

# **Male and Female Sports Fans: Team Identification, Satisfaction With Team Performance, and Consumption Behavior**

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*This research examines the relationships between sports teams and various fan basis. The path of inquiry recognizes that a sports organization that successfully implements relationship marketing programs can develop long-term relationships with its fans, thus improving the likelihood of customer retention. Two factors, fan identification with a team and fan satisfaction with a team's performance, have been identified as critically important in retaining a sports team's customers. Results suggest differences between male and female fans in team identification and sports event attendance, but not in satisfaction with team performance or other consumption behaviors.*

*Keywords: sports marketing, relationship marketing, fan satisfaction, customer retention*

## **INTRODUCTION**

American spectator sports, a portion of the much larger U.S. sports industry, reached \$71.06 billion in revenues in 2018 and was projected to exceed \$81.6 billion by 2023 (Gough, 2019). However, everything changed on March 11, 2019, when the Utah Jazz v. Oklahoma City Thunder game was cancelled due to “unforeseen circumstances,” as the initial announcement stated. The NBA season disruption was soon followed by all the other major sports and student competitions with games and seasons cancelled indefinitely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of a steady industry growth, the downward trend soon became more than pronounced. A recent report by Deloitte, for example, stated that “... (The) National Football League (NFL) teams are expected to lose an estimated \$5.5 billion of stadium revenue, primarily in the form of ticket sales, concessions, sponsorships, and sales of team” (Deloitte, 2020). And although the NBA managed to finish their season and playoffs in the “bubble” (without any fans), the same report points at more than \$500 million in losses as well. Similar concerns are evident in the non-professional sports marketplace. The pandemic is costing universities tens of millions of dollars and dictates tough decisions to end many low-revenue student sports (Garthwaite and Notowidigdo, 2020). Moreover, the importance of the sports industry to the U.S. economy, of course, goes well beyond the revenues of professional and

amateur sports teams. Almost 500,000 American jobs are directly linked to the industry (Burrow, 2013) and retail sales at sporting goods stores, which often feature merchandise closely tied to professional and college sports teams.

In such turbulent environments, the industry as a whole must find ways to bring back fans to arenas and to create alternative sources of revenue. There is a consensus building up that one promising path to recovery is to increase fan involvement on a personal level through social engagement on a team and athlete levels. A cite from the above-mentioned Deloitte report illustrates the issue:

*“Leagues, teams, and athletes possess powerful platforms that can promote positive change for society as a whole. Sports organizations should embrace the critical role they can play in helping address race, gender, and LGBT+ inequality and injustice. Many fan expect it—and future growth likely depends upon it.”*

Related, team sports organizations have increasingly emphasized relationship marketing efforts in their business operations. The foundation of these efforts is the belief that relationship marketing, by creating stronger ties between fans and teams, offers tremendous benefits to sports organizations. These benefits include greater fan (customer) loyalty, an increased ability to address fan complaints, and fans’ increased willingness to support sports teams through various consumption behaviors (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Fullerton, 2007).

An emphasis on relationship marketing represents a shift to a customer retention focus, rather than a customer acquisition focus, among sports organization marketers. Retaining fans provides a sports team with both short-term and long-term benefits. In the short-term, the organization benefits from revenue generated by those fans, reductions in revenue losses from defecting fans, and relatively low-cost maintenance of an existing fan base. Over the long-term, high fan retention rates result in longer relationships between a sports team and its fans and thus provide for a greater average customer lifetime value (Johnson and Gustafsson, 2000; Best, 2009). Fullerton (2007, p. 384) emphasizes this last point, suggesting that moving to a fan retention emphasis “has allowed many marketers to more effectively capitalize on the potential long-term value that each of their current customers represents.” When examining customer retention, the marketing literature has focused primarily on two causal factors, customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (Dick and Basu, 1994; Bolton, Kannan, and Bramlett, 2000; Kotler and Keller, 2007; Best, 2009). Loyal customers are less likely to be attracted by competitive marketing efforts and satisfied customers are more likely to continue purchasing from an organization. Empirical studies have supported the positive impact of both factors on customer retention (e.g., Oliver, 1980; Rust and Zahorik, 1993; Bolton, 1998). Naturally, the influence of loyalty and satisfaction has also been emphasized when considering customer retention in sports marketing.

