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Female Fan Avidity in the National Football League

Abstract

Women have become increasingly interested in sports. Significantly so with the National Football League, 44% of NFL fans are female fans (Waller, 2013). This new found fandom has abruptly changed the demographic and target market of the sports fan base. Therefore, there has not been a significant amount of research done on the level of fan avidity of females. My goal was to observe the female NFL fan base and help to determine what level of avidity females were considered.

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Female Fan Avidity in the National Football League

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Abstract

Women have become increasingly interested in sports. Significantly so with the National Football League, 44% of NFL fans are female fans (Waller, 2013). This new found fandom has abruptly changed the demographic and target market of the sports fan base. Therefore, there has not been a significant amount of research done on the level of fan avidity of females. My goal was to observe the female NFL fan base and help to determine what level of avidity females were considered.

Introduction

It is no secret that the relationship between females and the viewership of sports is on the incline. The major American sports leagues such as; the National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Basketball Association (NBA), have been reaching out to welcome their new found female consumers. "As women have become increasingly involved in sports, those American sports-football, basketball, hockey-have seen an enormous explosion in popularity (Nelson, 1994 p.1)." For these leagues, the new level of fandom in female consumers has opened flood gates to new revenue streams that they are capitalizing on. Sport fandom is a huge platform that has helped develop the sport industry to grow to become twice the size of the auto industry (Frederick, 2013). More specifically, females have shown the greatest increase of fandom within the NFL (Stevenson, 2012). The journey for women to reach this level of fandom however, was not easy. There have been many forms of discrimination throughout the years that have made it difficult for women to partake in the viewership of sports. These forms of discrimination included; questioning of knowledge of sport, separate viewing areas, sexist and derogatory language. Yet this has not stopped them from becoming avid fans. This led me to wonder, we know that there are a significant amount of female NFL fans, but what is their level of fan avidity? There are several motivations to become a fan, all of which are unique to the person or the sport. It is these motivations that lead to specific fan behavior. How people act, what merchandise do they wear, do they attend games or watch sports on television, if so what is their

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behavior like when they do attend? These questions are particularly important when you are trying to assess the level of fandom or fan avidity that one exuberates. Although the questions relate to how people exhibit their fandom based on consumption, this is a main determinant in figuring out the level of fan avidity. Classifying groups of fans based on their fandom towards a specific team or athlete loyalty is typically easy. However, evaluating their level of fandom within these groups requires a more in-depth look. It is simply for someone to say they enjoy the NFL, that would require a yes or no answer. The task of calculating, more specifically, the level of female NFL fandom would require more extensive questioning or evaluation. Since there is a vast amount of areas to look at concerning the level of female fan avidity, I decided to narrow down my segment of interest to female fans in attendance. My research question is; how do women in attendance of NFL games display avid fan behavior? Discovering the various levels of fandom to which females can be categorized and the frequency of females that fall into the different categories helped me to determine how females display avid fan behavior. This was important information that I believe will be useful to the academic community because it breaks down female fans into further segments. As a result of this, researchers will have a better understanding of the female NFL consumer and will in turn help them with marketing.

Literature Review

Female NFL fans have become unique group of fans that has grown vastly. 40 percent of NFL fans are female; it is the sport that has the closest female to male fan ratio (Stevenson, 2012). It is even estimated that the number is now nearly 44 percent (Waller, 2013). However, this was not always the case. Females and sports have come a long way, not only with fandom, but with participation and respect within the sport community. Throughout the 19th century, Victorian ideals dictated that women should be presumed as delicate and devote all their time and energy into maintaining this “Victorian ideal of femininity.” This mindset put women and the sports society at odds, it was not socially acceptable for women to partake or even spectate in sporting events. Not until the late 19th century did women finally

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gain allowance to attend sporting events (Gerber, 1974). Even then, they were segregated into their own section to view the event (Gerber, 1974).

