Hillygus, 2005). Likewise, the Civic Education Theory contends that, by pursuing a higher education, citizens are better equipped with the necessary skillsets to analyze political information. The Social Network Theory suggests that the education system is a means by which citizens of a given society are sorted. This theory asserts that education predicts an individual's social network position (Hillygus, 2005). Lastly, the Political Meritocracy Theory challenges the notion that there is a correlation between education and democratic behavior. Though it does not negate the fact that a relationship exists between education and political engagement, it does bring the causal relationship between education and democratic behavior into question (Hillygus, 2005).

Even though voter turnout among college students has fluctuated over the course of numerous election cycles, it is estimated that voter turnout among college students increased by 14 percentage-points between the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections (Smyton & McAndrew, 2021). College students' increase in political engagement and participation is, in part, a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the pandemic impacted every facet of our daily lives, it had a major impact on the way college students interacted with their peers and professors. As a result, since 2020 was an election year, many college students relied heavily on social media for information regarding the pandemic, the political landscape, and social movements (Booth, Tombaugh et al., 2020). Traditionally, political parties and its candidates have struggled to reach the younger generation and, consequently, they have made a genuine effort to have more of an online presence, especially since "young adults, aged 16-25, rely on digital platforms or messenger services, such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, or WebChat, to get the news," which is a relatively new phenomenon (Matthes, 2022).

While social media has many uses, in the context of politics, not only does social media allow college students to readily access information relating to a particular political candidate or issue, it also allows them to engage with the opinions and views of a host of individuals, particularly their peers. Moreover, compared to older generations, younger generations (e.g., Millennials and Generation Z) are often seen as being uninterested in politics, less likely to cast their vote, and less knowledgeable about certain political and social issues (Matthes, 2022). Because of this, both political candidates and parties have seemingly overlooked the younger generation when it comes to politics, but, since many politicians have made their presence known on social media platforms, younger generations are more likely to engage with an array of political and social issues, connect with people who share similar political and social views as them, and also foster civic participation (Matthes, 2022).

Limitations of Existing Research

Comparatively, a great deal of research has been conducted in the areas of sport fandom, political orientation, and team identification. Despite that reality, very few studies have examined the overall influence that sport fans' political orientation has on their sport fandom and overall attachment to certain sport leagues and teams.

The Current Study

The purpose of the current study is to determine the extent of the relationship between sport fandom and political orientation among college students. To achieve this, participants' sport fandom, political orientation, and team identification will be measured. Thereafter, the relationship between these three factors will be examined. Additionally, while this is a correlational study, it is exploratory in nature in that there is no definitive consensus that there are (or are not), in fact, political nuances in the world of sports.

Hypotheses

There are two hypotheses under study:

H1: Because it appears that the NFL supports conservative causes and draws conservative fans, it is hypothesized that students who self-report their political orientation as conservative will be more strongly attached to, and more likely to consume, the NFL; and

H2: Because the NBA supports liberal causes and draws liberal fans, it is hypothesized that students who self-report their political orientation as liberal will be more strongly attached to, and more likely to consume, the NBA.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 74 college-age students (23 males and 51 females) who were recruited through Study Board, an online platform that is used solely for the purpose of recruiting students in both the Department of Psychology and Department of Psychological Sciences to conduct psychological research with human subjects. The mean age of the participants was 19.86 years (SD = 3.01 years). There were 52 (70.3%) Caucasian participants, 10 (13.5%) African-American participants, 2 (2.7%) Asian participants, 1 (1.4%) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander participant, and 9 (12.2%) participants who self-identified as other. Of the 74 participants, 35 (47.3%) were college freshmen, 21 (28.4%) were college sophomores, 7 (9.5%) were college juniors, and 11 (14.9%) were college seniors.

Design

This study used a one-way within-subjects design. The dependent variable was how often the respondents consume either, if not both, NBA and NFL games. The independent variable was respondents' political orientation (i.e., liberal, conservative, or moderate), which was measured by their responses to the political orientation item.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked to self-report their age, education level, ethnicity, and gender.

Frequency. Participants were asked five questions relating directly to how frequently they watch the NBA and NFL and, on average, how much time they spend watching games from each respective sports league.

Political Orientation. In this study, participants were asked "How would you describe your political orientation?" to get a depiction of their political orientation. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess the political orientation of participants, ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 5 (*very conservative*).

Political and Social Topics. Using a scale that was created for this study, participants were asked to rate whether they agree or disagree with certain topics of discussion that are, at a surface level, liberal or conservative. Participants' responses to these questions were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample questions addressed topics such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), Blue Lives Matter, classism, racism (e.g., institutional, structural, and so on), sexism, and social justice.

Team Identification. The Sport Spectator Identification Scale-Revised (SSIS-R; James et al., 2019) is used to reliably measure any given spectators' level of identification with a sport league team.

Participants responded to the seven-item SSIS-R through a five-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). An example item is, "How important is it to you if your favorite NBA/NFL team(s) win?" The SSIS-R has been shown to have good psychometric properties (James et al., 2019). In an effort to get a level of identification with both an NBA and NFL team, participants were given the SSIS-R twice; once for their favorite team in each league.

Sport Fandom. The Sport Fandom Questionnaire (SFQ; Wann, 2002) is a measure that is used to assess general fandom of a particular sports league or team. The SFQ consists of five items that are measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In this study, participants were given a questionnaire for both the NBA and NFL to gauge the strength or weakness of their fandom toward each individual sports league. The SFQ has a Cronbach's α > .90 and test-retest reliability of r = .68 across four weeks (Wann, 2002). Likewise, the SFQ is positively correlated with both sport consumption and knowledge (Wann, 2002). An example item is, "My life would be less enjoyable if I were unable to follow the NBA/NFL."

