

Sport Fanship at the Age of the Pandemic: Preliminary Thoughts in Times of (Global) Change

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Abstract

Sport fanship is immeasurable and represents one of society's most universal leisure activities. The current collection of research on the fanship phenomena is truly global: 25 scholars from 4 continents (including North and south America, UK, Australia, Norway, Netherland, and Israel) looked closely at various dimensions of sport fanship. The ongoing COVID pandemic presents both spectators on and off the field with various challenges side to unique opportunity to rethink the way sport fans consume and interact. Thus, the aim of this double special issue with 13 papers was to assemble both applied or theoretical research from experts within fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, economy, media, and gender studies.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, fanship, global

In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

—Eric Hoffer

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Sport fanship is immeasurable and represents one of society's most universal leisure activities. Although event attendance and media consumption received a great deal of attention from scholars (e.g., Weinish & Lev, 2021), there is a growing understanding that sports fans interact, both physically and digitally, with their favorite teams in numerous other ways (Dwyer et al., 2018; Levental et al., 2021).

Contrary to the business motives that characterize team owners, the relationship between the fan and the team is based on deep feelings. Sympathy exists and grows over the years from a combination of several central aspects: love and loyalty, community formation, and building a self-identity that grows out of identification with the group (Lev & Weinish, 2020).

In the first years of contact with the team, the fan identification will take root and will be based on the admiration of the players and the pride of the team's achievements in the present and in the past. The reference to the group will be from a close relationship. A phrase such as "my team" clarifies the quality of the relationship between the young fan and the team. An integral part of sympathy for the group is in acquiring a great deal of knowledge about it. The names of the players, mythical past player characters, and the years of success of the team. For the fan, the more he knows about his beloved team, the more dedicated and loyal he feels to the squad (Levental et al., 2021).

Indeed, the intensified process of globalization of sports fandom in the 21st century has received a notable boost following the COVID-19 pandemic. The limitations that applied to sports and especially playing matches without fans affected the psychological state of sports fans (Simmons et al., 2022) and, at the same time, led them to change their daily routines and behaviors. The physical proximity to the home stadium and the players has changed the way sports are consumed and hence, as discussed in this volume, the self-identity of the fans.

The current collection of research on the fanship phenomena is truly global: 25 scholars from 4 continents (including North and south America, UK, Australia, Norway, Netherland, and Israel) looked closely at various dimensions of sport fanship. The ongoing Covid pandemic presents both spectators on and off the field with various challenges side to unique opportunity to rethink the way sport fans consume and interact. Thus, the aim of this double special issue with 13 papers was to assemble both applied or theoretical research from experts within fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, economy, media, and gender studies.

The opening research by Gantz and Wenner build on a considerable body of scholarship on sports fanship that has been focused on uncovering and articulating the demographic, psychological and behavioral antecedents, correlates, and consequences of sports fanship. Using a critical event theoretic analytic lens, they argue that the COVID-19 pandemic had the disruptive power to shake the foundation of sports fanship, much as it affected all aspects of contemporary life across the globe. Both have conducted a survey of 613 adults in the United States, all of whom self-identified as sports fans. They found that sports fanship avidity dipped during the height of the pandemic when games, matches and seasons were canceled or conducted in protective bubbles without fans in the stands. That dip was temporary. With sports back in full-throttle mode, fanship avidity returned to pre-pandemic levels. Those who identified as strong fans appeared to

cherish its return, some even more avid than before. The impact of the pandemic on sports fanship was most acute among those who were not ardent sports fans to begin with—and its impact appears to have extended over time. For them, there is one seemingly important finding that suggests a longer-term critical events effect. While needing further investigation, their findings suggest that avid fans, perhaps due to “living through Covid,” may be able to put sports in broader perspective. When their favorite team or player falls short, the ability of avid fans to detach and protect themselves from the disappointment of the loss seems to have grown in light of the health challenges and risk of death that took center stage during the pandemic. Still, they conclude, it remains to be seen whether such perspective will stay the course for avid fans.

