Sport Fandom's Intertwined Relationship to Well-being – The Power of Shared Team Identification within Sports Communities

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Abstract

An individual's well-being can have significant correlation with their belief systems and learned ideologies - which can place high importance on sports teams and their true significance in people's lives and those around them (Reysen, Plante & Chadborn, 2017). Further investigation into the key factors that play a role in sport fans' well-being could yield intriguing results. Sports fandom spans every currently living generation - there will be new complexities that factor into each individual sports fan's state of well-being. Narrowing those complexities into a clearer understanding for temporal psychological states could garner macro and micro results as to why - sports fans identify heavily with their teams, a sports fan would employ coping mechanisms to maintain their identity as a fan, diving deeper into satisfying sports fans' craving for team identification/positive state of well-being (Delia, 2017). Depending on the results of the study and consolidation of prior research, sports entities might find this study useful in better understanding their consumers (sports fans) and the adaptive well-being of the community surrounding their organization as they grow together. This study will be qualitative in nature, however sparingly, there will be models and quantitative research mentioned that yield relevant and credible case studies. This case study will be using a purposive sample of participants with high fan identification for the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Dallas Mavericks. The purpose of this study – further qualitative research into the relationship between sports fandom and the psychological effects on a sports fan's well-being and how they navigate those highs and lows.

Sport Fandom's Intertwined Relationship to Well-being – The Power of Shared Team Identification within Sports Communities

Sports fandom entails the connection individuals feel towards their favorite sports teams (i.e. team identification) and the community they've adopted in the process. It's a fundamental aspect of human nature to live with others and to maintain a sense of belonging with social groups (Kesler & Wann, 2020). Sports fans select their team and subconsciously that team's community. A sports team's community will face highs and lows together that can supersede ideologies. An extreme example of this could be bipartisan political understanding and reaching across the aisle for the betterment of the United States (government) – seeing beyond our differences and leaving divisiveness at the door for the greater good of a common goal.

Sports possess the power to bring individuals together that would otherwise never cross paths. This power can hold prominent influence on sports' fans as they build their team identification, which connects them further to an entity that might not be producing favorable results on their field of play. Poor results can lead fans to explore coping mechanisms, which can be overcome if they're willing to strap in and remain a loyal fan and possibly lean on their team's community or sports organization to uplift them from an identity crisis. The ebbs and flows of a sports team's successes and failures on and off the field may have strong ripple effects within the communities that covet them.

Team identification can have powerful social and psychological health outcomes, which can come in the form of an attack on a fan's identity leading to coping mechanisms (Delia, 2017). These coping mechanisms seem to be attempts at stabilizing fans' well-being; when a sports organization's identity becomes associated with underperforming, has a scandal, or faces public criticism. Fan identification may appear to waver in the fallout, the resulting fans' actions could

be an attempt at regaining a semblance of their own dignity, identification, and trusted belief systems. Hierarchy of salience is a concept in which different components of individuals' identity are ranked regarding prominence and importance. There is still need for more research into the "interplay between the multiple identities with a sport fan's salience hierarchy" (Mansfield, Melton & Katz, 2022). Observing sports fandom and their adopted communities within the older adults' psyche. Older adults' relationships within sports communities – their perceptions of subjective well-being, emotional support and belonging. Older adults' connections to team identity can span many decades, which their social lives may begin to revolve around. Finding community within likeminded individuals is difficult, but sports identification can form a quick bond between perfect strangers set in their ways. Lock, Sato, Wann, Inoue, Moore and Funk's (2020) study, *Enhancing older adults' sense of belonging and subjective well-being through sport game attendance, team identification, and emotional support* "results indicated that game attendance and team identification had a positive and significant influence on older adults' perceptions of emotional support from fellow team fans" (p. 530). Through their use of structural and measurement modeling to prove their hypotheses, they "found that older adults' perceptions of emotional support are enhanced by participation in social activities and associated group identification, and those perceptions, in turn, affect their sense of belonging and subjective well-being" (p. 540).