Although those types of physical segregations do not exist anymore, women still face discrimination towards their knowledge of sports and level of fan avidity. “In the football spectacle, the role of women in our society is clearly defined against the masculine criteria. The important action is male-dominated. Women can share only from a distance in a mass world they can shout and squeal from afar, but their roles are accessory to the male event.” (Clark, 1972, p. 1). The quote is an example of how the female role is viewed within the male-dominated sports society. This type of mentality is what female fans have been fighting since their presences of being an NFL fan has been steadily increasing. Like stated in Binchi’s quote, women are seen as a mere accessory to the game by men who believe they are truly avid fans.

The league itself has tried to take a more feminine approach to their marketing plans; however others still segregate the genders based on stereotypes. Bleacher Report is one of the leading sports websites that focuses on informing fans with news about sporting events, organizations and even expressing other fan opinions. They have a non-mainstream approach to the typical sports new website, for example they have featured a “swagger” section. This section reports solely offbeat stories. Unfortunately, along with this section, they attempt to appease to their seemingly male dominated followers and post demeaning articles and contests about women. “The Top 40 Hottest NFL Fans” and “Sexiest NFL Fan Bases” are a couple of examples that prove women are still seen as a sex symbol and accessory rather than a knowledgeable fan. It is because of demeaning publishments like this that people develop a mentality that is defined through this quote “As football spectators, women are often addressed as ignorant girlfriends, wives, friends, daughters, sisters and mothers of all-knowing male viewers (Anderson, 2007).”

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The public's perception of female sports fans typically are similar to the quote by Anderson unfortunately. Even though males and females are viewing the same sport, it is assumed that men who watch football and females who watch football are still two very different groups (Anderson, 2007). The common reasons as to why females are perceived to enjoy football is for the reasons of identifying with the male athletes, enjoying the masculine spectacle and sexual display, and to spend time with others (Anderson, 2007). Regardless of how female fans are viewed within the NFL culture, the fact that people cannot ignore is that the number of female fans have been rising (Stevenson, 2012). In 2004, 37% of NFL fans were females and in 2013 it is said to be closely approaching 44% (Stevenson, 2012). Although that may not seem like a huge spike in percentage, when you look at how vastly huge the NFL fanbase is, this translates into millions of new female fans. But how did the NFL gain all these new NFL fans? There are many motivations that lead people to become sports fans to be explored more in depth.

Specifically for sports fans, most do not even consciously think about the question; how did I become a sports fan? In the past, there has been research to prove that there are differences in sport motivation based on gender (Wann, 2003). There are eight motives that Wann uses to identify sport fan motivation; entertainment, eustress, escape, aesthetics, economic, self-esteem, group affiliation and family needs. Entertainment is a major part of why people engage in sports, it is a fun and enjoyable spectacle that is unpredictable and unscripted. The thrill of the unknown outcome of the event is one of the biggest draws of the game. This also related to the motivation of eustress; when one is seeking the positive physiological arousal that often accompanies following a sport or sporting event. Viewership of sports is commonly used as a diversion from everyday life, an escape. There are also people who simply enjoy the artistic nature of the sport and partake in the aesthetics motivation. Since there is an attraction to the unknown there is also an attraction to betting on the unknown. The economic motivation of sports is a result of gambling on the outcome of sports. The desire to gain a self-concept boost that can occur when a team performs well, this is a result of the self-esteem motive. Others participate in group affiliation; this activity provides an opportunity to be with one's friends. Lastly are family needs, participating in the

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activity because it provides an opportunity to be with one's family. Men have been found to score higher in these motives due to their masculinity and the male dominance of sports (Wann, 2003). This was a significant predictor for six of the motives in men including; entertainment, eustress, self-esteem, aesthetic and escape. According to past studies, men are perceived to be more interested in sports and they report greater interest in sports (Dietz-Uhler, 2000). Violent sports are described as aesthetically pleasing to men which rises arousal towards the sport for males. Females however were found to have higher results in the motivations of family needs, group affiliation and escape. These results show that females have less of an intrinsic motivation towards sport fandom and more of a focus on how it benefits everyone. Females focus on family needs and group affiliation show that they are thinking about others and what is most ideal for them. Whereas men focus on more of an intrinsic reward based on their own entertainment, self-esteem and eustress. These motivations can then be funneled down to show how people exhibit their fandom.

