

**Opinion**

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# Fan Free Agency: Reimagining Sports Fandom through the Power of Choice and Identity

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## Abstract

This opinion piece leverages my personal exploration of “fan free agency” to examine the evolving nature of sports fandom and its implications for fan identity. Central to this investigation is the establishment of eligibility criteria based on four psychological areas: behavioral aspects, cognitive processes, mental functions, and social behavior. Drawing on over 30 years of experience as a sports enthusiast, I reflect on my journey of selecting a football team based on personal values and community engagement rather than traditional geographic loyalty. Through my interactions with dedicated fan bases, particularly the Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers, I highlight the importance of self-awareness and the role of social media in shaping modern fan experiences. I argue that contemporary fandom increasingly prioritizes individual character and social responsibility, challenging the conventional notion that loyalty must stem from one’s hometown. This shift is particularly relevant considering recent changes in social media dynamics, which have created a need for inclusive spaces where fans can connect meaningfully. By emphasizing the communal aspects of fandom, such as shared rituals and supportive interactions, this piece advocates for a broader understanding of fan identity that embraces diversity and personal connection. Ultimately, I call for further exploration of how emerging platforms like Bluesky can foster positive fan interactions and contribute to a more inclusive sports culture.

**Keywords:** Sports Fandom; Fan Identity; Social Identity; Self-Awareness; Social Cognitive Theory; Participatory Culture; Social Behavior; Social Media

## Introduction

Sports fandom plays a significant role in shaping individual identities and community dynamics Singleton [1]; Singleton & Green, 2021. Despite growing up in a sports household, I did not have a dedicated football team. My parents were fair-weather fans, cheering only for the winning teams, which influenced my own experience of watching football. As a result, I spent my football Sundays tuning into games featuring all 32 teams in the league and those slotted in television primetime. For many fans without a local team, the process of selecting a favorite can involve various strategies, such as choosing a team based on family ties, player loyalty, or even regional rivalries. The supplemental programming in sports coverage offers a wealth of complementary media, highlighting human-centered stories that showcase athletes’ personalities and lives off the field. This approach allows fans, regardless of their level of commitment, to consider becoming fans of individual players rather than just one main team. Sports fan identity is defined by individuals’ connections to a sports team or athlete. This identity encompasses emotional investment in the team’s success, participation in rituals (such as game day

traditions), and engagement with fellow fans Wann & Branscombe [2].

The psychological aspects of sports fandom reveal how identification with a team influences behavior and emotional responses to the team’s performance. The prevailing norm in sports fandom is to have “a team,” illustrating a direct affiliation between a person’s identity and that team. My earlier research indicates a multidimensional sports fan experience Singleton [1], highlighting various factors that contribute to team allegiance. However, I have often wondered: if athletes can be traded and move from team to team, why fans not allowed to do the same? The unspoken standard of football fandom dictates that your team should be from your hometown, emphasizing the cognitive and emotional sense of ownership fans feel when they declare their allegiance. While this view is widely accepted among sports fans, I choose to think differently. In this piece, I will explore my own personal journey of “trying out” different teams, challenging the traditional notion of unwavering fandom by examining the cognitive and behavioral aspects involved in selecting a football team to support.

## The Landscape of Fandom and Concept of Fan Free Agency

In August 2023, the Pew Research Center (2024) conducted a survey of nearly 12,000 U.S. adults, posing the question: "If you had to choose one sport as being 'America's sport,' even if you don't personally follow it, which sport would it be?" The results indicated that 53% of respondents identified NFL football as 'America's sport,' significantly outpacing baseball, which garnered only 27% of the votes. This finding is noteworthy given baseball's historical reputation as 'America's favorite pastime' Gramlich, Jackson, & Rotolo [3]. Football consistently achieves the highest television ratings, attendance figures, and overall fan engagement compared to other sports in the United States. This trend is exemplified by Super Bowl 59, which attracted 127.7 million viewers across all platforms, setting an all-time viewing record Porter [4]. Growing up in Riverside, California, I did not have a direct affiliation with a local football team; the closest teams were in Los Angeles, which has experienced fluctuations in team presence over the years. As of now, there are two teams in Los Angeles: the Los Angeles Chargers and the Los Angeles Rams. During my young adult years, I primarily supported Indianapolis Colts Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning, whose jersey was the first football jersey I ever purchased. After leading the Colts to a championship, Manning transitioned to the Denver Broncos, where he also secured a championship before retiring. Following Manning's departure, I experienced a significant shift in my fandom, prompting me to seek out a new team.