Sports fandom and the ability to maintain identification with their team of choice requires brand loyalty and a concerted effort to remain invested in the goals of the team they follow. Coping strategies are not just denying the existence of a negative event or result encompassing their team. Daniel Wann's – Table 1 - Highly identified sports fans manipulate their associations with a team. The sports fan wants to protect themselves from further anguish or attachment to an organization that appears lost at the wheel. Fans make decisions for their team's organization to maintain the

course or lobbying for positive change for their team. The fan and team relationship can fall into a one-sided discussion. Like many relationships there is give and take nature, when one party breaches this unspoken agreement and fails to account for the other a fallout may occur. Sports fans grasp at straws looking for the positives in their team's potential future, while the current negative narrative that may surround their team becomes increasingly prominent in their lives. "Meaning in life is not necessarily experienced just from being a highly identified fan. Instead, specific elements of one's connection to team provide meaning" (Delia, James & Wann, 2022). Delia, James, and Wann (2022) study findings "highlight the importance of close relationships over imaginary intimate relationships…how mental health via fandom may provide older adults significance." A team's community strength seems indirectly tied to the team and places the established relationships with other fans as the real binding force. Fandom does include the bitter taste of rivalry that leads to hatred and a darker side of sport, which can lead to largely emotional responses. Meeting a rival on equal footing and going punch for punch can lead to mutual respect. We can achieve similar results within other communities of likeminded folks; furthermore, sports are a strong bonding agent (Papineau, 2021).

Are all sports fans motives similar or do they become passionate for singular reasons or quasi-unique reasons? This case study will explore those motives and attempt to uncover similar themes that fans exhibit on their journey to becoming a highly identified sports fan. The answer appears to be very intricate and person specific. Aligning under one flagship requires a commitment and ownership of your ideals and passions. Sports fandom can surely include a variety of positive outcomes in a person's life. Sports fandom and the power it holds over some individuals could be vastly different than others. This study explores the complexity of the highly identified sports fan's psyche through thematic analysis in a qualitative study.

Literature Review

This Literature Review will be comprised of articles that provide a foundation of research for this developing research study. There appears to be an unraveling evolution of knowledge behind sports fandom's connection to team identification and the state of psychological well-being a fan can experience. This knowledge continues to be built upon previous scholarly research efforts. These studies tackle the psychological complexities surrounding a sports fan's journey towards developing their highly identified fandom of a sports team.

Theoretical Framework

This will be a qualitative research study employing research theory within a National Basketball Association (NBA) fanbase – the Dallas Mavericks. In Delia, James, and Wann's (2022) article, *Does Being a Sport Fan Provide Meaning in Life?* – they employ a conceptual framework; however, their research mirrors this case study's data organization needs well. Adapting their technics while accounting for necessary variation to obtain the study's ideal results. They used a data-driven approach that is not dissimilar to a thematic analysis approach. This study will adopt thematic analysis when combing through the collected data. Breaking down diary entries and interview data, which suits this study's goals in that patterns in the data are present. Trying to make sense of those patterns through past research and similar result alignment. Patterns in the data will be similar words, topics, and concepts provided by participants as answers to (diary and interview) questions throughout the study's duration. The researcher will begin with the collected qualitative data, which is broken down in the coding process into codes. These codes converted through interactive comparison into themes. Creating theme categories should allow the

researcher to organize results to interpret. The results will be collected over the length of the NBA season. Only after the data is finally collected in mid-April of 2025 will it begin to be organized and coded by the researcher. The data will include hundreds of pages of transcribed material from the participants.

