The Salience of Network for Coping Fans of Historically Disappointing Teams

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The 2016 Buffalo Bills season was like most Bills seasons: a mirage that ended in disappointment. Fans grasped onto hope as the team sprinted to a 4-2 start, but their dreams were deflated as it limped to a final record of 7-9. The franchise has had an unprecedented run of mediocrity. Yet somehow, the Bills finished the 2016 season with a higher fan attendance total (559,047) than the team that went on to win that year’s Super Bowl, the New England Patriots (534,642). And somehow, despite the practical guarantee of an annual letdown, “Bills Mafia,” the team’s core group of fans, is considered one of the most rabid in all of American professional sport. The unit was recently glorified in a short film (Bills Mafia: A Barstool Sports Documentary, 2017) that was widely shared on social media. This appears to be a bizarre relationship: the team keeps devastating fans, but fans keep coming back and asking for more. Furthermore, fans are proud to proclaim their allegiance to the team. Considering this phenomenon leads to the following question: How do Bills fans continue to be so proud of their identity as Bills fans?

This is not the first study to raise such a question, as sport marketing scholars have examined fans of historically disappointing or struggling teams through different lenses. Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986) introduced the idea of cutting off reflected failure (CORFing), grounded in concepts of balance theory, which suggests that fans often distance themselves from unsuccessful teams. Yet not all fans of unsuccessful teams CORF, as multiple sport fan studies have shown. As Campbell, Aiken, and Kent (2004) argued, some fans display behaviors indicative of basking in reflected failure (BIRFing). What differentiates a fan who CORF from a fan who engages in other behaviors, such as BIRFing, has often been explained through team identification—highly identified fans are thought to stand by a team even after many years of losing and repeated heartbreak (Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

Given that fans may CORF (Snyder et al., 1986), BIRF (Campbell et al., 2004), blast (Cialidini, 1980), or boost (Jones, 2000), their level of team identification does not appear to fully explain their behavioral responses. We need to better understand the nuances of why fans respond in such different ways, and coping perhaps explains part of this. Coping is “a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles” (Snyder & Dinoff, 1999). Delia (2017) discussed the concept of coping in instances where a fan’s identity is threatened, and found that fans cope by relying on different emotion-focused strategies.

One missing component in this discussion of fans of historically disappointing teams is the role of other fans in the coping experience. Dating back to Holt’s ethnographic study of Chicago Cubs fans (1995), scholars have extensively researched the social and relational dimensions of sport consumption. Researchers have explored how sport fandom is largely driven by a desire for community (Anderson & Stone, 1981) and how fan-to-fan relationships are a strong driver of consumption (Katz & Heere, 2013). A fan’s network plays a vital role in their behavior as a fan (Katz, Ward, & Heere, In Press).

We cannot fully understand why fans continue committing to historically disappointing teams without considering the role that a fan’s network plays in coping. We argue that the intersection of coping and network needs to be explored further. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of a fan’s network in the coping experience.

To examine how a fan’s network impacts the coping experience, the researchers will use a qualitative long interview approach. Consistent with the approach established by McCracken (1988), the researchers will conduct semi-structured interviews with fans of the Buffalo Bills. The research is not yet complete.

The Bills are a prime candidate for the team of focus in this study. In a 2012 article that ranked the Bills’ fan base the
second best in the National Football League, NFL.com wrote: “Bills fans are…passionate, smart and hopeful, despite a lot of bad times.” It could not be on-field success that has kept fans dedicated and set them apart among NFL fans, as the team’s winning percentage in the 17 completed seasons since its last playoff appearance is .412 (112-160).

The long interview approach is a powerful tool in qualitative research because it allows the interviewer to step inside the mind of another person and experience the world from their vantage point (McCracken, 1988). In many cases it is better to work longer and more deeply with a smaller sample size than more superficially with many participants (McCracken, 1988).

Participants will be recruited through social network referrals and fan message board solicitation. Each participant will be incentivized with a gift card for participating in the study. Data collection begins in December 2017. All interviews will take place in person in Buffalo. Interviews will continue until reaching the point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006). We will enter the interviews with pre-written questions based on existing coping and fan network studies; however, in the interest of allowing Bills fans to drive the research themselves, we will deviate from the questions to pursue any repeated or new themes that emerge.

Based on McCracken’s (1988) suggestion, each interview will begin with broad, “grand tour” questions about Bills fandom and their networks. Within the long interview process, McCracken (1988) also suggests utilizing “autodriving” (Wax & Shapiro, 1956) to elicit a more visceral response to noteworthy moments. Autodriving involves asking respondents to comment on salient pictures or videos. The fans will be shown images or videos of moments from the Bills’ playoff drought and asked pertinent questions about their fandom and networks as they relate to these moments. Through grand tour questions, follow-up questions, and autodriving prompts, our strategy is to better understand how each fan’s network impacts their coping experience.

All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The researchers will analyze themes of the interviews through application of the coding template established by Tesch (1990). Coding consists of organizing data by bracketing chunks and assigning a word that represents the category in the margins (Rossman & Rallis, 2012); it involves labeling categories with a term (Creswell, 2014). Based on these codes, we will identify themes of the interviews. The use of this template will help ensure qualitative reliability (Gibbs, 2007).

There are several areas in which the findings of this study could elevate sport management research. This study could be part of the growing recognition that a fan’s network plays a large role in their allegiance to the team, as well as the evolving literature on the different ways fans cope. Through this study we hope to unearth insight on how Bills fans continue to be so proud of a team that has, for 17 years, consistently deflated and devastated them.