## Cognitive Criteria for Selecting a Team

The concept of fan free agency refers to the ability to explore different sports teams to determine which one resonates most with an individual, based on a set of personally identified criteria. As I embarked on this new personal venture spanning across 5-6 months during the 2017-2018 NFL season, I carefully considered the evaluation criteria that would guide my methodological approach. This process underscores the significant influence of one's psychological makeup on fandom. Social attitudes and perspectives surrounding a person's decision to change teams are generally negative, often leading to the perception that "you're not a real fan." While individuals can still root for whichever team they choose, this scenario of changing teams would likely register on the lower end of a hypothetical fandom measurement scale. In contrast, lifelong fans are typically regarded as "diehard" supporters, representing the highest level of loyalty and affiliation with a team. This dichotomy illustrates the socially understood spectrum of team loyalty, where the extremes reflect varying degrees of commitment and identification with a team. By examining these dynamics, I aim to highlight the complexities of fandom and challenge the conventional notions surrounding team allegiance.

The framework I implemented for selecting a new team centered around two primary areas of consideration. The first area is team culture, which encompasses the franchise's history

and its surrounding community. Additionally, I paid close attention to human behavior, evaluating any notable concerns related to personal conduct violations, negative behavior on or off the field, criminal acts, and other relevant issues. The second area of consideration involved personal connections. I looked at which teams my already established friends supported, recognizing that this would be an important element in my decision-making process. Friends could serve as "team tour guides," helping me navigate the nuances of fandom for those teams. This aspect of my exploration aligns with social cognitive theory, which posits that human behavior is influenced by observing others Bandura [5] and that these observations can serve as sources of behavioral reinforcement. In consideration to these two pillars, I narrowed my search to be 1 of these three teams: the Chicago Bears, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the Philadelphia Eagles. By employing these criteria with my three finalists, I aimed to create a thoughtful and reflective approach to selecting a new team, ultimately enhancing my understanding of the dynamics of fandom and personal identity in sports while simultaneously challenging norm of only having one team. Relating directly under the scope of multidimensional sciences as they relate to the human experience, the following outlines the four psychological and behavioral areas I used as criteria in search of a new team.

## Behavioral Aspects

The dynamics of modern fandom incorporate a highly active membership (Fiske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger [6]), positioning fans as not merely passive consumers but active participants with the ability to engage with the surrounding content and communities Singleton [1]. The related term "participatory culture" highlights that the significance of media lies not in the technology that creates it, but in the empowerment provided to consumers through their engagement and connectivity (Jenkins, 2006). By enabling consumers to take on the role of creators, this reciprocal exchange of information allows users to repurpose existing content by sharing or generating their own in digital spaces Singleton [1]. For instance, a fan might watch a game on traditional media, such as television, and then use social media platforms to share their live reactions, create memes, or retweet highlights. As Kennedy and Hills (2009) observe, "with traditional media, while you can interpret them in many ways, what you see is what you get. With new media, each user can see a different thing, depending on the route he or she navigates through a website or the multimedia components he or she chooses to play" (p. 173). New media offers fans the opportunity for a unique experience with each interaction on these platforms, creating a 24/7 participatory culture surrounding one's fandom.

## Significance of Fan Engagement within Social Environments

Groups play a crucial role in fostering loyalty, as they draw upon a collective social identity. Fandom represents a voluntary

psychological commitment to a larger group, such as a sports team Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund [7], which makes it easier to cultivate group solidarity because membership is not imposed (Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984; Singleton [1]). According to Mael and Ashforth (2001), “identification has its most direct emotional and behavioral expression in loyalty” (p. 198). Within these groups and organizations, individuals establish beliefs and behavioral norms that define inclusion and exclusion, even in participatory digital environments.