Fan behavior, especially with sports is a very unique and diverse culture. It is a culture that is hard to understand from an outsider's point of view, if you do not love and have a passion for sports then it would be difficult to understand why sports fans act the way they do. There are two popular ways within the sports world that differentiate sports fans known as BIRGing and CORFing (Bernache, Assollant, 2011). A BIRGing fan stands for "basking in reflected glory." Following victories, these fans support teams and are more lively to wear their teams attire and more extensively use the pronoun "we" when discussing their team's performance than they did following a defeat (Bernache, Assollant, 2011). On the contrary, CORFing stands for "cutting off reflected failure." When a team makes a mistake or loses, fans tend to blame it on an external factor to distance themselves from the defeat (Bernache, Assollant, 2011). Although, fans can interchange between being a CORFing fan and a BIRGing fan, most people can classify themselves as mostly one or the other based on their behavior after their teams competition. Higher fan identification has been reported to result in an increased tendency to BIRG and a decreased tendency to CORF (Wann, Branscombe, 1990). It is important to understand which type of fan

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you are observing because their behavioral patterns are likely to be different from each other. A CORFing fan is not as likely to associate with the team after a loss as they would after a win, however this does not make them less of a fan. A BIRGing fan is more likely to be vocal about their team alliance. Since a BIRGing fan is more vocal than a CORFing fan they are usually perceived as a more avid fan. However, CORFing fans and BIRGing fans can both justifiably be avid fans, they just have different ways of displaying it.

How fans act is one way for people to exhibit their fandom, however there are other forms of behavior that exhibit this as well. Other ways include; Are the fans going to games or just watching them on television, or do they use and understand sportugese? The term “sportugese” that was used earlier is also another way to help measure the level of sport fandom. Sportugese is the language or jargon or sports fans with an estimated over 1,500 words or phrases that can be traced to sports origins (Anderson, 2007). The level to which fans use the language sportugese can help us determine how avid a fan may be based on the terms and phrases that they know and associate with. Going to games is also important as well because, it shows how committed the fan is. It is not cheap to go to an NFL game, especially if you have a family. The fan cost index is the price of a family of four to attend a game. It includes; four average price tickets, two small draft beers, four small soft drinks, four regular size hot dogs, parking for one car, two game programs, and two adult size caps. The fan cost index for the NFL as of 2011 was at \$427.42 (Team Marketing Report, 2012). Attending a game is a sacrifice of funds that may not be something that casual fans would want to give up. There are several ways to analyze each of these questions and how it relates to their fandom. Are fans considered more avid because of the amount they purchase or if they go to games rather than watch on television? These questions are still up for debate in the sports world and that can be questioned, evaluated and analyzed to help us measure fandom. Determining the line between an avid fan and a casual fan will help us evaluate female NFL fans as well.

As quoted by Emily Anderson “It may be a man’s game, but women certainly are watching.” The NFL felt the increase of female fans, avid and casual, and decided it was best to capitalize on it. In 2004,

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ABC Network included Terrell Owens in a *Desperate Housewives* commercial (Clark, 2009). Integrating the athletes with women and soap-opera like primetime drama shows was a perfect way to capture the attention of females. This relates back to the eight motivations to be a fan, since females are more likely to associate with escape, tying in the things that females already love with something new and exciting. By 2010, four out of five women said they watched some part of the NFL season (Stevenson, 2012). That translates into 93 million women consuming the NFL brand. An astonishing 44 million females viewed the Super Bowl in 2010 as well (Stevenson, 2012). This was a shocking figure because the number of total viewers for the Oscars that same year was only 39 million (Stevenson, 2012). The Oscars have been said to be the Super Bowl for women (Stevenson, 2012), so the fact that the Super Bowl had more female viewers shows the impact and growth that the NFL has made with female fans. The NFL has stated that the medium with the most impact on fans is television (Clark, 2009), although it is arguable that that has shifted over the past few years with the rapidly growing social media platform as well. It is obvious that the best way to build a stronger fanbase is to get them involved in the product and give them opportunities as well. As a result of this, the NFL became innovative and decided to come up with a program to help grow existing female fan's knowledge and help attract new ones. The NFL introduced their 'Football 101 Courses' in order to teach basic football strategy to female casual fans (Clark, 2009). The goal of these programs was to turn novice fans into a more committed, avid fan. The Chicago Bears have the most prominent Football 101 program running still. They host an event that includes classes to enhance their knowledge along with partaking in other activities like; touring the locker room, autograph sessions with players, gifts, shopping opportunities and dinner to help entice them to come again. The program has been beneficial to help change the attitudes of female fans to have a more positive look on the NFL (Hoyle, 1997). Besides from courses to help female's football knowledge and catchy advertising directed towards them, the NFL has also tailored their merchandise for women as well. Quite literally, they have a "fit for them" apparel line that allows women to have their own jersey and team gear. Merchandise for women has become so elaborate that they now create everything from yoga pants to nail polish and bejeweled leather handbags to appeal to any level of female fan. The Vice President of NFL consumer products,