Team Identification and Social Psychological Health

Scholars build upon others' research - the models continually referenced in current team identification and well-being research provide us with foundational building blocks. Wann, Dunham, Byrd, and Keenan's *Five-Factor Model* (2004) developed in their study on *Personality and the Psychological Health of Highly Identified Sports Fans* is referenced in many articles regarding sport team identification. Their article was written two decades ago and must battle the previously held notion that "sport fandom is often stereotypically associated with negative behaviors such as poor interpersonal skills and aggressiveness" (p. 29). Local team identification can be positively linked to social support, camaraderie, and connections to society at large. They continue to compare other theories and their consistencies and connections to one another.

The Five-Factor Model is not the best model for determining mental health or well-being, however, the data collected can be used to inference possible correlations with an individual's well-being. The five variables they used to survey 196 university students were as follows – Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness, Neuroticism, and Agreeableness. The authors write "identifying with a local team may result in a valuable social support network, it was hypothesized that identification with a local sport team would be positively correlated with Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness and negatively correlated with Neuroticism…with no real correlation to agreeableness expected" (p. 30). Their expectations were all confirmed, expect

Neuroticism was not negatively related to identifying with a local team. Their findings do not completely prove a sturdy connection between "psychological ties to a local sport team are positively related to psychological health" (p. 34), however, the correlation is not disproven. The authors' point toward the need for more research to be done to draw stronger ties to sports fandom and psychological health.

Daniel L. Wann has had his finger on the pulse regarding sports psychological health research over the last two decades. Wann has developed and been a part of the development of several significant advances in sport psychological modeling. Wann's *Team Identification – Social Psychological Health Model* (2006) (Figure 1, below) "framework…is posited that individuals who identify with a sport team have temporary and enduring social connections to sport teams, resulting in greater social well-being" (Delia, 2017). Wann covers coping strategies and provides descriptions of each in '*Table 1'* (below). These findings come only two years after his involvement with the Five-Factor Model. These frameworks are still utilized almost 20 years later, which others have expanded upon or used it as a baseline for developing further modeling. My research study will build upon these coping strategies to understand the breadth of fan identification and its correlation to well-being.

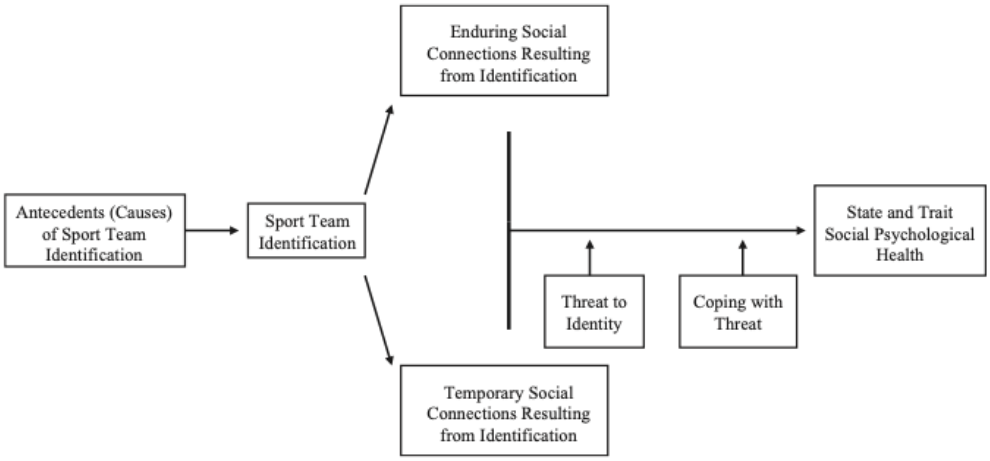


Figure 1. The Team Identification–Social Psychological Health Model.