Being authentic-defined as being true to one’s core self (Ryan & Deci, 2006)-is crucial in both psychological and market research because the actions individuals perform reflect their fundamental values and beliefs. Authentic and autonomous behaviors demonstrate a sense of ownership and an affirmation of the self (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Therefore, when it comes to selecting a football team, the emotional motivations behind this choice provide insight into how fans’ identities are formed- self included. Take the Chicago Bears, one of the three teams in competition for my fandom. I have a close friend, “Jackie,” who was born and raised in Chicago and embodies the typical loyalty to hometown teams that comes with being a local. Despite being a devoted Bears fan, the team has struggled since their last championship in 2007, experiencing limited success and a lack of consistent optimism. Eager to connect with fellow fans, I decided to visit a Bears bar in Los Angeles to watch a game alongside Jackie and others to get the all-important feel for the community. I was immediately struck by how patrons proudly displayed their allegiance through blue and orange Bears merchandise, the team’s colors. Even in defeat, the fans maintained their affection for the team, though their spirits seemed slightly diminished, demonstrated in lowered heads. Rituals and traditions are deeply valued among fan bases of all major sports teams, and the Bears are no exception.

For instance, when encountering another fan wearing Bears gear, it is customary to shout, “BEAR DOWN!” at each other, fostering a sense of unity among supporters. The 1985 Bears are famously recognized for their formidable defense, so much so that a documentary titled “85: The Greatest Team in Football History” was created, featuring Hall of Famers such as Walter Payton, William “The Refrigerator” Perry, and Coach Mike Ditka. This documentary chronicles the team’s journey to championship victory and their rise to pop culture fame 85: The Greatest Team in Football History [8]. While this historical narrative is intriguing, I felt an emotional disconnect; without an understanding of the team’s statistics and historical moments, it was challenging to feel a sense of belonging, let alone an invitation, to the team’s in-group. Additionally, I noticed a lack of engagement both in-person and online, aside from a few enthusiastic “BEAR DOWN!” calls. It seemed to me that many fans were more focused on the past rather than the present or future of the team. Upon reflecting on my personal journey of fan free agency, I ultimately decided to eliminate the Bears from my list of potential teams to support.

### Cognitive Function

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is a psychological framework developed by Albert Bandura (2001) that emphasizes the importance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in understanding behavior. According to SCT, individuals learn not only through direct experiences but also by observing the actions of others and the consequences of those actions. Functioning as an agentic transaction Bandura [5], Bandura (2001) notes, “People are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental events or inner forces...In these agentic transactions, people are producers as well as products of social systems” (p.266). I assert that this notion of people being both producers and products of social system rings true to sports fandom as well. Seeing as how football fandom is stimulated by active participation, fans therefore are highly motivated by their surrounding social systems which can be made up of a large population of fans for the same team and having a “home base” or team bar. And due to the acceleration of new media innovations in the sports business, fans are now given ample space and opportunity to enter alternative social systems, ultimately extending their sport experience with the ability to now add to it as a producer by spreading their own behaviors into both traditional and digital arenas.

Expressive aspects of fan behavior illustrate the intentionality behind fans’ cognitive processes in making decisions. And because interfacing with others can build esteem Festinger [9] in-person and social media experiences can one’s a personal and social identity Sanderson [10], thereby sparking new behaviors. Expanding on Henry Tajfel’s classic social identity theory (SIT) (1982), it is important for me to stress how the evolution of sports fandom and its surrounding business illustrates a cognitive function which Stephen Reicher (2001) calls a transition from collective identity to collective action.

### Team Brand Identity and Personal Narratives

We now dive into the Pittsburgh Steelers. This fan base exemplifies the interplay between self-concept and collective identity within sports fandom. For many Steelers fans, their affiliation with the team is a vital part of their self-identity, reflecting values such as loyalty, resilience, and a hard, blue-collar working community. This connection fosters a sense of pride, as fans proudly display team colors and engage in game-day rituals, integrating their support for the Steelers into their personal narratives. The team’s rich history, including multiple Super Bowl victories, further reinforces this self-concept, allowing fans to feel part of a larger legacy.