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Tracey Bleczinski, stated that their strategy was to “shrink it and pink it” to help feminize NFL apparel (Stevenson, 2012). Besides the introduction of the new Nike line to the NFL in 2012, there has not been as much chatter about new products for men as there has been about the new products for women. During the 2011 playoffs, female NFL merchandise showed an 85% increase in sales and an astonishing 125% increase from the year prior (Dosh, 2012). Women’s jerseys accounted for six out of ten of the top viewed jerseys and the top five most searched jerseys included two women’s jerseys (Dosh, 2012).

Merchandisers are customizing their apparel and products to not only attract new female fans, but to also elevate the level of fandom within the female fans that they already have. Female fans are asserting their right to be fans by forcing the NFL to gear merchandise to them which has created a billion dollar industry (Anderson, 2007). Female fans are inserting themselves into other aspects of sports as well.

Although fantasy sports do not always have monetary rewards, a majority of them do. In 2011 the number of women participating in fantasy football had doubled (Dosh, 2012). This could mean that there is an unknown increase in economic motivation for females that has not been studied yet. Vice President Tracey Bleczinski also stated that she believes women are the “CFO’s of households,” this is because they have increasing powers in the household (Stevenson, 2012). Combined with the motivation to fulfill family needs and female’s increasing power to make decisions within the household the NFL recognizes that females hold the key to increasing attendance numbers.

Since the increase of female fans has come about the NFL has been striving to make the game day experiences more family oriented. With the incorporation of family sections, code of conduct, and kid’s days etcetera, the goal of the NFL is to attract these new consumers. This proves how significant female fandom has become in the NFL. With these new implications the NFL is greatly fulfilling the family wants and needs motivation. The NFL has had a reputation of being an event where people, mostly men, drink, swear, and get rowdy. With the shift of the NFL league towards a more family friendly atmosphere, more females will be willing to bring their families to the events. When they attend the events and have a positive game day experience they are likely to return and grow their fandom towards

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the team, league and sport. With the NFL striving to be a more family orientated atmosphere not only are they attracting future fans, but they are retaining and growing current female fans as well. The way that the NFL has been marketing and branding themselves over the past decade has made it easier for women to become involved with the sport, however the level of fandom in which they are engaging in is still in question.

Research Traditions

Since there is no specific truth to the results of my observation it is determined that my study will use an interpretivism tradition. The interpretation of my results will be subjective based on what I feel ranks the female as an avid or casual fan. There is not a specific answer to the question that is being asked within my observation. Subsequently there are several factors that either have the same result or that stand out more to my specific study. Themes will be found from the observations collected but my interpretation does not guarantee there will be correlations or relationships between them.

Conceptual Framework

The concept that was examined is the avidity of the female fan in attendance at NFL games. Fan avidity is defined as the level of involvement or commitment one has towards a team or sport (Wann, 2004). The NFL also classifies an avid fan as someone who consumes 14 plus hours of sport related content a week (Waller, 2013). Passion and loyalty are what set them apart from casual fans and makes them an avid fan. Casual fans are people who are familiar with the sport or team, but are not as committed to the entity. Previous researchers have classified all fans as avid fans, but then broke them into separate levels of avidity from there (Dietz-Uhler, 2000). However, I am taking a different approach, I will rank females as an avid fan or a casual fan. The differentiation will be the level of passion and commitment that I observe. Observation of the female fan will give a better understanding of whether females are on a level of fan avidity or are considered a casual fan.

