

Sacred Heart University

The Argument for Fandom and Its Unrealized Societal Benefits

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Introduction

The entertainment industry spans a variety of mediums and yields lucrative revenue numbers annually. In 2021 alone, the global entertainment industry (including theater, home, mobile, and pay TV subscriptions totaled \$328.2 Billion. (Adgate 2022) Another piece of the entertainment industry that is often separated from the rest is sports. The global sports industry amassed \$354.96 Billion in revenue in 2021. (Gough 2022) As evidenced by 2021's statistics, sports generate significant profits on their own. This information is already well-documented from a variety of sources. So, to expand on that fact and delve into something more profound, the research is explicitly focused on the reason for the revenue generated, which is sports fandom. *Fandom* is defined as "The state of being a fan of someone or something, especially a very enthusiastic one." (Vale et al. *The Cambridge Dictionary*) Fandom is a polarizing topic. There are passionate stances both in support of fandom and opposing fans of sports organizations and leagues. Regardless of one's stance, one undeniable fact is sports' influence and revenue derivation.

In looking at sports fandom outside the business realm, we can see just how and why sports are as popular as they are. Psychology and sociology are two disciplines that can provide much insight into the thought processes of sports fans. Throughout this paper, arguments for and against sports fandom relating to the business world and society are compiled and evaluated. Psychology and sociology will be drawn from extensively to back claims and investigate

fandom's origins, how that might contribute to consumption patterns and the societal effects that emerge from fandom. Sports fans' passion should be celebrated, and sports fandom is a net positive for society. There are a few driving factors behind the supportive stance surrounding sports fandom, all of which will be reviewed throughout. The origin of a person's fandom introduces many outside considerations, most of which will be elaborated on. Similarly, but not entirely creating the same argument, the community naturally cultivated through sports fandom is essential to the perpetuation of sports fandom. As a result of people's origin of fandom and the communities created and maintained through sports fandom, there are a wealth of societal benefits that directly emerge from sports fandom.

Background

A dictionary definition of 'fandom' was provided in the introduction, but it is challenging to offer a decisive and all-encompassing definition of a "fan." When attempting to construct a framework or a checklist to evaluate whether someone is a fan, there are all sorts of considerations. There would often prove to be a troublesome process as determining "legitimate" patterns of support is subjective by nature, along with the possible confusion and/or overlap between a "fan" and a "supporter." (Crawford 2004: 20), among other things. The term fan is also most closely associated with forms of popular culture. (Crawford 2004: 19) In years past, "fans," for whatever reason, have garnered a reasonably negative stigma around themselves and the term "fan" itself.

In comparison, if someone generally interested in art or literature were to be described, the definition would gravitate more toward the term 'aficionado' or 'scholar. (Crawford 2004: 19) While I think that being a 'fan' of someone or something has become much more normalized due to social media and internet culture, this differentiation in terms used for the classification of

people who have a specific interest in something has existed for generations. This stigma could be attributed to the fact that youth typically participate in sports, so that association clouds people's judgment, or that there was a poor experience with a sports fan in the past. Regardless of the reasoning, the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding sports fandom are like any other interest. Suppose someone does not have an interest or needs help understanding something. In that case, they instead react by judging (whether internal or external) because it keeps them from having to understand. While fans exist among just about all forms of popular culture and entertainment, sports fans have a different relationships with their respective organizations/leagues. Here is a quote offered by a psychology professor concerning sports fandom, "Tajfel (1981) suggested commitment to a favorite team can become an important part of a person's identity. With such identification, fans presumably envision their team as an extension of themselves. (Wann, 1997; Stevens & Rosenberger, 201) As a result, their emotional state may correspond with their favorite team's performance (Wann et al ., 1994; Cottingham, 2012)." (Pradhan 2014: 1)

What is overlooked by people who are indifferent to sports fandom or who actively oppose sports fandom, in general, is that sports fandom is the culmination of a variety of factors that represent something more to people. While this may not be the case for ALL fans, there is typically a genuine connection between how someone became a fan and the continuation/dedication to that fandom. While professional sports teams and competition prove year after year that they are hugely profitable business ventures, revenue was only one of the primary engines behind sports popularity. It was in the late 1970s that business people began to see professional sports' business and economic potential. (Crawford 2004: 7) Similarly, the consolidation of sports agencies due to the revenue potential of having multiple clients

(professional athletes) under contract with various professional sports teams came about in the 1990s. (Mitten et al. 2021) While sports are considered a channel of entertainment, they differ significantly in that the outcomes of sporting events are not (typically) fixed and predetermined. The absence of predetermined results and fans' connection to their respective sports and teams creates quite a differentiation from other entertainment mediums.