At the time, I had several dedicated Steelers fans among my friends, but none lived near me in Los Angeles. I anticipated that this would pose a significant challenge, as I wouldn’t have anyone to serve as a “team tour guide” to help me navigate the fandom. Undeterred, I accepted the challenge and conducted a quick

Google search for “LA Steelers bars.” To my surprise, over 15 establishments appeared, each either self-identified as a “Steelers bar” or mentioned as such in patron reviews. I chose one based on its proximity, and upon entering, I immediately felt a magnetic, upbeat atmosphere filled with enthusiastic patrons.

As I mingled with fans and strangers enjoying food and drinks, I found everyone to be welcoming and friendly. When I shared my personal journey of exploring fandom, many fans lit up with excitement. “Oh, how cool! Let me tell you why Steeler Nation is the best fanbase of all... we work hard, we love hard, and we play hard!” This declaration was met with a resounding cheer from the entire bar. I began to feel a sense of belonging and thought, perhaps my experiment was nearing its conclusion; maybe I was becoming a Steelers fan after all! The concept of collective identity leading to collective action became evident in this experience. Collective identity among Steelers fans is rooted in a self-concept characterized by hard work, toughness, and resilience-qualities that resonate with the city’s working-class heritage and its steel industry history. This identity fosters an emotional connection that fuels shared experiences and communal activities, such as attending games and participating in tailgates. Known as “Steeler Nation,” this devoted fan base rallies around iconic symbols like the “Terrible Towel” and the legendary “Steel Curtain” defense, creating a strong sense of belonging. Active participation in cheering, chanting, and celebrating victories enhances group membership, cultivating a supportive environment where fans collectively experience the highs and lows of the season. Within this fan base, human agency and self-efficacy are prominent psychological traits that I continue to admire, as they reflect a shared synergy of personal values. As I navigated this decision-making process of selecting a football team, I found myself torn between the Pittsburgh Steelers and my final “try-out” team, the Philadelphia Eagles.

### Mental Functions and Social Behavior

Central to my personal journey experiment to explore firsthand the psychological and behavioral components of football fandom is making sure that there is alignment within my own personal identity and defining what criteria is even most important. Mental functions and social behavior each prove critical. Tajfel [11] recognizes that identity is a complex and multifaceted concept. To address this complexity, he confines his definition to its relationship with the social environment, thereby avoiding the myriad interpretations of the term. Tajfel [11] specifically defines SIT as “that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 2). This framework suggests that individuals can derive esteem from their conscious affiliation with a group. Consequently, this theory illustrates how self-worth and value can also stem from one’s connection to a group, such as a sports team or an individual player Wann [12]. And being

such a dedicated fan of sports, “being without” a football team left what I can only describe as a gaping hole in my identity because of my inability to be a part of something bigger than myself. This results in a high need to fulfill my social identity to gain esteem and confidence in my general fandom.

Tajfel’s SIT provides a framework for understanding how mental functions are involved in the formation and maintenance of one’s group membership (1982) – which I assert explicitly applies to sports fan identity as well. A fan’s identification with a team can enhance their self-esteem and can be recognized by even the choice of language used. For example, when someone’s team performs well and wins a game, he or she may say, ‘yay we won!’ showing ownership and pride for being a part of the winning group. Conversely, a poor performance and loss may make he or she may then say, ‘I can’t believe they lost!’ demonstrating an us vs them mentality; an intentional way to create emotional distance and separation between he or she and the team due to feelings of disappointment or shame. The communal experience of being part of a fan base fosters social connections and a strong sense of belonging among fans. Participation in rituals, such as attending games or tailgating, reinforces group identity and creates shared memories, which can enhance emotional well-being and social support Wann [12]. However, fans may also encounter cognitive dissonance when their team performs poorly or engages in controversial behavior. To alleviate this discomfort, they might rationalize their loyalty or emphasize the team’s historical successes, thereby preserving their identity as devoted supporters Festinger [9]. SIT provides a foundation of valuable insights into the mental functions underpinning fan identity. By examining how categorization, identification, and comparison shape fan experiences, I uphold the belief that researchers and applied practitioners alike can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics that contribute to construction of passionate fanbases, and the often-complex relationships fans maintain with their teams as a result. At this stage of my personal fan free agency journey, it was time to “try out” the Philadelphia Eagles.