I will be observing the behaviors of women such as; the extent to which they cheer, the emotion they demonstrate and the movements they produce in reaction to a play. Fans that are more avid will

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likely exuberate more of these behaviors than casual fans. I will not however be able to know the depth of their knowledge pertaining to the game and team, such as the general rules, rosters, stats or ability to recognize plays. Observing their behavior however is extremely important because the behavior that the subject exhibits is nearly a direct reflection of their level of avidity. The more the subject cheers the more passion and loyalty the subject has towards the team. Also, their attire is a key component to the equation as well. Looking at what they are wearing (ie: jersey, sport hat, team colored pants) can translate into their commitment to the team. Team apparel and clothing articles within the team's color scheme can indicate that the female is more committed and invested in the team because they have spent more time and money towards their outfit for the game and are proud to represent their team. Also, other accessories would indicate the same, if they have more than a few they are likely to be a more avid fan.

Theoretical Framework

Dietz-Uhler examined the sport fanship and behavior amongst male and female college students and recognized their similarities and differences (Dietz-Uhler, 2000). There was an equal number of students who identified themselves as sports fans, however there were more male students that identified themselves as an avid fan than the females did. This is quality information that gave me a good headway with my research of this topic however, the results were gathered from self-assessment surveys. I plan on restructuring the study of sex differences in fan behavior by observing their behavior. By gathering results from observation rather than surveys I will be able to get a candid result instead of a result that reflects how avid of a fan the female thinks she is. The data that Dietz-Uhler gathered and interpreted was important because it fit the stereotype of the public's perception of females regarding their stance on fan avidity. The stereotype that surrounds female fans has changed over the years, however it is still assumed that females do not know the sport and are not actual fans.

Methods

Participants

In order to achieve a successful observation I observed female NFL fans from a random section of each level of the stadium. I partook in convenience sampling, the reason for this is because

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there are a significant amount of attendees at an NFL. One of the disadvantages of observing at a live game was not being able to pick any row or any seat to observe. Since there is no designated seat to where the female may be sitting and a restriction on where I was sitting as well, I could only observe females within a certain radius of my given seat. Over the two separate games, my goal was to observe approximately fifteen different females from each level of the stadium. My goal was to observe at least 50 female fans for approximately five minutes each, while the game clock was running and while it was stopped. However, since the amount of time it would take to observe the 50 females for five minutes would be extremely time consuming and there is a possibility that I could have ran out of game time, I decided that if my observation was satisfied in less than five minutes I could move on to the next observation.

Design

I created an observational chart of qualitative variables. The chart that I used for my observations can be found in my appendices. My secondary data was collected over a month span at two consecutive Buffalo Bills regular season home games during the month of October and November of the 2013-2014 NFL season. These games were October twelfth Buffalo Bills verse Cincinnati Bengals and the November third Buffalo Bills game verse the Kansas City Chiefs. I collected data from fifteen different women from the 100, 200 and 300 levels of the stadium. The participants were not aware that they were being observed that way they could not change their behavior based on the observation and I could get more accurate, true results.

Procedure

Since the females did not know they were being observed, there was no requirement for them to do anything rather than act as they will. It was easiest to collect the observations about their apparel first while waiting to observe their behavior. Through the collection of variables I then decided whether the female was an avid fan or a casual fan. If the female was wearing a jersey she reached the basic level of fandom, less than that she was considered a casual fan and more than that she was

considered an avid fan. Once I had determined the amount of females that are avid fans out of the total number of females I observed to determine what percentage of the fans have a high avidity.