Conversely, sports fandom and fandom, among other entertainment mediums, are similar in that a community is naturally cultivated through that fandom. Belonging to a community is essential to developing a person's self-identity. Much of the sociological aspect in the analysis of fandom lies in what is known as "social identity theory." As Sean Pradhan asserts, "Social identity theory posits that people tend to construct an external projection of themselves known as their social identity. Social identity is influenced by the groups that individuals associate themselves with. These group memberships can contribute to a person's self-esteem, basic pride, and, most significantly, feeling of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)." (Pradhan 2014: 1) As evidenced here, communities that surround social groups are hugely important to people in a general sense.

Everything in life is examined on a macro level, and then we can essentially "zoom out" to contextualize those macro effects on a societal level. Taking a step back creates what can be considered a much more significant "ripple" effect so that we may scale these actions up to a more generalized audience as it sits among all other webs of society. Ordinarily, humans are inclined to support things they see offer society the most benefit. While there may never be an existing all-encompassing metric that can quantify how much society benefits or loses from each societal contribution, some contributions are widely supported. Some reap the exact opposite sentiment from the public. Topics such as sports fandom and fan culture, in general, are among

some of the many societal contributions that garner much discussion. In offering a rough definition for reference, societal benefits include creating or using a product or service that creates an advantage/benefit to society. While the realm of entertainment (and the amount of revenue generated for those involved in the industry) may not present a clear-cut societal benefit or detriment, it is worth debating.

Origin of Fandom

"Research shows that people are introduced to sport through family (Coakley, 2004; DeGroot & Robinson, 2008), consume with friends (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000), and tend to change consumption habits as they move through the life cycle (Funk, 2008)." (Havard, 2011) With people often being introduced to sports or a specific sports organization, there is, by nature, an added significance to that fandom. Sports being passed down through generations can be enjoyed by multiple family members. The memories created while supporting a sports team alongside people who introduced the team and the emotions elicited during these moments are unparalleled. Similarly, people may have begun to support their chosen sports organization because it is close to their hometown or where they live. Supporting a sports organization due to geographical considerations is reasonably expected. It can make fans feel connected to an area where an individual once lived and also provides people with a topic to relate to others in the area.

An oft-repeated phrase is, "some things are bigger than sports," and as cliché, as it may be, it is true most of the time. With entertainment such as television or music, fandom is often rooted in superficial interests such as a performer's appearance or ability. In contrast, sports stand out among other forms of entertainment because there is typically a deeper connection associated with a fan's favorite sports team or league outside of surface-level reasons. The significant

connection is evidenced by the fans of organizations who have not had success for a long time or have even been particularly good. Despite teams' lack of success in their respective sports, these organizations remain profitable. While profits are derived from television contracts and team sponsorship deals, many of an organization's profits are derived from fan consumption. Crawford asserts, "it is undeniable that some supporters will connect with their given sport at a far higher level than others." (Crawford 2004: 32). This quote directly points to those fans who support a team despite a disappointing performance, which were previously referred to.

As evidenced by a quote provided by author Garry Crawford, "Rogan Taylor (1992: 185) suggested that association football fans cannot be understood as merely `spectators watching a spectacle; nor just consumers purchasing a leisure product . . . [but rather] football fans are more like temple-goers a localized religious sect.'" (Crawford 2004: 34) This quote shows how dedicated some fans can be to the sports team(s) they support. This sentiment surrounding fandom is often the heart of arguments for and against fandom. People who support the argument that sports fandom benefits society might argue that passion creates positive outcomes. In contrast, the opposition might argue that level of passion is unhealthy or may lead to aggressive/irrational behavior.

