

RUNNING HEADER: PREMIER LEAGUE FANDOM IDENTIFICATION AND
AGGRESSION

Premier League Fandom Identification and Aggression

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Abstract

The present study is a replication of a previously published study on the relationship between sport team fan identification and aggression. The present study used social identity theory to try and identify a correlation between level of Premier League fan identification and willingness to commit anonymous acts of aggression. Twenty participants completed an online survey, and because of this small sample size, the results of the study were not significant. Findings suggest no strong relationship between either general Premier League fan identification and aggression or team-specific fan identification and aggression. Had the sample size been larger, however, the results would have been expected to match those of the previous study; namely, that higher fan identification would lead to a higher willingness to commit anonymous acts of aggression.

Keywords: Premier League, fandom, aggression, fan identification, social identity theory

Premier League Fandom Identification and Aggression

This study is a replication of a previously published study titled “Team Identification, Sport Fandom Identity and Willingness to Verbal/Physical Aggressive Actions among Soccer Fans” (Rahmati, M. M., Kabiri, S., & Shadmanfaat, S. M., 2014). Authors of this study examined participants’ levels of team identification and sport identification in relation to their willingness to participate in verbal and physical acts of aggression. Researchers found a significant relationship between these three variables. The purpose of the present study is to replicate the methods of the original study to see if there are similar trends among Premier League fans. There have been some small tweaks made in the present study to have a bigger focus on anonymous physical aggression rather than verbal. Additionally, the measures have been modified to accurately represent the Premier League and its teams.

Fandom

Football, like other sports and entertainment, brings people together and promotes community on the basis of commonality and shared identity. Fans are defined as people who have an interest in and follow a sport, player, and/or team (Wann, D. L., Hunter, J. L., Ryan, J. A., & Wright, L. A., 2001). Fandom is not necessarily portrayed in the most positive light, and sports fans are no exception. From rowdiness to hooliganism, sports fans, especially males, are not thought of in the most positive way (Rahmati, M. M., Kabiri, S., & Shadmanfaat, S. M., 2014). However, research has shown that participation in sport fandom can have positive effects on people. A case study conducted in 2008 found that sports fandom allows displaced people in the United States the ability to reconnect with parts of their hometowns (Kraszewski, J., 2008). Nevertheless, recent research has been interested in fandom identification and levels of aggression. A person who highly identifies with a sports team is someone who feels a strong

psychological connection to that team. Being a follower of that team is a central part of their self-identity.

Theoretical Framework

When studying fan identity and sports, there are two main theories that are used: identity theory and social identity theory. Identity theory explains an individual's role-related behaviors, while social identity theory seeks to explain group processes and intergroup relations (Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M., 1995). Therefore, for the purpose of this study which looks at levels of fandom identification in relation to aggression, social identity theory is more suitable to use. The idea of social identity theory is that a social category that a person feels they belong to provides a definition of who they are in terms of the defining traits of that category. A membership to this social category or group is represented in the person's mind as a social identity, helping them figure out how to behave and think as a member of that group (Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M., 1995). In terms of social identity and fandom, a study was conducted to look at the relationship between self-esteem, self-description, and sports team identification. This study found that the level of identification was a strong predictor of whether or not a participant mentioned their fandom in their self-description. Among those who mentioned their fandom, self-esteem was a strong predictor of how soon it was mentioned (Wann, D. L., Royalty, J., & Roberts, A., 2000).

Premier League Football

This study aims to look more specifically at Premier League fans, rather than looking broadly at sports fans in general. The English Premier League (EPL) is the top level of the English football league system, consisting of 20 teams. The teams participating in the 2020-2021 EPL season are: Arsenal, Aston Villa, Brighton, Burnley, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Everton,

Fulham, Leeds United, Leicester City, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Newcastle, Sheffield United, Southampton, Tottenham, West Bromwich Albion, West Ham, and Wolverhampton Wanderers. A typical Premier League season runs from August-May with a total of 38 matches played by each team. The EPL is the most-watched football league in the world, broadcast in 212 territories to a potential TV audience of 4.7 billion people (Ebner, 2013). Because of the broad reach of the Premier League, dedicated fans can be found all around the world, not just in the United Kingdom.