Table 1
Common Coping Strategies Used by Highly Identified Sport Fans

Strategy	Brief Description
Manipulating associations with a team:	
Basking in reflected glory	Increasing association with a successful team (or switching one's focus to a more successful favorite)
Cutting off reflected failure	Decreasing association with an unsuccessful team, note: highly identified fans tend not to do this, rather, they tend to increase self-stereotyping
Cutting off future failure	Choosing not to increase association with a successful team
Outgroup derogation	Acting in a hostile fashion towards outgroup persons (e.g., fans of rival teams, officials, etc.)
Biased perceptions:	
Evaluations of players and fans	Perceive own team's players and fans in a more positive manner than players and fans of rival teams
Predictions and recollections	Overly positive in recall past performances and expectations for future performances
Attributions	Attributing team's success to internal causes while viewing team's failures as a result of external factors
Pessimism:	
Retroactive	After a competition, concluding that the team's chances of success were small (compared to pre-competition estimates)
Proactive	Decreasing your perception that the team will succeed as a competition draws near
Magical and mystical	Attempting to influence a contest through superstitious behavior and beliefs in curses as explanations for poor performance
Group cohesion	Increasing the perception of fan unity
Downward social comparison	Comparing your team to less successful teams
Displays of team knowledge	Presenting oneself as knowledgeable of a team's history to assist in coping with acceptance threat

Team Identification and Coping with Identity Threats

Kim, J. and Kim, Y. wrote the article *Coping with losses: Need unfulfillment, coping strategies and temporal well-being of sport fans,* to research strategies sports fans lean on to evade deeper depressive states of being. If a sports team losses regularly, a fan's identification with that team will appear to waiver to stable their well-being. High fan identification can be detrimental to a person's well-being if they do not learn how to cope "to mitigate potential threats to well-being" with their team's shortcomings (p. 721). They examine the positive and negative effects of fans' exposure to a game – win or loss – their psychological need fulfillment/unfulfillment and the positive/negative effect(s) that lead to a temporal psychological state. This model expands further into identification of a 'threat' and the 'response.' Fans learn to adapt and 'mitigate effects' to reach a manageable temporal psychological state. The article sets out to prove this conceptual model. The structural model they developed starts with need unfulfillment, leading to coping strategies, and the temporal well-being produced as an outcome. More research within need fulfillment and well-being of sports fans must be done to back up the authors' findings. Their findings were enlightening to sports entities/managers and how to alleviate adverse effects of a loss by diverting to the positives within the game, providing a safe space for fans to vent, and pointing toward what the future may hold for their team.

The author of *March sadness: Coping with fan identity threat*, Elizabeth B. Delia, focuses on the relationship collegiate basketball fans connection with their teams' and their proximity to "identity threat, such as a program scandal" (p. 408). The public relations fallout can be difficult to grasp and maintain the same team identification. Delia uses "autoethnography, an interpretive ethnographic mode of inquiry, to examine her Syracuse University Men's Basketball fandom and her reaction to sanctions imposed on the program in 2015" (p. 408). Delia explores the connection

between team performance and fans' coping with the ups and downs of attaching oneself to a team can do for their well-being. She breaks down relevant theories, detailed definitions of coping, and her (autoethnographic) process used. Among her discoveries is "that coping is a multifaceted process, unique to the individual and the particular situation" (p. 417). Fans use "emotion-focused coping strategies, given the inability of fans to change or control team matters" (p. 419). Fans may use humor, distancing themselves, changing their focus, seeking out familial support, surrounding themselves with community and others that feel the same stage of anguish, etc.

Well-being and the Importance of Sports Communities

Delia, James, and Wann's article, *Does being a sport fan provide meaning in life?* (2021) - "primary aim…is to understand how team identification may impact consumers' lives" and the connection between "identification with a sports team alongside well-being" (p. 45). The article uses empirical and conceptual work to back their findings. The researchers used a qualitative approach on the topic that has been primarily studied quantitatively. The reasoning for this shift is "to understand the unique experiences of fans…given the complexity of team identification and well-being" (p. 45). The study uses a WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) team, Minnesota Lynx, and their fanbase (season ticket holders) to conduct qualitative research – their data collection and constraints appear to yield favorable results. Their findings illuminate macro sources of significance; the need for close relationships and building community around a central shared interest (in a sports team).