Procedure

After Institutional Review Board Approval, participants were recruited through the Department of Psychology Study Board to participate in the research study. They completed the study in-person in a research lab. Participants provided informed consent and then completed the frequency items, political orientation question, political and social topics items, the SSIS-R, and the SFQ in a single setting. They provided demographic information after completing the other measures. Data collection took place between November 2021 and March 2022.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Items for the NBA SSIS-R, the NFL SSIS-R, the NBA SFQ, the NFL SFQ, the NBA consumption, the NFL consumption, and the political orientation scales were summed to create totals for each of the variables. The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for each of the measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for the Variables in the Study.

Variable.	*M*	*SD*	Alpha
NBA Consumption	7.50	2.92	.78
NFL Consumption	8.30	3.70	.84
NBA SSIS-R	11.33	6.10	.95
NFL SSIS-R	15.95	8.86	.98
NBA SFQ	10.61	5.39	.91
NFL SFQ	12.68	6.47	.95
Political Orientation	62.93	10.97	.79

Note: NBA = National Basketball Association; NFL = National Football League; SSIS-R = Sport Spectator Identification Scale, Revised; SFQ = Sport Fandom Questionnaire

Hypothesis Testing

In a preliminary test of the hypotheses, correlations were examined among the variables. As shown in Table 2, Political Orientation (liberal versus conservative) was moderately to strongly associated with NFL consumption but was not associated with NBA consumption. Identification with the NBA was not associated with Political Orientation, but Identification with the NFL was associated with Political Orientation.

Linear regression analyses were conducted to follow-up these correlations. As shown in Table 3, team identification and NFL fandom were predictors of NFL consumption and NBA fandom was a predictor of NBA consumption; political orientation did not predict consumption of either sport.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether there was a correlation between college students' political orientation and sport fandom. The hypotheses of this study were that the college students who self-reported their political orientation as conservative would identify strongly with the NFL and that students who self-reported their political orientation as liberal would identify strongly with the NBA. The hypotheses were partially supported.

The results of this study indicated a few things that are worth discussing in further detail. First, there was a moderate negative relationship between the respondents' self-reported political orientation and participants' scores on the measure of political and social issues, which suggests that political orientation and sport fandom can exist independently of one another. Second, there was a moderate positive relationship between respondents' consumption of NFL games and how conservative they reported themselves being. This suggests that those who are conservative are more likely to watch NFL games more frequently than NBA games. Lastly, there was a moderate positive relationship between respondents' fandom of the NFL and their self-reported conservative political orientation. Ultimately, this indicates that those who have a conservative political orientation are more likely to be fans of the NFL rather than the NBA. The study findings support hypothesis one.

There are some limitations to this study. First and foremost, a convenience sample of college students was used. The pool of respondents consisted of students from the Department of Psychology and Department of Psychological Sciences. As such, because this study had such a small sample, it limits the ability to generalize the findings of this study. Historically, the state of Kentucky, which is located in the Bible Belt, has been considered a conservative state, so another limitation of this study is that respondents could be predisposed to a conservative political orientation, which, in turn, makes it more likely that they will be fans of the NFL rather than the NBA. Also, another limitation of this study was that the questions relating to political and social issues were not reverse-coded, which would have ensured consistent answers from the respondents. Lastly, one of the biggest limitations of this study was that some of the political and social issue questions were worded in such a way that some of the respondents did not understand what was being stated. For example, question 59 read: "Fans should *admonish* professional athletes that participate in demonstrations of social justice."

In conclusion, this study has laid the foundation for both sport psychologists and political scientists to further examine the relationship between political orientation and sport fandom. In the end, the current study sought to examine whether a relationship exists between college students' political orientation and sport fandom. Although it was hypothesized that there would be a correlation between students' political orientation and sport fandom, after conducting this study, there is no definitive answer as to whether there is a relationship between students' political orientation and their fandom of the NBA or NFL. In the future, sport psychologists and political scientists in U.S. states with both an NBA and NFL team (e.g., Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Dallas, TX, and Denver, CO) could replicate this study and, depending on the final results, could potentially generalize the idea that there is a positive relationship with political orientation and sport fandom.

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Table 2
Correlation Matrix for All of the Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	--							
2	.47**	--						
3	.61**	.18	--					
4	.33**	.70**	.34**	--				
5	.77**	.29*	.74**	.27*	--			
6	.35**	.77**	.11	.74**	.30**	--		
7	-.06	.30*	.07	.22	-.03	.35**	--	
8	.01	-.10	-.04	-.09	.30	-.18	-.54**	--

Note: 1 = NBA Consumption; 2 = NFL Consumption; 3 = NBA SSIS-R; 4 = NFL SSIS-R; 5 = NBA SFQ; 6 = NFL SFQ; 7 = Political Orientation (1 = liberal; 5 = conservative); 8 = Political Scenarios

Table 3
Regression Equation for NFL and NBA Consumption.

Variable	B	Beta	t	p
NFL Consumption (R^2 = .62)				
Political Orientation	0.12	.038	0.78	.63
NFL SSIS-R	0.12	.28	2.45	.02
NFL SFQ	0.31	.54	4.57	<.001
NBA Consumption (R^2 = .59)				
Political Orientation	-0.10	.19	-0.04	.59
NBA SSIS-R	0.05	.10	0.84	.40
NBA SFQ	0.37	.69	5.99	<.001

Note: NBA = National Basketball Association; NFL = National Football League; SSIS-R = Sport Spectator Identification Scale, Revised; SFQ = Sport Fandom Questionnaire