Sports marketing researchers have found that both fan loyalty and fan satisfaction impact fan retention. Loyalty, often referred to as team identification, has been reported to have a positive influence on fans’ intentions to attend games (Wakefield, 1995; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, and Harada, 2003) and a negative influence on fans’ changing their focus of attention to other teams (Harada and Matsuoka, 1999). Sports fans’ general level of satisfaction with a team’s performance and satisfaction with team performance in a particular event (game) have also been found to positively impact fans’ intentions regarding game attendance and other consumption behaviors (Wakefield and Sloan, 1995; Laverie and Arnett, 2000; Matsuoka *et al.*, 2003).

Focusing on customers who self-identify as fans of a particular team, this study seeks to add to the stream of research examining fan loyalty, fan satisfaction, and fan behaviors in the marketing of sports. Specifically, the study compares team identification (loyalty), satisfaction with team performance, and consumption behaviors of male and female fans. Contributions from the study are in three areas. First, a survey method was used to collect data from fans of many different professional and collegiate teams involved in a variety of team sports. With few exceptions (e.g., Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012), previous studies of sports fans have focused attention on specific teams and/or sports. Trail, Fink, and Anderson (2003), for example, studied consumption behavior among fans of intercollegiate basketball teams. The proposed study

is an effort to explore general relationships. If general relationships among teams and fans are better understood, research in particular sports contexts may offer greater insight into the unique effects of sport and team on these relationships. Second, the study considers four distinct consumption behaviors. With few exceptions (e.g., Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Trail *et al.*, 2003; Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012), prior studies have focused on the impact of loyalty and satisfaction on one behavioral variable (often game attendance). Sports-related consumption, however, is multidimensional and includes listening to sports talk on the radio, viewing sports programming on television, talking with others about teams and sports, purchasing team merchandise, and other fan behaviors (Madrigal, 2006; Fullerton, 2007). This broader view of fan consumption behavior allows for a deeper and more meaningful assessment of customer retention. Finally, by exploring similarities and differences between male and female sports fans, the research emphasizes the need for sports organizations to better understand their fans in order to create and maintain long-term relationships with those fans.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### Team Identification

Team identification refers to a fan's attachment to a specific sports team. Fullerton (2007) identifies two team identification dimensions, emotional involvement and personal commitment. Emotional involvement represents a fan's psychological attachment, while personal commitment represents a fan's tendency to engage in consumption behaviors (i.e., spending time and/or money) that bond a fan to a team. Following earlier research by Fisher and Wakefield (1998) and Mael and Ashforth (1992), the proposed study defines team identification only as a fan's psychological attachment to a sports team and does not include a behavioral component. Team identification is reflected by expressions such as "I love my Broncos" or "I am a Yankees fan."

Studies have found that team identification impacts consumption behaviors. Gray and Wert-Gray (2012), for example, reported that team identification positively impacts a variety of intended consumption behaviors: in-person and media-based attendance, purchase of team merchandise, and word-of-mouth communication related to a team. Studies by Wakefield (1995) and Matsuoka, Chelladurai, and Harada (2003) also found that team identification positively impacts a fan's intention to attend games. Others have found a positive impact on actual game attendance (e.g., Murrell and Dietz, 1992; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Laverie and Arnett, 2000). Trail, Fink, and Anderson (2003) found that team identification positively impacts fan intentions regarding both attendance and purchase of team merchandise. Similarly, Fisher and Wakefield (1998) indicate that team identification leads to game attendance and purchase of team-licensed products. Several studies have also noted a positive relationship between team identification and a fan's word-of-mouth communication related to a team (Madrigal, 1995; Trail *et al.*, 2003; Madrigal and Chen, 2008). The word-of-mouth communication considered in these studies is sometimes labeled basking-in-reflected-glory (BIRGing) behavior and can be manifest in a variety of ways, including "bragging" about a team and "publicizing" connections to a team.