In *The Well-Being of Sport Fans: Predicting Personal Life Satisfaction and Social Life Satisfaction* (2020), authors Kesler and Wann "simultaneously examine the interrelationships

among team identification, sport fandom, personal well-being, and social well-being" (p. 321), which has been researched separately, but never in total correlation with each other. These are uncharted waters, so they draw four probable hypotheses for the outcome of their research: "Sport fandom will be a significant unique predictor of personal life satisfaction, Team identification will not be a significant unique predictor of personal life satisfaction, Team identification will be a significant unique predictor of social life satisfaction, or Sport fandom will not be a significant unique predictor of social life satisfaction" (p. 321). They set their constraints and participants for their method of obtaining data to back their possible hypotheses (315 college students with a mean age of 21.26 years with a standard deviation of 4.20). This study appears to build upon "the growing body of research documenting a positive link between sport team identification and social psychological health" (p. 323). All hypotheses were proven, except they found that team identification was a predictor of personal life satisfaction. They speak about other unique applications of the study that could yield even more correlation (like fantasy sports). The results are consistent with earlier research on the "link between team identification and social psychological health" (p. 330).

In Reysen, Plante, and Chadborn's (2017) research study, *Better together: Social connections mediate the relationship between fandom and well-being*, "fans of a variety of different interests completed measures regarding degree of fandom with a favorite fan interest, functions of fandom engagement, and well-being" (p. 68). Reiterating the initial sentiment in my abstract above, an individual's well-being can have significant correlation with their belief systems and learned ideologies which can place high importance on sports teams and their true significance in people's lives and those around them. "For many fans, their fandom is more important to them and central to their identity than other traditional connections or relationships" (p. 69). There is an

immeasurable weight placed on sports organizations to do right by their respective fanbases, which can have lasting and profound effects on fans' well-being. The authors' find that there is a relationship mediated between identification with a fanbase and well-being, which is further advanced through social connection.

The research being conducted in this study will attempt to illuminate connections between highly identified sports fandom and the significance their fandom has on their well-being. While in addition, building upon current research that accounts for the trials and tribulations (coping) when scaling the breadth of a fan's possible rise to a state of tranquility (healthy well-being) as a highly identified Dallas Mavericks fan. Again, the purpose of this study – further qualitative research into the relationship between sports fandom and the psychological effects on a sports fan's well-being and how they navigate those highs and lows.

- RQ1 – Is sports fandom a stronger central identity to highly identified sports fans than other traditional connections or relationships?
- RQ2 – To what extent does sports fandom adversely stretch a fan's well-being towards coping mechanisms (employed to mitigate poor need fulfillment)?
- RQ3 – What sparks a highly identified fan's fandom for their team?

Methods

Research Design

This study is conducted through a qualitative (inductive) approach and instrumental case study design – data collection through diaries and interviews of highly identified Dallas Mavericks' fans. Through use of triangulation (employs multiple *instruments*) – participant *diaries* followed by an *interview* allows for strong convergence. Meaning all participants can elaborate

further on past diary entries in their final interview. Transcribing all collected participant data establishes validity through member-checking. This convergence increases the credibility of the data collected by lowering the probability that response bias exists in the collected data. This research will be following a similar methodology to Delia, James, and Wann's (2022), *Does Being a Sport Fan Provide Meaning in Life?* A key difference between this study and theirs would be their use of interpretive paradigm (focusing in on understanding one particular idea), while this study will have a collection of elements that jump back and forth between the highs and lows of being a sports fan with high team identification. Past research focuses a lot on 'does being a sports fan provide happiness' or the inverse 'does high team identification as a sports fan lead to coping mechanisms.' This study looks to dive deeper to connect those highs and lows and bridge that gap.

