

Fandom and Identity: The Psychological Implications of Sports Fan Engagement through the Lens of Positive Psychology

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Abstract

The field of media psychology interprets the human experience by examining how individuals engage with media and technology, as well as the relationships and meanings associated with them. When we explore the cognitive interactions between media consumption and human behavior, we find that numerous psychological research disciplines address this relationship, including the realm of sports. As a media psychologist, I focus on the intersections of fan identity, culture, the sports experience economy, community behavior, and media/technology engagement. Despite the growing importance of the sports industry, I am often surprised by the limited attention it receives from a psychological perspective and in high-level scholarly discourse. This is particularly striking given that sporting contests have a rich history dating back thousands of years to ancient civilizations [1].

In this brief expert opinion piece, I aim to highlight the psychological implications of sports fan engagement through the lens of positive psychology. I will discuss both the benefits and opportunities associated with sports allegiances in today's media-saturated environment. By focusing on concepts such as social identity, emotional resilience, and community development, I underscore the necessity of understanding the scope of potential positive effects generated by fan engagement. I also call for further research and practical applications that promote inclusivity and joy within the sports setting to enable fans to have a safe, regulated means of engagement, overriding the present slew of negativity and harmful online behavior currently polluting society, in both real and digital settings.

Keywords

Fan engagement, Sports media and communication, Positive psychology, Community, Emotional resilience.

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Introduction

Sports fandom in today's contemporary society has significant meaning and is a space where researchers and developers can learn a lot about an individual's identity. For instance, research about one's personal level of resistance and patterns of behavior when it comes to media consumption and tech interactivity can become evident and reveal itself as well. This is all afforded because

the landscape of sports media has become oversaturated with new touchpoints of engagement, including X (formerly known as Twitter), which for a long time was considered a digital sports bar [2] where many organic fan communities developed. Digital media spaces present a very important opportunity as a vehicle for inclusion and engagement, particularly for Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) or crowd-averse individuals who might experience discomfort from Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) or varying

forms of social anxiety. Providing digital outlets and means for engagement allows individuals an opportunity to still be a part of the sports experience as opposed to isolating them.

Investigating the complex multilayers of fandom affords investigators multiple angles of exploring the human experience when it comes to their usage of, relationship with, and meaning associated with sports media. While social identity emphasizes the self-esteem achieved from affiliation with a larger group [3], team identification similarly addresses emotionally-rooted feelings of belonging, connection, values, and community [4-6]. It is these emotional roots that I am bringing attention to in this piece as a means to present a new area to learn from, particularly when studied through the lens of positive psychology.

While fandom is not a new concept, the influences presented by emerging media do present new means of fan experiences, illustrating a consistent push in human activity of wanting to be more fully immersed and engaged with entertainment media [2]. If we look at the evolution of sports media consumption, we can go all the way back to the early 1800s when the sports page was introduced to newspapers [7], to ESPN going 24/7 on television in 1980 [8], all the way up to the present day with immersive and interactive platforms as complementary options [2]. Human behavior is significantly influenced by one's emotions and passions as opposed to reason or logic [9], tying directly to interpretations of identity, esteem, and community engagement. This reiterates my purpose in writing this expert opinion piece, which is to begin exploring the psychological implications of sports fan engagement through the lens of positive psychology.

Positive psychology is a shift in perspective moving away from looking at what's wrong with somebody to focusing instead on identifying their strengths, values, and emotions that support human flourishing and the pursuit of a life well-lived [10-12]. I urge a continuation of finding human strengths and constructive values in both research and applied practices to surge an interdisciplinary initiative or movement to push the development of wellness-based strategies for creating new forms of media, art, and technological engagement, rooted in the guidelines of positive media use. Using a positive psychology framework, researchers and developers can more effectively assess and leverage the potential of media technologies to create positive impacts on individuals and society as a whole, as it will emphasize the identification of strengths and opportunities for growth, enabling the design of media solutions that enhance well-being and foster positive social change [13,14]. Through the lens of positive psychology, what follows is a high-level overview of key concepts related to the cultivation of psychologically impactful, engagement-based fan experiences.

