Avoiding Fan Discontinuity: Nostalgia and Displaced Fans

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Displaced nonlocal fans, or fans who have moved from their hometown yet remain supporters of their hometown team, have garnered increasing focus in the literature (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Reifurth et al., 2019). This increase corresponds to technological advancements, such as Internet streaming (i.e., Direct TV's NFL Sunday Ticket), that have made it easier to support teams from afar. However, the underlying psychological processes for how these fans maintain their identification with a distant team remain under-researched. Drawing from psychology literature, nostalgia offers a compelling avenue for exploration. In the current study, we seek to explore what role nostalgia plays in the maintenance of a displaced fan's team identification.

Existing fan literature suggests that team identification, as a social identity, is an antecedent of psychological and social well-being due to the sense of community and group membership that fandom provides (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). In the case of nonlocal fans, who identify with a team absent a local proximal fan community, it is presumed that these psychological and social well-being outcomes do not characterize the nonlocal fan experience (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017). Nostalgia may shed light on a gap in our understanding.

Defined as a sentimental longing for the past, nostalgia has been shown to play a role in the maintenance of self-continuity, or one’s sense of connection between their past and present selves (Sedikides et al., 2015). Having a sense of one’s own life story is a basic human need (Bluck & Liao, 2013) and one that supports psychological and subjective well-being, as well as feelings of social connectedness. Nostalgia can similarly serve as a tool for counteracting discontinuity stemming from life events that disrupt one’s sense of self across time. For displaced fans, moving may represent such an event. Consequently, fans may choose to maintain their distant fandom as a source of continuity, enacted through nostalgia.

We will take a qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of displaced fans, using semi-structured interviews to explore the role of memory in relation to their fandom today. This is consistent with the long interview method (McCracken, 1988). Participants will be recruited from Reddit boards and Twitter, specifically fans who classify as displaced fans. Long interview studies use small sample sizes, trading generalizability of numbers for depth of the participants’ experiences and worldviews. Consistent with similar studies (e.g., Mansfield, Delia, & Katz, 2019), we plan to conduct around 15 interviews but will continue the research process until reaching theoretical saturation. Data will be recorded, transcribed, and inductively coded to identify themes, consistent with our method (Tesch, 1990).

While this research is ongoing, we expect the findings of this study to provide insight into the underlying psychological processes that drive displaced fans to maintain their fandom from afar. More practically, we expect this study to extend our understanding of displaced and nonlocal fans, as well as how sports marketers may better connect with nonlocal fans and bolster the fan-team bond.