Data Collection

Using a qualitative research methodology. Collection of consent for participation in the study will be done in-person with a physical signature from each of the 20 participants. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling – the researcher narrowed a subgroup of Dallas Maverick's fans that are part of a season ticketholder membership group called Club Maverick. Participants will be provided with the start of an email chain to record their 7 diary entries to close each month - October 2024 to April 2025 - of the Dallas Maverick's regular season. These diary entries are sent to a neutral email (MavsFandom24_25@gmail.com) specifically created for this study's data collection. The researcher will send out a different open-ended, closed-ended or probing question each month via the email chain (as a subtle reminder to respond and spark participant inspiration). All participants all received the same 7 questions over that 7-month period. This email will be destroyed (in April 2025) after all data is collected/transcribed and transferred

to a singular file kept in Professor Nicole Sellars office at Troy University - for up to 3 years (in April 2028).

The individuals participating in the study will be selected from the pool of over 3,500 people enrolled in 'Club Maverick' – a Dallas Maverick internal rewards program that includes season ticket holders and grants early or exclusive access to organized events, promotions, and other incentives (e.g. lower ticket pricing for home playoff games and Dallas Mavericks merchandise discounts).

Participant selection follows a primarily purposive sampling structure. The researcher has corporate connections within the Dallas Mavericks organization, so elements of convenience sampling took place too. Those connections allowed access to in-person events held this offseason for Club Maverick members. Additionally, using purposive sampling allowed research to start with a pool of possible participants that identify as highly identified Dallas Mavericks fans. Their membership in Club Maverick and participating in a Dallas Mavericks related event in the off-season are strong indicators that they highly identify with the team. Attendance at the event alludes to individuals' possible willingness to participate in a research study that can clarify the connection fans have to the Dallas Mavericks organization. All 20 participants that hold Club Maverick membership will be selected from the 'general public.' Variables such as race and ethnicity will not be included in analysis, however, all participants were 18 years or older (age of each participant will be recorded). Also, the number of participants and technics used to gather participants (organizational connections) are like the study *Does Being a Sport Fan Provide Meaning in Life?* conducted by Delia, James, and Wann (2022). Following this similar process of filtering, individuals volunteering to participate were issued the proper informed consent documents (written in plain English for the 'general public').

The time investment and overall rigor of the study justifies quality incentives to maintain response rates by the participants. Incentives all participants will receive to increase response rates included - a Dallas Mavericks merchandise bag with items like a jersey, hat, and other limited-edition items. Plus, a $100 gift card to The Hanger (Maverick's official merchandise shop) will be issued to all 20 participants. The Dallas Mavericks will only receive results that the public receives, which removes all participant identifiers. The Dallas Mavericks primary motive is to better understand their highly identified fans. The call to action in the researcher's Informed Consent Form issued to each participant states that, "your participation will help the Dallas Mavericks better understand their fans and the weight the team has in your life." All participants were given a code name as an identifier to keep all personal identifiers undisclosed. Only the primary researcher (Aidan Conner) and their professor, Nicole Sellars, are privy to the participants names and identifiers prior to code name creation.

Members of Club Maverick are by default highly identified fans of the Dallas Mavericks, which provides a solid foundation for this research (prerequisites for membership covered in previous section). Establishing a pool of subjects that have high team identification removes the additional need to qualify their team identification strength (making high team identification a control variable). Along the lines of "the social identification approach, team identification involves one recognizing membership in a group…such recognition requires an individual to have a vested interest in the group, which influences their sense of self" (Delia, James, and Wann, 2022). The initial contact will be semi-brief exchange, which includes the verbal offer followed by the physical informed consent document to learn more about participating in a 7-month long study that would grant them the above incentives. Initial contact will take place in-person at a Club Maverick held event in the 2024 off-season, prior to the ideal start of the study (in October 2024).

Participants will be instructed that diary entries (via email response) will need to range from 75 to 300 words commenting on themes. One open-ended, closed-ended, or probing question will be conveyed to each participate every month (for 7 months) to stimulate a current raw reaction in their diary entry. Diary questions will be sent in the first 2 weeks of every month, which the participant will have 2 to 3 weeks to complete and send an entry in response. Interviews conducted in month 7 will include "topics raised by participants in their diaries…discussed in greater detail…, allowing for convergence" (Delia, James, and Wann, 2022). The 7 semi-structured diary entry questions will focus on attaining participants fandom origins, closest forms of community, coping mechanisms, and other strong forms of significance within their lives. Over the entirety of the study, 17 questions will be asked to all 20 participants.