### Satisfaction With Team Performance

Anderson, Fornell, and Lehman (1994) identify two aspects of customer satisfaction, transaction-specific satisfaction and cumulative satisfaction. Transaction-specific satisfaction is a post-purchase evaluation of a single transaction, while cumulative satisfaction is an evaluation of purchase experiences over time. This study considers only cumulative satisfaction (a fan's satisfaction with team performance over time), but studies have shown that both conceptions of satisfaction impact customer repurchase intentions and consumption behavior (Oliver, 1980; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann, 1994; Mittal, Ross, and Baldasore, 1998). Focusing specifically on cumulative satisfaction, Gray and Wert-Gray (2012) found a positive impact of satisfaction with team performance on intended event attendance (both in-person and media-based). Similarly, Arnett (2000) found that this type of "long-term" satisfaction positively influences frequency of game attendance. Factors often closely linked with both transaction-specific and cumulative satisfaction (team success, team win-loss record, on-field success) have

also been linked with fan consumption behaviors (Gladden, Milne, and Sutton, 1998; Pinnock and Potter, 2006).

### **Consumption Behaviors**

Based on the earlier work of MacDonald and Milne (1997), Fullerton (2007) offers three consumption behaviors indicative of a bond (or relationship) between a sports team and its fans. This relationship is generally considered a foundation for customer retention in the sports marketplace. Usage, which focuses on team-fan contact situations, is generally considered to be the primary consumption behavior defining a fan's relationship to a team. Fan usage includes both in-person and media-based attendance. Fullerton suggests two additional consumption behaviors, responsiveness to product merchandising and word-of-mouth communication (which he terms word-of-mouth advertising), must also be considered when examining the strength of team-fan relationship. Responsiveness to product merchandising refers to the fan's purchase of merchandise displaying the team's name, logo, or colors. Word-of-mouth communication refers to a fan speaking of the team, including talk related to games, specific players, personnel changes, performance expectations, etc. These consumption behaviors are considered evidence of a fan's strong psychological bond to a particular team. Fullerton (2007) suggests that usage, when combined with these other consumption behaviors, define an "expanded relationship" between team and fan. This relationship benefits both the sports team (organization) and its fans (customers). The team gains revenue and promotional assistance, while fans receive value through both game experiences and identification with the team (i.e., improved self-images based partly on team affiliation).

### **Male and Female Sports Fans**

Prior research, generally focused on specific sports contexts, has found both similarities and differences between male and female fans. While large numbers of both male and female sports fans identify themselves as fans of a specific team, James and Ridinger (2002) found that males are more likely to self-identify as fans. They also found that males exhibit higher levels of loyalty to a specific team, are more likely to share in the joy of a team's success, and empathize more strongly with specific teams. For males, sports and sports teams "provide an important identity not shared by females" (James and Ridinger, 2002, p. 273). Greenwood (2001) and Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002) also found stronger team identification among male sports fans. Examining a related concept, Ware and Kowalski (2012) reported male fans to be more "highly involved" with both sports and sports teams than are female fans.

***H1:** Males will exhibit higher levels of team identification.*

While it is certainly likely that consumption behavior of both males and females is influenced by on-field performance, a study of Australian professional sports team fans reports "that men are often less satisfied than women with the team's performance" (McDonald, Leckiea, Kargb, and Zubcevic-Basica, 2018, p.169). This study also found that experiential aspects (customer service and facilities) of event attendance were stronger drivers of customer satisfaction for female fans than for male fans, while personal involvement with the team was more important to male fan satisfaction. Other studies examining differences in the motivation and satisfaction of male and female sports fans have found female fans to be more motivated than male fans by the social aspects of sports consumption behaviors ((Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte, 2000; Ridinger and Funk, 2006; Wann, Schrader, and Wilson, 1999; Ware and Kowalski, 2012). For example, Ware and Kowalski (2012) report significantly higher percentages of female fans "motivated by the opportunity to spend time with family and friends" and "motivated by the social setting of large-group game viewing" (p.234). Findings from these studies are consistent with research efforts suggesting that male fans are more likely to experience vicarious achievement through the performance of sports teams (e.g., Trail, Robinson, and Kim, 2008).