Results

After observing fifty females in attendance of NFL games I believe I got a diverse and satisfying result. However, with further observations of more females and different venues, the study would have given a greater idea of what the typical female NFL fan looks like. The most popular article of clothing that was team related was a hat, 22 females had team associated hats. Twenty females out of the fifty were wearing a jersey of a current or past player. Then the number dropped significantly, only eleven people wore team related shirts and coats/jackets and ten wore team jewelry. The other apparel items that were spotted did not have many tallies and were obscure. As far as the female behavior however, there was a slightly greater demonstration of support. Across the board, whether it was positive or negative, there was a great amount of females that were engaging in some sort of cheering. Although the results of females partaking in cheering behavior were not skewed towards one general form of behavior, they demonstrated an abundance of it. These numbers do not all add up to fifty because some female's behavior fulfilled multiple categories. The amount of females cheering during the play and in-between the play were split nearly in half at 16-17. There were slightly more females that were cheering in support of their team (14) than there were females that were negatively cheering (11). On the contrary, 13 females did not cheer at all during the entire time of their observation. Lastly, the numbers were again somewhat evenly matched as to whether the females were sitting and cheering or standing and cheering at 16-15. There were a few other obscurities in behavior such as sleeping, cell phone use and dancing that were observed, but again were not significant enough to make an impact on the observation's results. The charted results for the apparel and behavior observations, along with the observation checklist can be found in the appendices. To interpret the results of my observations and draw conclusions I created a point system. To be considered a highly avid fan, females had to fulfill five points in the apparel category and three points in the behavior category. Each item of apparel and behavioral action counted as one point. However, two points were awarded for wearing a jersey and one point was deducted if the female

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did not cheer or left during the play. I awarded the extra points for wearing a jersey because this factors in the purchases the female partook in. Jerseys are typically expensive, so if a female allocated funds to purchasing a jersey, she is more likely an engaged fan. I deducted the points for not cheering and leaving during the play because this as well shows that the female is not engaged with the on field product. Only five females achieved the avid fan status in the apparel category, however 36 females satisfied the high avidity level in the behavior category.

Conclusion

There has undoubtedly been an increase in the relationship between females and the viewership of sports. With this ever growing trend, it is valuable to look at the level of avidity that female's exhibit. I observed females in attendance of NFL regular season games to answer the question of how avid female fans really are. The discovery of various levels of fandom to which females were categorized in helped to determine the level of avidity that they displayed. Although the females observed lacked a high avidity level based on their apparel, they made up for it with their behavior. The majority of females were engaged in the game and partook in some form of cheering for their aligning team. In retrospect of the observation it is hard to make claims as to whether this can account for all NFL female fans, but it is evident that the avidity is on the incline and will continue to grow and develop an even more avid female NFL fan base.

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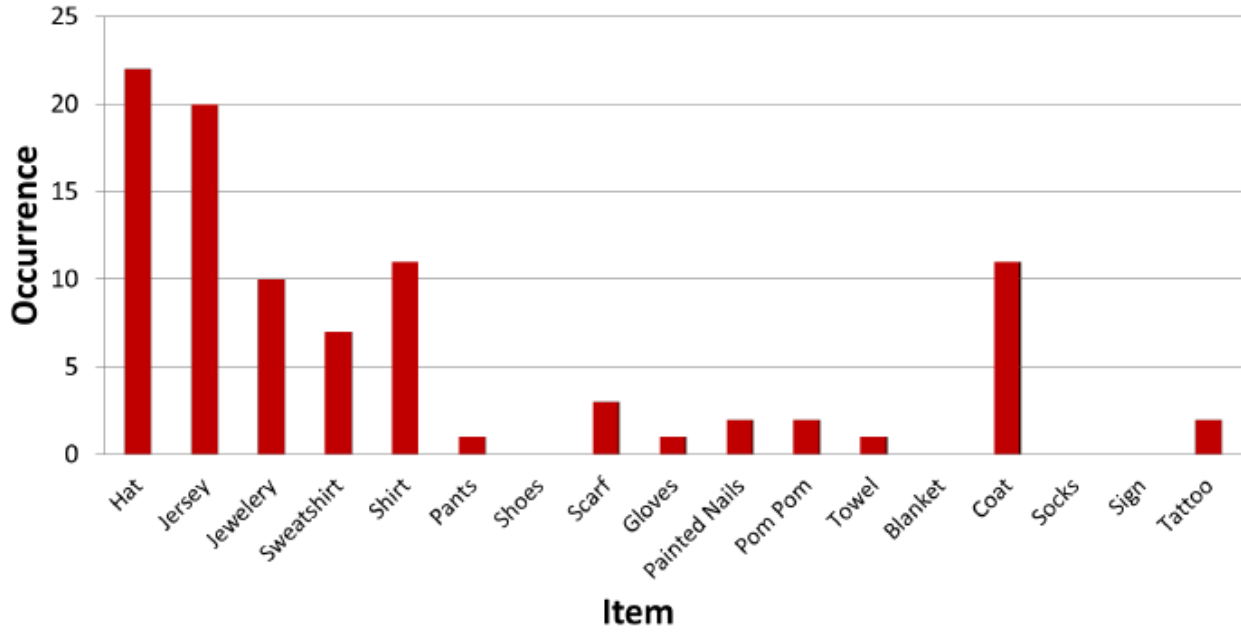
Appendices:

Apparel:								
Hat								
Jersey		Current Player		Past Player		No Player		Pink
Jewelry								
Sweatshirt								
Jacket								
Shirt								
Pants								
Shoes								
Scarf								
Gloves								
Painted Nails								
Pom Pom								
Towel								
Blanket								
Coat								
Socks								
Face Paint								
Tattoo								
Sign								
Other								

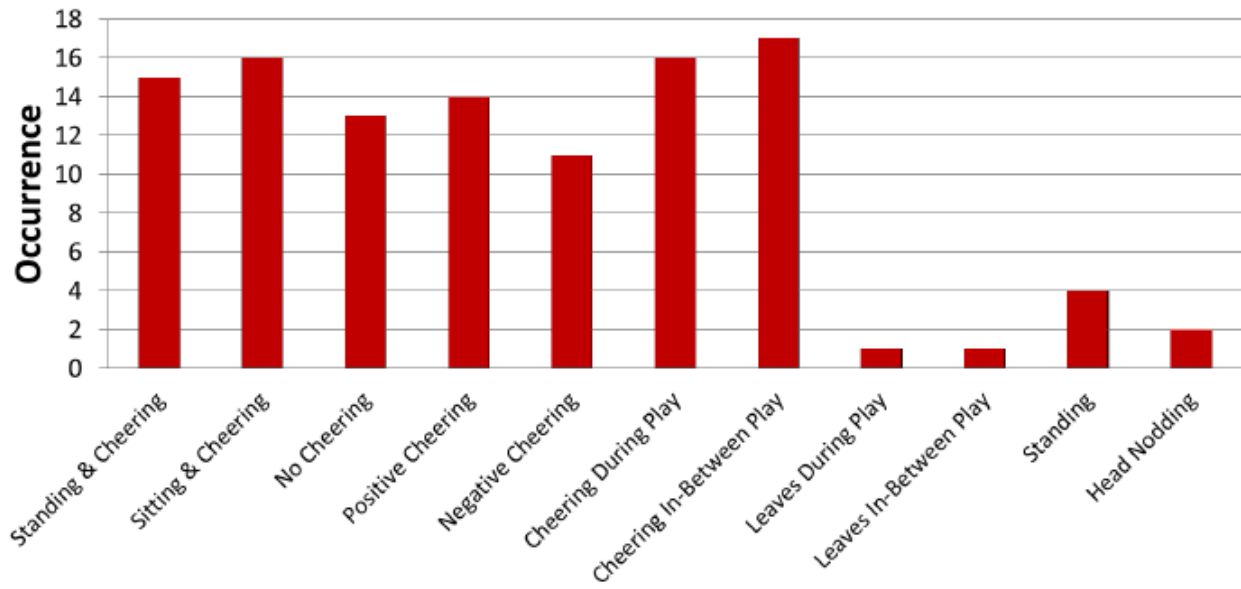
Behavior:	
Standing & Cheering	
Sitting & Cheering	
No Cheering	
Positive Cheering	
Negative Cheering	
Cheering During Play	
Cheering In-Between Play	
Leaves During Play	
Leaves In-Between Play	
Other	

Others Observations/Comments:

Apparel



Behavior



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