Psychological Implications of Sports Fandom

What insights can we learn about ongoing fan engagement strategies from the realm of sports? Such revelations would be embedded with principles rooted in behavioral psychology, encompassing both individual and group/collective dynamics. Concepts of team identification and fan identity are similar in nature, pointing to not only a sense of belonging to a greater entity

but also the boosted self-esteem and confidence provided as a result. Consequently, I assert that the economy of sports business and media can provide a unique, alternative channel of positivity, whereby uplifting experiences are both refreshing and without an expiration date. Traditional perspectives on fandom often present a narrow view; however, I contend that modern fandom is inherently multifaceted. Contemporary fans are shaped by an array of new media consumption patterns and engagement touchpoints, each resonating with diverse emotions, motivations, and cognitive processes. This exploration was central to my 2017 dissertation, "Digital Fandomonium" [2], in which I drew upon organizational psychology concepts to elucidate the three-tiered structure of a multidimensional sports fan experience. Here, I adapted the antecedents and consequences of customer-company identification as proposed by Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen [15] to the context of the developmental stages of sports fandom. Thus, affective, continuance, and normative identification correspond to Want (the fan's desire to engage), Need (the perceived necessity to participate), and Should/Ought (the sense of obligation to uphold their fandom). In essence, if one can cultivate a fan's desire to engage, imbue the need for participation with a sense of duty, and subsequently nurture commitment, a foundation for loyalty is established. This commitment is critical for the development of any community, regardless of context be it sports-related or otherwise aiming to foster synergy around a shared cause through collaboration, mutual interests, and public or cultural civic spaces.

Positive Psychology in Sports Fandom

Positive psychology focuses on well-being [16]. Sports fans have a sense of community among them with people who share the same interest in experience, bringing added senses of self-esteem and emotional assistance. Since we're also sifting out factors to discover the secret ingredients of flourishing and human life, I believe that today's sports experience has the potential to enhance psychological well-being. Belonging is a fundamental human motivation that promotes mental health [17]. Similarly, positive psychology emphasizes the cultivation of positive emotions, which sports fandom has been noted to significantly enhance [2,6]. Engaging with sports through watching games, discussions, or events can evoke joy, excitement, and pride. Such emotions enrich the fan experience, thus contributing to the generation of positive experiences. Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory [18] holds that positive emotions broaden the individual's thought-action repertoire and build personal resources over time. This turn from human deficits toward human strengths is a necessary one, especially since many are faced with negative media influences, such as feelings of inadequacy or anger from the dissemination of misinformation. From this position, an imperative need arises for the development of positive media strategies that provide a variety of creative outlets to counteract the toxicity affecting our well-being.

When developing media technology, the design of digital tools that satisfy our needs and promote health can be considered a positive step for the human experience. Positive media experiences can extend beyond digital; for example, joy from experiencing social media transfers into real-life situations due to the fact that our

brains process media with the same inner mechanisms used to process real life [19].

Martin Seligman created the PERMA model, identifying Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment as the five core components of well-being [16]. I believe this presents a reference to build upon in strategizing the development of fan engagement experiences that are purposefully designed to reinforce resilience and pleasure. Because positive engagements and social interactions can have a positive effect on a person's mental health [20], it becomes vital to expand our understanding of what a flourishing life "looks" like, especially for different communities, such as fandoms, and what items can be classified as a positive outcome trigger. For instance, storytelling could be used as a positive intervention tool where audiences become connected to an athlete, the history of a team, or regional local history based on shared cultural stories and communal practices. It is from this position that I call on those engaged in applied professional practice and academic/education research to consider using this model as a lens to create complementary experiences for audiences that occur not only during the season but also beyond the sport itself throughout the whole year to facilitate an ongoing practice of positive engagement.

Emotional Resilience and Community

Given my scope of personal, professional, and research-based experiences in the business and consumption of sports, I can strongly testify to the phenomenon of sports fandom being closely associated with emotional resilience. A deep sense of belonging is cultivated among its followers who actively participate in the shared experiences created. For instance, engaging in support for a sports team triggers a range of emotional reactions, from joy during victories to collective grief in defeat. This emotional journey aids in the development of coping strategies that are beneficial not only during happy moments but also during challenging times. As such, research indicates that participation in group activities, such as cheering for a sports team, improves emotional regulation [21]. Moreover, the communal experiences inherent to fandom can serve as a protective shield against stress, offering comfort through social connections.