Follow-up (emails) with each participant were conducted at the end of each month (of the 7-month study), closing with an interview using the same formula as Delia, James, and Wann (2022) "semi-structured conversation yet still providing participants opportunities to engage in unstructured discussions." Due to the nature of the interview and encouraging further elaboration on past observations and thoughts within diary entries, using the 10 semi-structured interview questions to close the study should yield valuable insights to the study's research questions. The interviews will be conducted using Microsoft Teams (video call), which would utilize the email participants have been using to record diary correspondence (email chain). All conversations will be audio recorded to later be transcribed for further analysis. The interviews length estimates range from 15 to 40 minutes in length, differing on the extent to which each participant wants to answer each question. The interviews are to take place the day after the close of the regular season and end prior to the start of the post-season (between April 13th to the 19th). The selection of this period of time will allow participants to reflect on their 7 diary entries and how the team performed during

the season and provide input on their emotions to follow based on the Maverick's ability to obtain a post-season berth, etc. Modifications to interview questions may be advantageous based on answers to the initial 7 journal entries and the Dallas Mavericks regular season results. More structure to diary questions could be added if deemed to yield more favorable and valid results.

Hypothesized Results

Using a thematic analysis approach, codes would be discovered and analyzed within the data collected from the Dallas Mavericks fans sampled. Chances are that 2 or 3 participants did not finish the case study due to some sort of attrition or loss of interest, even with high quality incentivization. Looking at the case study's research questions –

Is sports fandom a stronger central identity to highly identified sports fans than other traditional connections or relationships?

Employing research from an article mentioned in the literature review by Delia, James, and Wann (2022) and their results to a similar study that wanted to explore where their Lynx fan participants derive significance. They found that "among those who did indicate that their Lynx identity provides significance in life, the most common sources included connecting with family and friends (quality time and shared rituals), supporting and impacting women's sport, and enhancing mental health (learning and sharing knowledge). Each of these sources gives participants a feeling that their life has significance—a sense of importance, worth, or value" These common sources are what popped up in their participant's diary and interview process the most, which makes them thematic in nature. This case study will likely show connection to family and friends and enhancing mental health of those who highly identify with a Dallas Mavericks team that is coming off an NBA Finals appearance for the first time since they won in 2011. This case study is a bit different

in that questioning is not looking for just significance. Participants would likely mention the years that were leaner and test fandom with coping mechanisms, due to the questions in their diary or closing interview. This is part of the gap in research this case study attempts to bridge. There would likely being further connection to depending on the community (family or friends) around the fan for support. Ultimately, the above research question would be answered with traditional connections or relationships are more important than team identification that will not be there for you when you're coping or need an exchange of the most basic need for real connection.

To what extent does sports fandom adversely stretch a fan's well-being towards coping mechanisms (employed to mitigate poor need fulfillment)?

Exploring known themes and coping mechanisms like the ones in Wann's 'Table 1 and Figure 1' in the literature review above could shed light on lengths a highly identified fan's spectrum of coping mechanisms could be pushed to, until their well-being truly suffers adversely. Again, sports fans with family and friends as their main source of significance ride the roller coaster that is sports fandom with a tether to their support system.

What sparks a highly identified fan's fandom for their team?

Scholarly research supports fandom growth due to the most basic need individuals have for connection and community. Even the purest of sports fans would want to enjoy the company of an individual that shares a similar passion and knowledge for their team. Team identification can be a strong bonding agent to strength friends and familial connections.