Still in the United States, the population of international student-athletes at the collegiate level has dramatically impacted the sporting landscape in North America. Whereas a passionate group of fans is vital to the success of a sports team, the development of that athlete–fan relationship has grown due to the increased media attention on athlete personal branding and social media presence. Jara-Pazmino and Pack’s study explores international student-athletes’ perceptions of social media use for personal branding, the challenges they face, and the extent to which they interact with fans through social media in a post-pandemic context. Athletes have pivoted more recently from personal appearances and other face-to-face interactions to more virtual means of interacting with fans. In all, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with international student-athletes from various sports within Divisions I and II of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Four main themes emerged: (1) social media consumption versus content creation, (2) effects of name, image, and likeness regulations, (3) personal brand building on social media, and (4) fan interaction on social media for international student-athletes. Their study aims to inform various collegiate athletics stakeholders on the potential value of international student-athletes’ personal branding for fan interaction and how this has been impacted by current name, image, and likeness restrictions.

Social Networks and Fanship

Certainly, social networks and sporting fanship was, and still, very popular topic among scholars. For example, one of the main realms in which political protest is most evident is sport events, where political and/or human rights movements, such as the Black Live Matters find as a hub to promote their ideals during major national and/or global sporting events (Galily, 2019, 2021). Furthermore, athletes and sports channels can serve as a key source for general political information (Hayat et al., 2016, 2019). Toward better understanding the nature of sport global (fans) protest, Samuel-Azran and his colleagues’ article examines the profiles of users of the #boycottqatar2022 ($N=111,172$), the initiative calling to boycott the 2022 World Cup on grounds of Qatar’s alleged breach of human rights. A social network analysis identified that 82% of users of the hashtag were from North America and Western Europe, that 88% of the uses of the hashtag were on Twitter (and a minority on Facebook and Instagram) and that the users’ political inclination was liberal in comparison to random users. Overall, the findings indicate that the boycott was almost exclusive to activists from the so-called Global

North. The liberal tendencies of the participants indicate that the protest was motivated mostly by human rights activism rather than conservatives' racial/religious motivations (which characterized resistance to Qatari entities in the West in the past).

Another paper that used the Twittersphere to investigate fans interaction is Seijbel et al.'s research on Dutch football realm. Their paper examines online expressions of rivalry and hate speech in relation to antisemitic discourses in Dutch professional men's football (soccer), with specific attention devoted to how this has developed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study analyses football-related antisemitic discourses in the Dutch-speaking Twittersphere between 2018 and 2021. Assuming that during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic fan activity has moved increasingly toward the online domain, we specifically examine whether and how the past pandemic years have influenced football-related antisemitic discourses on Twitter. Tweets were scraped using the Twitter API and 4CAT (a capture and analysis Toolkit), producing a dataset of 7,917 unique posts. The authors performed thematic analysis of the Tweets and a selection of the Tweets was analyzed in depth using narrative digital discourse analysis. The findings show how these Tweets, while seemingly targeted exclusively at football opponents, contribute to wider exclusionary discourse in football and society that may have become more aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, Jakar and Carr's research compared how a North American league (National Basketball Association) and a European league (English Premier League) adapted to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic using social media to engage with fans. They examined changes in the volume of Tweets and engagements with official team Twitter posts. Their data contain categorical control variables accounting for different stages of the pandemic. This includes when games were cancelled for health and safety reasons, when play was resumed in a *bubble* format, in-season periods, and offseason periods. For them, examining social media engagement during these periods was a unique opportunity to compare team (supply) strategies and fan reactions (demand) to a disruption, and to explore the longer-term implications such as expanded engagement after the disruption has ended or when its effects have lessened.

Lastly, on the social networks category, Hayat and his co-authors examined the extent to which mega sport events play a role in connecting people from different countries, using the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as its case study. Their analysis examines social connection (on Twitter) between Chinese and Russians and whether these connections are more likely to occur among the followers of the @Beijing2022 Twitter account, if compared with Twitter users in these countries who do not follow this account. The choice of the Russians and the Chinese also stems from their countries' united front against those Western countries whose diplomats boycotted the games. The analysis reveals that, in cases where two people follow @Beijing2022, the likelihood of there being a connection between them increases by 8%, as compared with those people who do not follow this account, while controlling for other relevant variables. The findings indicate that mega sport events which take place under a boycott have the ability to be enhancers of international social connections.