***H2:** Females will exhibit higher levels of satisfaction with team performance.*

With some exceptions, past research has generally found that males are more likely to engage in sports fan consumption behaviors than females. Examining sports fans in general rather than fans of a specific team, Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000) reported that males spend more time than females both discussing sports and watching sports on television. This study, however, found no difference between male and female sports fans in attendance at sporting events. Focusing on fans of a particular team, Greenwood (2001) indicates that males have reported a greater propensity to purchase team merchandise. Also examining team-specific fan consumption behavior, Ware and Kowalski (2012) found males more likely to engage in word-of-mouth communication related to the team. In these studies, differences between male and female consumption behavior was linked to higher levels of team identification (Greenwood) and team involvement (Ware and Kowalski) for male fans. There is substantial evidence that males, who are more likely to indicate that they are devoted or “die-hard” fans of a team, engage in more sports fan consumption behaviors than females.

*H3: Males will report a greater likelihood of engaging in future in-person attendance.*

*H4: Males will report a greater likelihood of engaging in future media-based attendance.*

*H5: Males will report a greater likelihood of engaging in future word-of mouth communication related to a specific team.*

*H6: Males will report a greater likelihood of engaging in future merchandise purchases related to a specific team.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

A survey research methodology was used to gather data from self-identified fans of college and professional sports teams. Data collection focused on fans in the state of Oklahoma and more specifically the Oklahoma City metro area. Spectator sports have a significant impact on the Oklahoma as well as the national economy. The University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University athletic programs are among the top revenue producers in college athletics, generating \$129 million and \$112 million, respectively, in 2014. Relocation of the NBA’s Seattle SuperSonics to Oklahoma City as the Oklahoma City Thunder has had a significant impact on both the state and Oklahoma City metropolitan economies. Government officials estimate the team’s economic impact at \$1.5 million per home game and over \$64 million each NBA season (Lackmeyer, 2013). Although generally considered a “small market” team, Forbes projects the Oklahoma City Thunder annual revenue at close to \$150 million (Thunder Ranks 11th,” 2014). In short, the spectator sports industry is an impactful industry within the United States, Oklahoma, and the Oklahoma City metropolitan economies.

Using a paper survey instrument, data were collected from 300 undergraduate students (175 males and 125 females) at a metropolitan university. These 300 students, who identified themselves as fans of various sports teams, comprised the study sample.

The sampled students responded to items assessing team identification, satisfaction with team performance and consumption behavior related to an identified team, as well as items providing demographic data (including gender, age, income, education, and employment). The instrument was developed based upon prior research efforts that have used a variety of measures to assess relevant sports-related constructs. As part of the survey development process, previously developed scales were modified following a small number of personal interviews conducted with sports fans from the metropolitan Oklahoma City area.

The survey instrument utilized several measures developed and assessed in prior research examining fan attitudes and behavior in the sports marketplace. Team identification was assessed using a modification of the three-item Team Identification Index (TII), which has shown adequate psychometric properties in prior use (e.g., Trail and James, 2001; Trail, Fink, and Anderson, 2003). Satisfaction with team performance

and four behavioral intentions related to a team (in-person game attendance, media-based game attendance, word-of-mouth communication, and purchase of licensed merchandise) were assessed through single-item measures. Satisfaction with team performance was measured using an item adapted from Matsuoka, Packianathan, and Munehiko (2003). Four items measuring intended consumption behavior were used to assess respondents' behavioral intentions. These items were adapted from measures developed by Trail *et al.* (2003).

Preliminary analyses suggested that the composition of the male and female samples was very similar. Chi-square analyses indicated no significant differences between the two groups in terms of classification (junior or senior), major, or status as domestic or international students. A two independent samples t-test found no significant difference in mean age between the male and female samples.