### Game Day

After reflecting on my 30+ years as a dedicated sports fan and undertaking a personal experiment regarding football allegiances, I found that the foundation of establishing and maintaining a relationship with a team lies in one’s self-awareness and respect for the associated culture-both the team and its fan community Wann & Branscombe [2]. During the middle of the 2017-18 NFL season, I was encouraged to participate in Eagles tailgates, attend games, and watch as part of a community in a dedicated Eagles bar in my area. Upon reflection, this experience proved to be pivotal in my evaluation of the team, its fan base, and the universal understanding of fan identity overall. On December 10, 2017, I was invited to participate in a weekend of Eagles festivities in preparation for an upcoming game against the LA Rams at the LA



Memorial Coliseum. The Saturday activities included karaoke at a nearby bar, and I attended with my close friend and lead Eagles' recruiter "Nyrie," who had been instrumental in encouraging me to "sign" my fan identity contract with the Eagles. Upon entering the venue, I expected to know only "Nyrie," despite having previously attended a Chargers game with what I assumed were many of the same fans. To my surprise, I was warmly welcomed as soon as I walked in, receiving enthusiastic greetings like "Hey! You're back!" and "Hey T! GO BIRDS!" accompanied by high fives from familiar faces. Many fans remembered me and my "experiment," especially "John," a dedicated lifelong fan who was regarded as the leader of the LA Eagles community.

"John" approached me and asked, "So you're back for more, huh? Where do the Eagles rank now in your test?" I smiled humbly and admitted that I was having the time of my life, thanking him for making me feel like a lifelong fan. The next day, during the game against the Rams, the Eagles emerged victorious, and the stands were dominated by Eagles fans, with an estimated 70% support compared to 30% for the Rams. However, the excitement was tempered by a severe knee injury suffered by starting quarterback Carson Wentz, which led many to believe his season was over and that the team would have to rely on backup QB Nick Foles. Typically, post-victory celebrations would fill the air with cheers, but on our ride home in a party bus filled with 50 Eagles fans, there was an eerie silence, overshadowed by sadness as the Eagles' path to the playoffs appeared more challenging. As I scanned the bus and noticed the droopy faces, including "Nyrie's", I elbowed her and shouted, "Hey come on, guys! It's not over! Foles finished the game and is a veteran. I thought we liked it tough and not handed to us. Let's go! GO BIRDS!" This outburst was met with a resounding "GO BIRDS!" from the crowd, and the energy in the bus lifted. "Nyrie" looked at me and pointed out, "You said 'WE!'" I paused and reflected on my pep talk, realizing she was right-I had subconsciously used inclusive language like "we" and "us," indicating that I was now part of the team. At that moment, I realized that my fan free agency was effectively over, as I had been fully integrated into the community through multiple social interactions without needing to pass a rigorous test of my knowledge about the team's history to gain acceptance-contrary to those who might have considered my level of fandom to be low or nonexistent. This experience challenges the general unspoken standard of football fandom, which often dictates that only those with extensive knowledge of a team's history, typically rooted in their place of birth, are deemed worthy of belonging.

### Self-awareness

Self-awareness plays a crucial role in personal identity and social interactions, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. It allows individuals to recognize their values, beliefs, and motivations, which can enhance emotional intelligence and interpersonal

effectiveness Goleman [13]. In the context of sports fandom, self-awareness is particularly important for newcomers, such as a new Philadelphia Eagles fan entering a community of loyal diehard supporters. For new fans, self-awareness helps navigate the complexities of group dynamics and cultural norms within the fan community. Understanding one's own motivations for supporting a team can foster a deeper connection with fellow fans and enhance the overall experience of fandom. This certainly became the case for me. For instance, recognizing the emotional significance of the Eagles' history and the passionate dedication of long-time fans can guide new supporters in engaging respectfully with established traditions and rituals, such as tailgating or participating in game-day chants Wann & Branscombe [2]. I was not shunned or belittled for not having control over where I was birthed or that I considered myself to be a sports fan yet not have a team in the country's most popular and dominate sport. The opposite rang true.