"Robertson (1970) asserts that the discipline of consumer behavior draws from areas such as psychology, sociology, and the like." (Havard, 2011) So, taking everything mentioned thus far leads us to believe that, similarly, the upbringing (or origin) of non-sports fans also significantly affects (or affected) their lack of fandom. If someone does not identify with or support a sports team, this could be a direct effect of poor relationships with sports fans or because they do not support what a team/league has decided to do morally. Of course, while these specific examples play directly into previous assertions, it is reasonable for people to have a general disinterest in

sports and a wealth of other reasons. While a broad range of reasonings exists, the application of psychology and sociology in consumer behavior cannot be denied, as previously mentioned.

Community

As previously mentioned in the background, the community is essential to sports fandom. Similarly, as was purported earlier, people form their social identity by finding and joining a community. Social identity is heavily influenced by groups that individuals associate themselves with. (Pradhan 2014: 1) Furthermore, Wenger and Brown take this fact of identity further and affirm, "If commitment to a favorite team becomes part of a person's identity, it may be internalized in a manner that can be evaluated implicitly, without conscious awareness." (Wenger and Brown 2014: 573) Community is the most significant contributor to the argument that fandom is a necessary and vital addition to society. "Community psychologists have suggested that there are many benefits that enhance life quality for those who find themselves inside a social group environment that fosters a sense of community." (Warner, Dixon, 2013).

Community is one of the essential things in life. Social acceptance and support are hugely important, especially in today's society, where everyone is connected virtually through forums, social media, blogs, etc. The community, cultivated through sports fandom, can be accessed from anywhere and can be a hugely important resource for some people within those communities. Moreover, while this topic can be more entirely and eloquently elaborated on in a separate paper, the community and environment that sports create for men, specifically in our modern society, is hugely important. Historically, the demographics of sports viewers lean heavily toward males rather than females. (Research Department 2020) Sports can act as a rallying point for men so that they stay connected to other men in their lives. Whether some men want to admit it or not, sports fandom is often used as a catalyst for socialization and staying in contact with loved ones.

If individuals struggle to reach out, sports can be used as a platform for further conversation or allegorical conversations draped under the sports veil.

Along with highlighting the importance that sports fandom has in the lives of those seeking a community, the role that sports fandom plays in the lives of older individuals who might have retired or turned to part-time employment should also be considered. Being a fan of sports to an older fan who no longer has as many commitments in their life is mainly positive. The structure of a professional sports schedule and all of the other things that come along with being a fan of a sports team all provide some structure and purpose in an individual's life who might not have that with fewer commitments than they once had. Other than being able to keep some structure in their lives, it has been proven that "The later life fan is a creative, imaginative individual." (Smith 2021) Keeping the brain engaged is essential to longevity and quality of life being improved later in life, and sports provide that creative outlet. Art is also often heard to be beneficial for older individuals to keep them engaged and their minds active; sports offer the same benefit with an arguably more engaging and easily accessible community of individuals to belong to.

Expanding further on the role that fandom plays in cultivating and maintaining community is community engagement. To reflect on the prior reasoning of the origin of fandom playing a significant role in a fan's emotional attachment/general commitment to a team, youth sports are essential to community engagement. Youth sports introduce the youngest kids in our generation to sports and all of the valuable life lessons that sports offer. Adults will experience and observe the concept of fandom and choose to volunteer their time to officiate, facilitate and sponsor youth sporting events so that the community is further engaged. The individuals who feel compelled to give back to their community (due to their own positive experiences from growing

up or the passion for sports derived from years of being a fan of the sport(s)) are invaluable.

These individuals provide unforgettable experiences for the youth in our communities and lay the foundation for the perpetuation of positive reinforcement going hand-in-hand with sports (and the fandom associated with them). Those youth athletes then grow up through sport and look up to those who sacrificed their free time for little to no return other than the satisfaction of knowing that they potentially positively contributed to a few kids' lives. Comparatively, youth athletes look up to professional athletes as role models and hold them in the highest regard.

Correspondingly, professional athletes tend to reinvest in the communities that helped them foster their fandom alongside their incredible ability in a given sport. Often, it is seen that a professional athlete will have a charity or foundation in association with their name to show their thanks and use their platform for good. The communities supported by sports fandom can be hugely important to those involved and provide individuals with a greater sense of belonging and social identity.