## RESULTS

All comparisons of male and female fans were completed using independent samples t-tests. Levene's test indicated that equality of variances could be assumed for the two samples in each comparison. To test H1, respondents indicated the extent to which they "strongly identified with a specific sports team" by responding to the three item Team Identification Index. A one to five scale was used, with lower scores indicating stronger team identification. There was a significant difference in the scores for males ( $M=2.02$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) and females ( $M=2.40$ ,  $SD=1.01$ );  $t(298)=3.29$ ,  $p=.001$ . The results support H1, suggesting that males exhibit higher levels of team identification. Satisfaction with team performance was measured using a single item – respondents indicated satisfaction with team performance on a scale of one to five, with lower scores indicating higher levels of satisfaction. Results from the two-independent samples t-test indicated no significant difference in the scores for males ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) and females ( $M=2.13$ ,  $SD=1.06$ );  $t(298)=1.10$ ,  $p=.274$ . Thus, H2 was not supported. Likelihood of future consumption behaviors was assessed through four independent samples t-tests. Respondents indicated the likelihood of in-person attendance, media-based attendance, word-of-mouth communication, and merchandise purchase, all related to a specific team, on separate scales of one to five. For each scale, lower scores indicated greater likelihood of the specified consumption behavior. There was a significant difference in the scores for males ( $M=1.90$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) and females ( $M=1.65$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ) reporting likelihood of future in-person attendance ( $t(298)=2.07$ ,  $p=.039$ ). Results of this test supported H3. No significant differences were found in the scores for males and females in reporting likelihood of future media-based attendance ( $t(298)=0.20$ ,  $p=.841$ ), word-of-mouth communication ( $t(298)=1.35$ ,  $p=.178$ ), and merchandise purchase ( $t(298)=0.52$ ,  $p=.604$ ). H4, H5, and H6 were not supported.

## PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The spectator sports industry is important to Oklahoma. Sales revenues from spectator sports attendance generate hundreds of millions of dollars for the state. In the past, Oklahoma's sports industry was focused almost exclusively on its college teams, particularly the football and basketball teams of The University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. With the arrival of the Oklahoma City Thunder, national awareness of Oklahoma's sports industry is changing. Sports fans throughout Oklahoma and the nation have been drawn not only to Oklahoma's stadiums and arenas, but also to local retailers and attractions. Increased employment and revenue from the spectator sports industry can potentially offset some of the losses facing Oklahoma's economy due to the recent decline in the state's energy sector. The future success of the sports industry in Oklahoma, however, is dependent upon strong relationships between Oklahoma's sports teams and their fans.

The proposed study aims to provide an improved understanding of sports team/fan relationships. This improved understanding may establish a firmer foundation for sports organizations in their efforts to build relationships with their fans and retain those fans over the long term. The study's results should provide insight into the pathways most appropriate for improving customer retention. A key question here is whether efforts to bond with fans provide greater benefits to the organization than efforts to improve the

team's competitive performance. In investigating similarities and differences between male and female fans' consumption behaviors, team identification, and fan satisfaction and in exploring various sports and teams, the study has the potential to provide insights into the fan bonding process in a variety of contexts. These insights can then guide managers in developing appropriate fan retention strategies in specific markets.

## CONCLUSION

This study seeks to add to conceptual and empirical work examining the impact of fan loyalty (team identification) and fan satisfaction on sports teams' retention of fans. By surveying fans of many different sports teams, the research effort considers whether or not the impacts of team identification and satisfaction with team performance may be generalized across a rather broad population of sports fans. Rather than examining the impact of these variables only on game attendance, the proposed study recognizes the importance of a variety of fan consumption behaviors and explores potential impacts on multiple aspects of fan retention. Comparison of male and female fans offers an opportunity to begin exploring the potential effectiveness of various retention strategies (for example, an emphasis on efforts to bond with fans rather than efforts to improve a team's competitiveness) among diverse groups of sports fans. More work is needed concerning many aspects of sports team/sports fan relationships approval of this grant application greatly help in moving this research forward.

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