Moreover, self-awareness can mitigate feelings of cognitive dissonance that may arise when a new fan encounters the highs and lows of team performance. By acknowledging their own emotional responses and aligning them with the collective identity of the fan base, new fans can cultivate a sense of belonging and authenticity within the community. This engagement not only enriches their personal experience but also strengthens the communal bonds that define the Eagles fan base. Take for instance Super Bowl 52 on February 18, 2018. The underdog Eagles have, as I previously predicted, would defy the odds and make it all the way through the playoffs with the backup quarterback Foles and play in the championship game against the New England Patriots. There are two important personal points I contend to be pivotal in recognition of oneself and how I believe this works to challenge generally accepted narratives about fans of new teams or those deemed to have a low level of affiliation. The first reveals a purposeful cognitive and aware decision-making process in my action of purchasing an Eagles jersey to wear to watch the game amongst all the new friends I've just made.

### Personal Values and Off-the-Field Character - Chris Long

Chris Long is a retired NFL player known for his successful career as a defensive end, primarily with the St. Louis Rams, New England Patriots, and Philadelphia Eagles. Long comes from a respected family with deep roots in professional football; his father, Howie Long, is a Hall of Fame defensive end, and both of his brothers, Kyle played in the NFL and while the youngest Chris also serving as a coach working with player personnel. Beyond his athletic achievements (including two Super Bowl rings for the Patriots and Eagles...spoiler alert), Chris Long is recognized for his commitment to social issues, particularly valuing diversity and community engagement. He founded the nonprofit organization Waterboys, which focuses on providing access to clean water in

developing countries. Through this initiative, Long has combined his passion for philanthropy with his platform as a professional athlete, emphasizing the importance of giving back and promoting social responsibility.

In my self-reflection, I realize that I share values with Chris Long, especially regarding diversity, opportunity, and social responsibility. I believe that modern fandom has evolved to place significant emphasis on an individual's personal values and integrity. This perspective challenges traditional norms of fandom, which often prioritize loyalty based on geographic ties. However, I am indifferent to these norms because I view the growing relationship between sports and society as vital in today's sociocultural landscape in America. By prioritizing personal character and team culture within fandom, we can enhance our own experiences while also contributing to a more inclusive and socially conscious sports environment. And there I found it – synergy in values and admiration of personal character, giving me all the purpose to and reasoning I needed to purchase my first Eagles jersey, number 56 Chris Long.

### **“Don't Sit in Dad's Chair” – Nonverbal Symbols of Authority**

There's a playful and familiar phrase that most households come to know, that being, you do not sit in Dad's chair. The chair, typically large and the most comfortable seat, is generally placed in the family room with the best view of the television, signifying that the chair is reserved for the father and is a symbol of his authority or comfort, rather than a literal prohibition Parker [14]. As noted by environmental psychologist Sally Augustin Parker [14], the “Dad Chair” serves as a protected space for the dominant male in a household. In recognition of the fact that not all families have a male figure, the attitudes and emotional behaviors surrounding this chair reflect both biological and cultural influences Parker [14]. I believe that this symbol of respect and tradition can also be applied to social sports settings, but it requires a heightened sense of self-awareness—another key component of achieving a positive fan identity and sport experience.

On Super Bowl Sunday, wearing my newly purchased Chris Long jersey, I attended the same Eagles bar in LA with my new football friends who have since become “real-life” friends. The bar is relatively small, with only a few “VIP” seats offering the best views of the television. Similar to the “Dad Chair,” these seats embody unspoken principles of belonging and respect, typically reserved for those who have established a friendly presence of authority within the community. Although I arrived early and had the opportunity to claim one of the prime seats, I chose not to do so, exercising my own level of self-awareness. Despite invitations from bar regulars, displaced Philadelphians, and friends I had made during the season, I humbly declined their generous offers, believing that those seats rightfully belonged to lifelong fans who had never witnessed their team win a championship. In

expressing this sentiment, I was met with hugs of mutual respect, gratitude, and solidarity from my peers. And to top it all off, we won the Super Bowl—the first championship in franchise history.