Societal Benefits

While sports fandom, when viewed through a business lens, is centered around profits and engagement, nothing is saying that exposure, reach, engagement and public relations have to be profit producers exclusively. There are numerous fundraising and awareness initiatives that professional sports leagues and the organizations within those leagues sponsor. One example of a charitable initiative in a major professional sports league is the "My Cause My Cleats" program that the NFL and members of the organizations within the NFL participate in. My Cause My Cleats is an initiative where each participating in the program can highlight a charity of their choice by wearing cleats. Local high school students, hospital patients, local artists, etc., specially design the cleats to raise awareness for the cause their cleats are highlighting. "After

the shoes are worn, some players have donated them to their causes organization for auction, while others auction the cleats off from their own foundation events to raise money." (Roberson 2022) This example is, of course, one of the many examples of charity work and initiatives among all of the major professional sports leagues. There are endless examples of individuals organizing events to raise money or awareness for a societal issue or a group of individuals who may be underrepresented. Charity work by players, coaches, and other organizational employees presents exemplary conduct for the youth in communities that look up to those individuals. Charity is beneficial from all sides. The organizations and everyone involved feel good, communities benefit from it, and the image of the organization(s) is improved. Charity efforts executed through sports organizations are great on the business end and pose a positive general human impact.

Speaking of underrepresentation, another significant societal benefit that sports fandom propagates is the ability of professional sports leagues, organizations, and individuals who are a part of said organizations to create awareness and conversation around various social justice initiatives. To bring us back to the earlier point that fans often voice the collective opinion that some things are just bigger than sports, the awareness that's able to be brought about to different social justice initiatives, charities, relief efforts, etc., truly embodies that sentiment. One of the more recent and most well-known examples of social justice initiatives is the national anthem protests, made most "popular" first by former NFL Quarterback Colin Kaepernick. To show his support for all of those oppressed in the United States, predominantly minority groups, Colin Kaepernick sparked what turned out to be a significant movement. He created a considerable amount of discussion around the topic as well.

While it was briefly mentioned prior, all of the athletes, their teams, and the leagues those teams reside in have the opportunity to do any of the great things they can do *because* of fan support. The direct link between the success of major professional sports leagues and sports fandom is undeniable. Without viewers, there would be no monster television/streaming deals to be made, and with no fans, there would be no ticket sales, merchandise sales, no salary cap for teams to "afford" (within the rules of each respective sport) the star players on their teams. The global platform that now exists for professional sports would all but disappear completely. The platform provided via revenue generated by fans grants those involved with professional sports these incredible opportunities to put some good back into society.

Opposing Views & Counter-Arguments

Sports fandom presents an overwhelming amount of positives being contributed to society as a direct result. However, there are counter-arguments to be made. Regarding the charity efforts that professional sports organizations promote and accomplish, those who do not support sports fandom as a whole might argue that charity work is only done so that sports organizations can garner positive public opinion. While sports organizations, and everyone involved, publicize their efforts and receive positive responses to charity work being done which may shift public opinion, it is the exact response we should want as a society. "Athletes are an important resource that professional sports teams use to both make an impact on a social issue and to garner positive associations for themselves and the team" (Babiak et al. 2012). Being critical of charity work is a strange concept because the mere fact that any charity work is being done for those who need help is a good thing. No matter the party's intentions in engaging in these exercises, charity work and philanthropic efforts are a net positive to society. The positive perception that results from

the work done and awareness created is inconsequential to every other party, whether it be a spectator or a direct beneficiary of the efforts.

Additionally, other than garnering positive associations for sports organizations and creating positive community activities, another motive for these efforts for professional sports organizations and athletes is the criticism constantly surrounding them. "Given the tremendous scrutiny professional sports teams and athletes receive in the media, it is important to make strong connections with the community." (Babiak et al. 2012) The stigma surrounding professional athletes and how much money they make leads people to forget that they are also human beings who come from communities like the ones the teams represent. "This contract is important because we are in an era where, unfortunately, so much of the business of pro sports has seeped into the front page of the paper, especially the attention given to the salaries our players earn. (Wallace, 2004, p. 38)." (Babiak et al. 2012)

Another aspect of sports fandom commonly criticized by the opposition is the passionate and emotional nature of fans that have spoken in support throughout this paper. While some improvements have been made to sports fans' perception, some still hold that sports fans are irrational, violent, and "hooligan-adjacent" due to their passion.

