Fan behavior has long been a major topic of interest in the study of sport. According to the National Summit on Civil Disturbances (2005), sporting events account for over 25% of convivial event disturbances on college campuses. These incidents have caused considerable property damage, led to countless arrests, damaged reputations, and even taken innocent lives as a result. As an indication of the importance of this issue, the NCAA has taken several steps to better understand fan violence, as well as initiated policy in an effort to prevent future occurrences (“NCAA President”, 2006). Additionally, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has formed special committees, enacted legislation, and convened a summit of academicians and practitioners to address this issue.

In the context of collegiate sports, student-led cheering sections have been identified as the most committed and long-standing supporters of the team. Most of these groups can be distinguished by a nickname and matching apparel (e.g., the Cameron Crazies at Duke University). Universities have attempted to capitalize on these groups through coordinated marketing activities, such as selling apparel with the group’s brand name on it (Sport Business Journal, 2007). These activities have added a new revenue stream for the university as well as strengthening the ties between fans and the university. The benefits these groups bring to the university have been well documented and some of the groups have become recognized student organizations on their respective campuses.

However, the potential negative consequences of the formation of these groups have gone largely unexplored in the literature. The formation of these groups brings together a collection of highly identified fans that share many similar characteristics (as suggested by convergence theory; McKee, 1969) that are grouped together in the same section of the arena in close proximity of one another and are usually standing for the duration of the contest (Mann, 1979). When these elements are combined, the results can lead to an increase in physiological arousal (and frustration) as well as the proclivity for out-group derogation (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). Given the characteristics of the student-led cheering section, if a precipitating event (Smelser, 1963) was to occur (such as a negative call or negative outcome), the chance of negative fan behavior among this group may be more likely. To this date, the literature is nearly devoid of in-depth empirical examinations of these groups to determine the extent to which these theories apply in a student-led group setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the behaviors of a specific branded collegiate student cheering section. More specifically, this study aims to understand what types of behavior fans in this context engaged in, why they engaged in these actions, and attempts to link some of these observations to relevant theory on fan violence.

A mixed method design which involves combining quantitative and qualitative methods was employed in order to obtain both breadth and depth of the phenomenon as well as for data triangulation (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). For this study, we were interested in seeing how responses to the questionnaire (using a larger sample) corroborated some of the findings in the interviews (Hanson et al., 2005). For the qualitative portion of the study, 10 college student basketball fans participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These students were members of a large basketball fan group at a major public university in the Southeast that competes at the Division I level. Students were selected that had a reputation for being loyal and passionate basketball fans. Additionally, direct observations of the branded collegiate student section were conducted over the course of a season. The data was coded through the utilization of a categorical coding scheme as detailed by Rossman and Rallis (2006). In this particular case, many factors have been hypothesized that may influence the likelihood of negative fan behavior occurrences, yet most have not been observed empirically. Besides the confirmation of previously hypothesized factors, the data was also coded in a manner to allow for new factors that may influence fan violence to be discovered. The quantitative component of the study was composed of 197 respondents out of a total of 1509 (13% response rate) members of the same college basketball fan group used for the qualitative study. This data was used to confirm the level of team identification of group members and gain a further understanding of fan behavior in this
There were a number of themes that emerged from an analysis of the interview transcripts, direct observations, and quantitative data. First, the specific actions and behaviors of the fans in this context revealed some startling findings. Positive cheers and actions that supported their favorite team was common practice among the fan group. However, observations and respondents also revealed a litany of hostile and negative behavior directed at opposing fans, players, and even officials. More importantly, a number of these negative behaviors were choreographed by group leaders and conducted via the dissemination of “cheer sheets”. Threats of physical violence, demeaning and profane comments, and other negative behavior were documented by observations and interviews.

In the interviews and direct observation, the presence and overall prominence of alcohol in the student group was evident. Most respondents indicated that alcohol was a major influence for the group members engaging in negative incidents of fan behavior. This indicates that alcohol plays a significant role in contributing to some of the behaviors in the student section. This supports previous research that concludes alcohol is a contributory factor (Mann, 1979; Simons & Taylor, 1992; Branscombe & Wann, 1992).

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the self-perception that members held toward the student section as a whole. Although not built into the interview protocol, respondents described what they viewed as the overarching goal or role of the student group in regards to the overall sporting event. One respondent indicated “I think that the main goal of the student sections is to do the best to rattle the opponent, no matter what it takes….give your team the advantage” (line 148-149). This statement was repeated by most respondents and reveals that the negative behavior that occurs in this context may be carried out with an overall purpose in mind.

The feeling of anonymity, the loss of personal responsibility and loss of fear of social reprisal, has been posited as a key characteristic of collective behavior (Smelser, 1963; Goldstein, 1981; Simons & Taylor, 1992) and was identified in this study. As one respondent indicated, “It’s hard to tell exactly who says what so I do feel like I can just blend in the group and not be caught saying stuff…..you can say anything and get away with it” (line 154-156). This comment is indicative of what was found in the interviews and observations and strongly indicate that this aspect of collective behavior is present in the student group.

The implications from this study are far reaching. While branded collegiate student sections may provide many benefits to the university, the results of this study indicated there are some certain negative consequences as well. Incidents of negative fan behavior found in this study parallel what has been reported in the media regarding branded collegiate student groups. University officials should be aware of the potential danger of these branded student sections and strengthen relations and authority over these groups to minimize the likelihood of negative fan behavior.