Discussion

The above hypothesized results are in more of a block citation format, than a true thematic analysis. This study must stand on the shoulders of past researchers to develop possible common participant codes, which would lead to thematic approach themes through consolidation of collected participant data. Using articles in the literature review to develop conclusions on this case study is proving difficult due to the complexity of the attempt to bridge a gap between multiple patterns and theories that have previously scratched the surface of their relationships to each other. This case study might be undertaking a connection that leads to new theoretical concepts and modeling in the future.

Strengths & Limitations

This case study will provide rich insights into the complex phenomena that is sports fandom's correlation to well-being of sports fans. Non-response bias is common in previous scholarly research with similar if not less rigorous demands on participant data submissions. Chances are that of the 20 participants that sign the informed consent document, several will be lost due to time or energy demands, and other forms of attrition. The sample size and quality of participants (highly identified fans) allows for some wiggle room within the 20 participants to account for non-response bias and still obtain quality results. To combat participant attrition, brokering a deal with the Dallas Mavericks to provide quality incentives (worth upwards of $250 per participant = $5,000 investment in the study), in exchange for valuable and in-depth market research on their highly identified fans could be beneficial for all parties involved. This deal would need to account for the Dallas Mavericks not being granted the same access to participant data as the researcher and their professor. The Dallas Mavericks will need to be fine with receiving the

same results that the public domain would when the article is published. The practice of triangulation employs multiple instruments, for example, participant diaries followed by an interview allows for strong convergence. Transcribing all collected participant data establishes validity through member-checking. This convergence increases the credibility of the data collected by lowering the probability that response bias exists in the collected data. Semi-structured interview (open-ended, closed-ended, and probing) questions will all be set prior to the final interview to limit interviewer bias; however, those question types open the door to a variety of responses from participants. Certain responses could illicit a reaction or follow-up question to probe further. Even with such limiting elements, these discovered and acknowledged bias can lay a foundation for future research to navigate.

Implications

Research still has a gap between what is truly understood regarding highly identified fans and their relationships to the teams they identify. The complexity and uniqueness from one fan to the next is what makes this case study important for both sports fans and sports entities to understand their underlying motives. This case study took place over a 7-month period of time. Could a longer length and (more or less) rigorous participant burden effect results? In the search for a fan's origin story to becoming a highly identified fan, are there more common themes that can be analyzed? Do we begin fandom based on geography, our relationships to those we care for around us, or is it a combination of a multitude of misunderstood variables. If sports entities truly understood the grassroots creation of all fan's developed team identification, they could market more efficiently, develop ways to cushion the blow for fans about to jump headfirst into coping mechanisms, or uncover other unknowns. Sports entities are a business and cater to the consumer

– their fans. Sports fans derive enjoyment from the entertainment these entities provide, why do fans remain supportive of a sports team when they continue not to fulfill their side of that agreement (when the team they identify poorly produces). This complex attachment could allude to a concept like 'making it through the bad times makes the good times that much sweeter.' Continued research is needed in this case study's focus. Using purposive sampling on season ticket holding fans (which can increase the chances they exhibit high team identification) remains a strong pool of untapped knowledge within leagues and teams outside the NBA, WNBA, or the sport of basketball. In Wann's Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model, he explores the difference between temporary and enduring social connections and the paths a fan with sports team identification can take to reach a certain social psychological health. The paths that diverge are dependent on the quality of social connections.

Conclusion

The research focuses on a participant pool of highly identified sports fans and attempts to find themes (using thematic analysis) within their collected data sports fandom's connection to well-being. Given the psychological complexity of this undertaking, this case study will interpret the collected data primarily through past scholarly research. Much of the research mentioned throughout this case study alludes to the use of sports identification to strengthen relationships with friends, family, and community. Making their identity less dependent and weighted to the team they identify and more about their unique support systems. Sports fandom's relationship to a fan's state of well-being will increase in complexity, but finding commonality and shared codes/themes may help us understand the relationship sports fans have with sports and those

around them more, in turn allowing fans to understand states of well-being in the settings they find themselves.

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