Fans have often been viewed, particularly in much of the earlier literature on the subject, as somehow 'deviant.' Fans are dangerous, often hysterical 'fanatics,' portrayed as either the 'obsessed loner' or the 'frenzied/hysterical crowd member' (ibid.: 9). Moreover, these stereotypes are often gendered, such as the lonely male collector or the female groupie. (Crawford 2004)

While this position cannot be wholly dismissed, as there are relevant examples of fans acting in the manner described, many individuals do not embody this description. Unfortunately, much of what is publicized about sports fans through media that is not catered to sports fans directly is

framed negatively, so these stereotypes and assumptions are perpetuated. Although this is about sports fandom, sports fandom is a form of entertainment in which much passion is involved. This posture can be found in every other form of entertainment as well. Due to the nature of entertainment and the massive audiences surrounding different forms of entertainment, there will be outliers. The criticism of the nature of sports fans comes with the territory. If there is so much history, emotion, and genuine passion tied to something, it is generally accepted that we have to accept the bad alongside the good, hoping to limit the bad as much as possible. This point comes down to each individual's perception of sports fans' passion. One belief, as supported by the myriad of psychology, sociology examples, and evidence, is that the passion, emotion, and identity surrounding sports fandom presents far more positive side effects to society than negative.

Additionally, a more controversial stance held by both fans and non-fans in response to social justice efforts being promoted through professional sports platforms: to "keep politics out of sports." While this argument is unique in that it has not exclusively held those on the outside looking in on sports (non-sports fans), numerous ex-sports fans stopped supporting their favorite team because of this position. These individuals might argue that sports are meant to be consumed as escapism and that "political" issues should not bleed over into entertainment. A response to this stance is that human rights and equality should not be a "political issue," Some things are just more important than a section of fans' opinions and feelings. Comparatively, this is a stance in all other forms of entertainment, with fans on both sides of the argument.

Most importantly, the social justice issues addressed in professional sports are systemic. Many athletes that have made it to the professional level have come from diverse backgrounds and had to push through endless challenges to reach the highest level of their profession. Social justice

initiatives represent much more significant issues than sports alone could tackle. However, it is a powerful message to fans that athletes are willing to use their position and possibly even risk their job for the greater good. Athletes feeling compelled to use the (fan-provided) platform they have been so lucky to be beneficiaries of to take a stand against injustices is highly admirable. While there are numerous other reasons that non-fans do not support the idea of sports fandom and argue that it contributes more to societal detriment than it does benefit, one last point of contention will be explored. Those who do not support sports fandom may point to the fact that fans may be blinded by their passion and fandom when it comes to immoral/inequitable decisions made by their favorite sports organizations and leagues. Because of sports fans' loyalty, it is used against fans due to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is used in this scenario because fans might turn a blind eye to a questionable organizational decision if it means that their team will benefit or will not have to face the severe nature of the situation/subject. This point briefly touches upon the last point about social justice initiatives propelled by professional athletes and sports organizations as a serious subject matter. The exact nature of sports fans is being addressed here. In retaliation, it can be argued that cognitive dissonance is not exclusive to sports in any way. Sports are still a form of entertainment, and as mentioned earlier, individuals typically seek entertainment as a way to escape reality. This brings us back to the point that fandom's origin dramatically affects how committed fans are to their allegiance. Of course, sociology and psychology are called back into reasoning here as well, "People are willing to suspend disbelief to allow their identification as a fan to continue unsullied." (Luther & Davidson, 2020) While this point can cause (potentially) warranted debate, unfortunately, there is not much anyone can do to sway fans who demonstrate this degree of fandom. Again, this, too,

circles back to the point that we are asked to weigh the positives and negatives of every societal addition, and it is impossible to satisfy everyone regardless of how much good is brought about.

Conclusion

Sports fandom is a subject in our society that will not disappear anytime soon, as profits are ever-increasing in the field. While looking at everything else in our world, professional sports may seem insignificant at first glance. However, after some research, professional sports connections to the economy, general happiness, structure, philanthropic endeavors, etc., are evident. As with most things, sports fandom offers clearly established benefits and detractions. However, the positives offered to society by sports fandom far outweigh all of the arguments against sports fandom. Sports fandom's history and roots in support and community offer indisputable positive opportunities for continued growth in all areas covered throughout this paper. Uniquely, the positive influences presented by sports fandom can be grown far more prominent than they already have been in the digital age we live in. It is why career paths with sports management and organizational structures in sports are becoming increasingly popular.

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