Uses and Gratifications

Irrefutably, COVID-19 ushered new forms of media engagement when traditional sporting events and league play were suspended. Subsequently, certain sections of the audience moved online to fill their needs typically satisfied via traditional sport consumption. Esports is one such form of digital entertainment that significantly altered the ways in which sport fans can immerse themselves in related content. To examine how those audience obtained gratifications, Billings and Mikkilineni surveyed traditional sport fans who have either increased or initiated esports media consumption during the pandemic, doing so through the lens of media dependency theory. Their study offers insights into how some effects unfold over time as a consequence of sustained media use. Results from 155 sports fans demonstrated three key findings. First, gratifications for traditional sports were significantly higher than those of esports. Second, ascending esports consumers maintained significantly more intense gratifications than did new users. Finally, media dependency was a significant, positive predictor of all 12 of the traditional sports motivations and nine of the 12 esport motivations.

The following manuscript by Levental et al. argue that in the modern era of commercialized, mediated, and global football, there is a decline in the importance of the local aspect of sports fandom. Nowadays, through television broadcasts, the Internet, and especially social networks, a fan continuously follows elite football clubs from around the world, which provide an alternative to local clubs. This has created a growing trend of football fan communities known as “transnational fans”—fans of sports clubs from other countries. Contrary to traditional definitions of fandom, the transnational fans are not close to the home stadium and therefore do not take part in the ceremonial ritual of actively supporting the club from the stands. Because of this, they are not seen as part of the club’s traditional fans. This means that transnational fans are forced to redefine the image of the football fan and to place special emphasis on an active community and loyalty to the team as markers of devotion. Contributing to the study of the psychology of fandom, their piece discusses the characteristics of those fans’ communities in Israel and seeks to present an analysis of the construction of their members’ social and personal identity. To this end, an anthropological approach was adopted, which involved attending community gatherings throughout an entire gaming season and also included a series of in-depth interviews with community members. The findings of their study illustrate two main premises: the use of personal and community resources for self-determination and the community and its place in the modern fan typology. Each theme attempts to redefine the individual’s role in the social setting and present a dynamic image of football fandom as it will take shape in coming decades.

As the virtual world develops through technological advancements, the lines between physical and virtual worlds become increasingly blurred, especially through the development of web applications. Bond’s paper on prosumption (when users become both producer and consumer) provided insight into how media and organizations created and extracted value from a time when the core sporting product was absent, effectively profiting from the unpaid labor of sports fans.

His research applies social network analysis measures, indegree, domain, and proximity prestige to measure prosumption capital and shows how media organizations and other public figures capitalized on the COVID-19 disruptions.

Importantly, Bond's results show that those who extract prosumption capital are not necessarily the most engaged users by the number of tweets; instead, prosumption capital is gained through popularity. Although this now becomes a chicken and egg paradox, do users become popular due to prosumption capital, or is prosumption capital a result of popularity? A question, according to Bond, for future research.

Still at the consumption level but more philosophically, the next paper by Lebed and Morgulev formulated play as "other being," a unique state of escape from reality. If football fans are also "players" and not just spectators, then their interactions with the club are characterized by play-like behaviors. To test this premise, they delivered questionnaires to 488 respondents who identified themselves as football followers or fans. They revealed that the most emotionally involved fans ("hot") tend to playful behaviors significantly more than others, whereas less involved fans were more inclined to influence their team's "life." The obtained results shed light on additional motivations and priorities of fans, motivations that can be overlooked in literature where fans are being considered as "ordinary" customers.

Gender Dimensions of Fanship

The last three studies in this compendium looked at fanship and the disparity between men and women.