Community support is an essential component of the sports fan experience, significantly enhancing both personal well-being and the formation of a collective, shared identity. Fans often establish strong interpersonal relationships that extend beyond the sports venue. This sense of community fosters social ties, increasing individuals' feelings of belonging and self-esteem. Studies show that social backing from fellow fans strengthens coping mechanisms during difficult times, applicable not only within the realm of sports but also across wider life experiences as well [22]. This forges a collective enthusiasm for a team or athlete that can reinforce an individual's emotional level on a positive scale. Furthermore, research on attitudes derived from social contexts has shown how engagement within social networks and in-group interactions significantly contributes to senses of well-being and joy from participation in positive communal experiences [23]. This perspective links to Fredrickson's [18] broaden-and-build

theory, which details how positive emotions can broaden a person's thought-action repertoires and, as a result, build on their own enduring personal resources social connections included.

The rise of digital platforms has drastically changed how fans engage with their teams, creating crucial spaces for inclusivity. Social media networks, online discussion boards, and virtual communities allow fans to connect regardless of geographical boundaries or differences in socioeconomic status, race, or education level thereby nurturing a unified sense of belonging. Within these online environments, fans can share experiences, collectively celebrate triumphs, and provide support during challenging times. For those with sensory sensitivities, social anxiety, or introverted tendencies, digital platforms offer an alternative to conventional face-to-face interactions. Individuals experiencing sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) or social anxiety may feel overwhelmed by large crowds at live events. Therefore, engaging online provides a more comfortable atmosphere similar to having ample space in a backyard where they can feel included rather than isolated. Research suggests that online communities can enhance feelings of connection and offer emotional support, particularly for marginalized populations [24]. For introverted fans, participating in discussions on internet forums may serve as a formidable channel for communication and validation while maintaining anonymity, reducing social pressures.

Positive psychology underscores the necessity of fostering environments that promote well-being and cultivate individual strengths. By enabling connections among fans with common interests, digital platforms can enhance emotional resilience and overall psychological health. Sports organizations that acknowledge and cater to these needs may adapt their content and engagement approaches accordingly such as organizing virtual viewing parties or moderating discussions sensitively. As a result, digital platforms not only facilitate fan participation but also provide crucial support for those with sensory sensitivities or anxiety issues while promoting a more inclusive atmosphere within sports fandom.

Conclusion

Through leveraging my broad knowledge of sports experience and fan engagement, I sought to initiate conversation and exploration of what positive influences and implications might occur when viewed through the framework of positive psychology. In this short introductory opinion piece, I first briefly mentioned major areas of psychology that can have an influence: Fan Identity, Emotional Resilience, and Community Commitment. Fundamentally, sports fandom can meet basic human needs like belonging and purpose [25]. It is true that fandom also has a darker side [25] emotions can ride a rollercoaster but these shared allegiances often carry a lot of good with them that can help individuals further build emotional regulation, resilience, and coping skills. A sense of belonging is sustained by the self-esteem gained from interacting with a community that shares similar interests and passions. This sense of camaraderie can serve as a buffer, providing fans, regardless of level, with the support that they desperately need.

In addition, digital platforms have emerged as critical forums for

inclusive participation. Online communities provide a space for fans to connect and celebrate their passion without the pressures or triggers common at real-life events. But with the rise of online extremism and hate speech in popular social media applications, I believe that a work priority should be starting with a clean slate with safety and ethical regulations with a no-tolerance policy on hate and harmful content and bots. Going forward, three main areas for further consideration are: First, interventions aligned with the PERMA model, grounded in co-creation and stakeholder collaboration, might improve the well-being of fans attending these events, as well as the experience itself. Second, studies need to examine whether there is a long-term psychological effect of being able to participate digitally as a sports fan and whether that is particularly important for marginalized groups. Finally, attention to how innovative media tools can facilitate healthy engagement and communities of care among these groups is vital for building resilience in the current media landscape and countering the effects of misinformation. These dynamics need to be understood to leverage the potential of sports fandom as a tool for positive social change.

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