Literature Review

In addition to the study being replicated, there have been numerous other studies published that explore the relationship between fandom identification and aggressive behaviors. A study conducted in 2003 found that fans who identified highly with the sports team they support were more likely to partake in anonymous acts of aggression (Wann, D. L., Haynes, G., McLean, B., & Pullen, P., 2003). This study also found that men were more likely than women to act aggressively and that participants on the whole were more likely to participate in less serious acts of aggression such as tripping a rival coach or player than more serious acts of aggression like murdering a rival coach or player. Athletic identity has also been linked to anger, along with aggressiveness, with differences in sport and culture (Visek, A. J., Watson, J. C., Hurst, J. R., Maxwell, J. P., & Harris, B. S., 2010). Another study found that a high level of fandom identification is associated with willingness to consider illegally assisting a sports team (Wann, D. L., Hunter, J. L., Ryan, J. A., & Wright, L. A., 2001).

Hypotheses

Because prior research has found that a higher level of fan identification correlates to a higher level of aggression and willingness to commit acts of aggression, I propose the following

hypothesis about the relationship between fan identification with a Premier League team and willingness to participate in acts of aggression:

H1: Participants who report high levels of fan identification with a Premier League team (team-specific fan identification) will report higher levels of willingness to participate in anonymous acts of physical aggression than participants who do not report high levels of fan identification with a Premier League team.

Next, based on the theoretical framework and the results of the original study, I propose the following hypothesis about fan identification with the Premier League in general:

H2: Participants who report high levels of fan identification with the Premier League in general will report higher levels of willingness to participate in anonymous acts of physical aggression than participants who do not report high levels of fan identification with the Premier League in general.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 20 participants ($n = 2$ women, $n = 18$ men) was recruited from various social media sites, including Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. Participants were also recruited through SNC News, a tri-weekly news email sent out to all St. Norbert College students, faculty, and staff. The researcher obtained approval from the IRB before collecting data, and all participants gave their informed consent to participate in the survey. The sample included 85% ($n = 17$) White or European-American participants, 5% ($n = 1$) Asian or Asian American participants, and 15% ($n = 3$) Hispanic or Latino/a or Chicano/a participants. Participants were all 18 years or older ($M_{AGE} = 30.3$, $SD = 13.97$) and 95% ($n = 19$) of the participants were from

the United States; the other 5% (n = 1) were from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 50% (n = 10) of the participants were single, 10% (n = 2) were in a relationship, and 40% (n = 8) were married. 20% (n = 4) of the participants identified themselves as fans of Chelsea, 20% (n = 4) were fans of Manchester City, 20% (n = 4) were fans of Tottenham, 20% (n = 4) were fans of Manchester United, 5% (n = 1) were fans of Crystal Palace, 5% (n = 1) were fans of Everton, 5% (n = 1) were fans of Liverpool, and 5% (n = 1) were fans of Newcastle. Participants were asked to take a short online survey that contained questions about levels of fan identification and aggression.

Measures

Aggression

Aggression was measured using the Hostile Aggression Scale adapted from Wann, D. L., Haynes, G., McLean, B., & Pullen, P. (2003). This scale measures the degree to which participants would be likely to engage in anonymous acts of aggression towards their rival team's star player and coach. For example, the scale asks participants, "If you could remain completely anonymous and there was no possibility of arrest or retaliation, would you..." The items that follow ask participants if they would trip the rival team's star player or coach, break the leg of the rival team's star player or coach, or murder the rival team's star player or coach. Participants answered these questions from 1 (definitely would not) to 5 (definitely would).