For example, most studies of the effect of COVID-19 restrictions on home advantage in sport have been conducted on men's soccer, with the women's game lacking scientific attention. The first study by Krumer and Smith fills this gap by investigating games in Swedish Damallsvenskan women's soccer league. Comparing games in the 2019 and 2020 seasons, they found a slight, but not statistically significant reduction in home advantage in games without crowds in terms of goals scored and points achieved. However, unlike in most studies on men's soccer, they also found that away teams received significantly more yellow cards in games without crowds compared to games with crowds. Krumer and Smith's results suggest that COVID-19's crowd-related restrictions did not significantly reduce the home advantage in the Swedish Damallsvenskan women's soccer league. The most plausible explanation for this result is that the crowd size was not large enough also in 2019, before the restrictions. This explanation is in line with Fischer and Haucap (2021), who found a reduced home advantage in games without crowd in German men's soccer Bundesliga 1 (the top division in Germany). However, the authors found no change in home advantage in the second and the third divisions. They explained that the decrease in occupancy to zero has been less dramatic for teams that have been used to low occupancy rates in a pre-COVID-19 period. In other words, the less a team has been used to a full stadium, the less severe the loss of home advantage is.

Correspondingly, the second paper is concerned with the content, both in quantity and quality that fans of women's sport could consume in the first months of the

pandemic. In the context of the current “boom” in women’s professional sports, MacDonald and his colleagues draw on the analysis of two online sport media sites to consider the narratives of female athletes that fans had access to. Their findings suggest that during the beginning of the pandemic sport stories about women were largely erased and replaced by those appealing to a very different fan market.

Their study echoes previous research that urges us to think critically about progress narratives in women’s sport as these hide perpetual, structural, and symbolic inequalities. Indeed, findings are consistent with recent research on the extent and nature of media coverage of women in sport yet, from a gender equity and social justice perspective, they may be even more alarming.

The third focuses on sport fans’ attitudes toward the presence of the first transgender soccer referee in an elite league in Israel, and largely reflects the broader discourse on gender diversity and inclusion in general. Tamir paper’s findings highlight the dispute between sport fans who support and object to the presence of transgender individuals on the soccer field. Website readers who support the referee and her transition largely compliment her courage. This is a surprising and refreshing finding in view of the history of soccer and the totality of emotions attributed to soccer fans. Resistance and opposition, in contrast, employ multiple techniques that reflect social views on transgender individuals that are common both within and beyond the world of sport.

At a deeper level, it has been argued by Tamir that sport reflects reality and, due to its unique appeal, frequently shapes the perceptions and attitudes of its fans. Thus, while aggressive objections to a transgender referee announcement of her gender transition process thus reflect social attitudes, the expressions of support nonetheless potentially mark the first cracks in soccer’s male hegemony and in the binary view of gender in the world of sport.

Final Words

Sports have always been a source of attraction and interest and has frequently been laden with social and cultural meanings. Overall, our collection documents the forcefulness of sports fandom in contemporary society.

The emotional involvement of a sports fan is different from any other audience. The sports fan feels really part of the show and part of creating the experience, and he believes, to a degree of justice, that he even has the ability to make a difference in the script of the event. It is no coincidence that fan organizations call themselves the “12th player,” they believe they are another player and their spirit of enthusiasm can push the ball and influence the game.

Yet, it is possible to explain sympathy and loyalty to a sports club in a rational way. The attempt is doomed to failure. Jerry Seinfeld tried to find an answer, to understand what the fuss was about: “It’s hard to justify loyalty to one sports team. After all, the players and managements, everyone changes. The fans actually cheer for the outfit. They want their outfit to win the second outfit. Even when their favorite player moves to another team, they Suddenly they hate him. They shout at him with contempt. He wears another shirt. BOOO!” Nevertheless, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano

wrote that playing without fans is like dancing without music. The return of the fans to the stands after the pandemic is critical to the continued existence of the professional sport so that we can continue to enjoy the dance. Not because of the income the fans generate when they return to the stands, but because of the impact they have on the dance itself. Let the games continue!

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