### **Future Considerations**

By exploring the psychological and social dimensions of fandom, my personal exercise of fan free agency aligns within the multidisciplinary scope of PBSIJ, particularly in how individual identity and group dynamics influence behavior. By investigating my journey of finding who would become “my team” based on a selective criterion rooted in my own personal values and requirements for community engagement, this study highlights the cognitive processes involved in forming social connections and the impact of self-awareness on group membership. Furthermore, the experience underscores the physiological and emotional responses associated with belonging to a fan community, contributing to a broader understanding of how social behavior and mental functions are shaped by cultural contexts. This exploration not only enriches the discourse on fandom but also offers insights into intervention strategies that leverage psychological science to enhance social cohesion and individual well-being.

A promising area for future research in this field centers on the significance of the modern multidimensional sports experience Singleton [1], particularly the crucial role social media plays in shaping fan identity and the expanded ecosystem of sports media. For over a decade, Twitter, now rebranded as X, served as the premier platform for sports engagement (Singleton [1]; Sanderson [10]). It was often referred to as the largest virtual sports bar in the world NPR [15]. However, I have observed that the positive aspects of social media engagement have diminished since Elon Musk acquired the platform in April 2022 for approximately \$44 billion Jennings [16]. Following the acquisition, Musk implemented a series of controversial changes that fostered an environment conducive to toxic behavior, bullying, racism, and discrimination. This shift can be largely attributed to the layoff of 80% of the workforce, including those responsible for critical safety protocols, as part of a complete restructuring of the company Jennings [16]—conditions that detract from the positive sports experience fans seek.

As a result, many fans now feel digitally homeless, lacking a positive space to connect with like-minded individuals to discuss sports and engage in real-time conversations during live events—activities that have been shown to enhance fan identity (Singleton [1]; Sanderson [10]). It is essential for researchers in this area to continue investigating the dynamic role of social media and digital communities in fan identification, as well as the psychological considerations that developers must address when creating a new “digital sports bar” that actively prohibits toxicity. Recently, Bluesky has emerged as an alternative to Twitter/X, offering a decentralized social media platform. Developed by a team led by

Jack Dorsey, co-founder of Twitter, Bluesky aims to foster a more open and user-controlled online environment O'Connor [17], prioritizing privacy, security, community governance, and user control Dorsey [18]; O'Connor [17]; O'Flaherty [19]. With the growing dissatisfaction with Twitter/X, Bluesky's commitment to a user-centric and decentralized approach resonates with those seeking alternatives that emphasize community engagement and individual empowerment, including sports fans. It will be crucial to monitor how Bluesky and other emerging digital technologies can provide the emotional support and utility desired by all stakeholders within the sports community, including athletes, media outlets, journalists, brand affiliates, fans, and their families.

In conclusion, this exploration of fan free agency highlights the evolving nature of sports fandom and the critical role of self-awareness, community engagement, and personal values in shaping fan identity. Through my journey of selecting a football team, I have navigated the complexities of belonging to a fan community, illustrating how individual experiences intersect with broader social dynamics. The shift from traditional notions of loyalty based on geographic ties to a more inclusive understanding of fandom emphasizes the importance of character and shared values, as exemplified by my interactions with fellow fans. As the landscape of social media continues to change, particularly with the rise of platforms like Bluesky, it becomes increasingly important to investigate how these digital communities can foster positive fan interactions and enhance the overall experience of sports fandom. Future research should focus on the psychological and social dimensions of this evolution, ensuring that new platforms prioritize inclusivity and support for all stakeholders within the sports community. Ultimately, embracing this multidimensional approach to fandom not only enriches individual experiences but also contributes to a more cohesive and socially aware sports culture.

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