Fan Identification

Fan identification was measured using two different scales. The first scale, the Sports Fandom Questionnaire (SFQ), was adapted from Wann, D. L., Shelton, S., Smith, T., & Walker, R. (2002). This scale measures fan identification more broadly, focusing on the Premier League in general rather than on participants' favorite teams. Participants responded to statements such

as, “I consider myself to be a fan of the Premier League” and “My life would be less enjoyable if I were not allowed to follow the Premier League” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Fan identification was also measured using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) that was adapted from Wann, D. L., & Branscombe, N. R. (1993). This scale measures fan identification more specifically as it pertains to participants’ favorite Premier League teams. Participants indicated the level of importance from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important) of the following questions: “How important to you is it that [favorite team] wins?” and “How important is being a fan of [favorite team] to you?” Participants indicated their level of fan identification from 1 (not a fan at all) to 7 (very much a fan) based on the following: “How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of [favorite team]?” and “How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of [favorite team]?” Finally, participants indicated how often they engaged in certain behaviors from 1 (never) to 7 (always). These behaviors were: “During the season, how closely do you follow [favorite team] via any of the following: in person or on television, on the radio, and televised news or a newspaper?” and “How often do you display [favorite team]’s name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?”

Results

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants who reported high levels of fan identification with a Premier League team would also report higher levels of willingness to participate in anonymous acts of physical aggression than participants who did not report high levels of fan identification with a Premier League team. The correlation between team-specific fan

identification and aggression was not significant, $r = .088$, $p = .713$. Because of this insignificant correlation, Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants who reported high levels of fan identification with the Premier League in general would report higher levels of willingness to participate in anonymous acts of physical aggression than participants who did not report high levels of fan identification with the Premier League in general. The correlation between general fan identification and aggression was not significant, $r = .01$, $p = .968$. Because of this insignificant correlation, Hypothesis 2 cannot be supported.

Discussion

The results of this replication study are such that concrete conclusions cannot be made. Ideally, I would have liked over 100 participants to complete the online survey, but a sample size of 20 is too few to truly analyze the results. If the number of participants were higher, I would have expected to see a correlation between fan identification and willingness to commit anonymous acts of aggression, as predicted in the hypotheses. In accordance with prior research, higher fan identification should result in a higher level of willingness to commit anonymous acts of aggression (Rahmati, M. M., Kabiri, S., & Shadmanfaat, S. M., 2014). This result should be true for both general Premier League fan identification and fan identification with a specific team. Prior research has concluded that identified fans consider being a fan of their team as an important part of their life; they feel like winners when their team wins, and they are willing to defend their team from criticism when they lose. Under the framework of social identity theory, these reasons make fan identification part of someone's social identity. Given prior research and

the basis of social identity theory, there is no reason to believe that the results of the present study would not be similar if the sample size was higher.

Limitations

Therefore, small participation size is the biggest limitation of this study. Because of the specific nature of the study, needing Premier League fans rather than football fans or sports fans in general, gathering enough participants to have meaningful data through social media was challenging. If there had been more time to collect data, then perhaps the sample size would have increased. Another limitation of this study is the type of aggression measured. This study measured willingness to commit anonymous acts of aggression. However, it did not measure whether participants were naturally aggressive, or had a more aggressive personality. It could be said that participants who were naturally aggressive would be more willing to commit these anonymous acts even if they did not highly identify themselves as fans. This limitation speaks to the larger complication of surveys, in that they do not rule out confounding variables. Even if there was a higher sample size and a correlation was identified between the variables, cause and effect could not have been determined. Another limitation that goes along with the low sample size is the lack of representation of fans from numerous teams. Only 7 of the 20 Premier League teams were represented in this study, and that number would ideally be higher. Additionally, men were represented much higher than women, so it would be appropriate for future research to focus on whether the correlation between fan identification and aggression is similar for women and men.

Future Research

Future research should also look more in-depth into specific Premier League team fandom. For example, are highly identified Tottenham fans more likely to act aggressively than

highly identified fans of Liverpool or West Ham? And then, if that is the case, what are the reasons why highly identified fans of one team are more likely to act aggressively than another? This could take research much further into the idea of whether geography and environment also play a role in fan identification and aggression in any sport. There is always opportunity for more research on sport fandom, too. Future research could look at the ways in which fans show support on forums and social media sites and aggression shown towards fans of rival teams on social media. Although the results of this study are not as expected, they still open up many avenues and questions for the future.

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