In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the practice of tanking in sport, and some have suggested that certain fans may be supportive of team improvement through tanking (Hanzus, 2011). Such behavior is nontraditional, as it goes against the natural human desire to win while competing (Deeks, 2014). However, this is an aspect of sport consumer behavior that has received scant academic focus. Previous work has focused on the existence of tanking (e.g., Taylor & Trogdon, 2002) or the economic impact on the team when engaged in such strategies (e.g., Soebbing et al., 2013), but none have examined the perspective of the fan, which has value, given the fan’s role in revenue generation. Thus, the purpose of this study was to holistically examine consumer behavior support for tanking.

This project, though exploratory, was rooted in group identity theory. From a social identity standpoint, the prospect of being able to “acquire” a promising draft pick through tanking may be seen as a tactic to add future value to the image of the in-group via a star player (Hogg, 2001). The research utilized a mixed method, multiple phase approach. First, the study sought to garner a basic understanding of the motivations involved in support for tanking via qualitative research. These findings served as a gateway to developing an instrument to measure support for tanking. A multi-step process was subsequently employed to develop and refine the instrument, which was then utilized to conduct an empirical study on the psychographic makeup of the fan who supports tanking.

In phase one, three themes were identified to explain the rationale for why a fan would support tanking. After refining the instrument to measure support for tanking, participants were recruited by Qualtrics during the 2018-19 NBA season and had to identify as either Chicago Bulls or Cleveland Cavaliers fans (both teams that had received attention as potentially engaging in tanking during that season; N = 262). Participants were exposed to a stimulus, in which they were provided information about a heralded prospect who was set to declare for the NBA Draft. With that information in mind, they were then asked to respond to items related to tanking.

A multiple regression model was used to examine the relationship between the following variables on support for team failure (tanking): delayed gratification, concern for group identity, perceived basketball knowledge, endorsement of sportspersonship, and advocation for analytics. The overall regression model was significant, $R^2 = .57, F(5, 250) = 67.179, p < .001$. Results showed that concern for group identity, perceived basketball knowledge, and endorsement of analytics significantly predicted support for tanking.

The findings suggest that there are both affective and cognitive factors that explain why some fans openly support their team to fail. Fans who support tanking appear to activate a greater level of cognitive involvement via their calculated prescriptions about successful long-term team-building, in conjunction with their behavioral support of the team - thus hoping that vicarious achievement will be invigorated when the endorsed “process” is complete.