



## McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

### Sports Fandom & Physical Health: Allies or Adversaries?

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You're at an NBA playoff game, and your stomach is rumbling. You roam the concourse, searching for something to eat.

There's just one problem: physical health is a high priority for you, and the options you're finding at the concession stands are, well...*not* what comes to mind when you think "healthy."

Nachos. Pizza. Beer. Lots of beer.

Encountering this predicament myself, as a doctoral student, got me thinking: *What is the relationship between sports fandom and physical health?*

On one level, the two seem to complement each other – athletes are viewed as the pinnacle of health. Watching stars like Ja Morant and Giannis Antetokounmpo compete at the highest level can inspire us to move our bodies. On another level, however, fandom and health seem to conflict – the refreshments associated with sports consumption are high in calories and void of nutrients.

Unpacking this complicated question became the focus of my dissertation, which spurred two recent publications in the *Journal of Sport Management*. I worked on these papers with three talented colleagues and friends from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst: [Dr. Matthew Katz](#), [Dr. E. Nicole Melton](#), and [Dr. Elizabeth B. Delia](#).

Here's what we found...

### Fandom & Health: Viewed as Competitors

In the first study, we conducted interviews with sports fans who self-identify as health-conscious, sitting down with them and asking open-ended questions about their experiences. Some fans discussed strategies they've found helpful – like watching the game while running on the treadmill, or eating a healthy meal to "fill up" before attending a game – but they *all* expressed the difficulty of balancing their health-consciousness with fandom.

One fan discussed the upcoming Super Bowl party he was planning, noting that the attendees would surely expect pizza and chicken wings. "If you're committed to the health aspect of your life, you either have to learn fandom is an environment where you have to work twice as hard to work off those calories or make better decisions, or maybe you just have to avoid it," he explained. "Fandom and health directly contradict each other pretty much every time."

Thus, interviewees spoke of pursuing "recovery" – as the fan alluded, striving to "work off those calories" – after letting loose while engaging in fandom. They viewed this as an unfortunate-but-inevitable trade-off.

One fan explained that he used to pack healthy food for watch parties, bringing along calorie-free drinks, protein bars, and other nutritious snacks. But this spurred tense conversations with others in attendance.

"I would get comments about it all the time," the fan explained. "People would be like, 'Why can't you eat our food? Do you think you're better than us?' Then there'd always be the comments like, 'Oh, have a cookie, have a piece of cake, have a cupcake.' It would quickly escalate and frustrate me, because why can't you just let me live the way I want to live?"

As it turned out, these experiences were not unique.

**Many Fans Struggle With This Trade-off**

In the second study, we surveyed nearly 1,000 fans from all over North America and India. Given the expanded sample, we weren’t sure if our initial findings would hold up. Maybe we had just discovered a phenomenon specific to neurotic fans in the Boston area.

But Study 2 produced strikingly similar results. We separated respondents into four groups: (1) those high in health-consciousness but low in fandom; (2) those high in health-consciousness and high in fandom; (3) those low in both areas; and (4) those high in fandom but low in health-consciousness.

<p><b>High Health-Consciousness, Low Fan Identity</b></p> <p>Health-consciousness is viewed as an important component of the self-concept (i.e., it is a central identity), but fandom is not important to the respondent.</p>	<p><b>High Health-Consciousness, High Fan Identity</b></p> <p>Both health-consciousness and fandom are viewed as important components of the self-concept (i.e., each is a central identity).</p>
<p><b>Low Fan Identity, Low Health-Consciousness</b></p> <p>Neither fandom nor health-consciousness is viewed as an important component of the self-concept (i.e., neither is a central identity).</p>	<p><b>High Fan Identity, Low Health-Consciousness</b></p> <p>Fandom is viewed as an important component of the self-concept (i.e., it is a central identity), but health-consciousness is not important to the respondent.</p>

People in Group 2 – the ‘high-high group’ – indicated they experience by far the most ‘identity conflict.’ In other words, these people feel they are violating their core values when they engage in fandom – which is interesting given how much they care about fandom. This is likely due to (1) the unhealthy foods/drinks associated with sports consumption, and (2) the sedentary nature of fandom.

**A Better Way Forward**

These findings seem grim, but there’s reason for hope. For example, Anheuser-Busch is known for its creative Super Bowl commercials. In 2020, the American brewing giant leveraged the moment not to promote one of its flagship beer products (e.g., Budweiser), but rather a healthier option: Bud Light Seltzer.

The commercial symbolized a societal shift: more and more people are prioritizing physical health. We see evidence of this change everywhere – fitness organizations like CrossFit, technologies like Fitbit, and nutrition paradigms like Whole30 have created a consumerist frenzy, [especially among the younger crowd](#).

There’s opportunity for sports to get in on the action. For example, teams can (1) add healthier options to the concession menu; and (2) give healthier concession stands enhanced geographic prominence. Teams can also assuage the sedentary nature of fandom by promoting [‘activity breaks.’](#) And how about partnering with fitness technology leaders like Apple Fitness? It’s not about ‘what’ sports organizations do, but rather that they do *something*.

Addressing fans’ health-consciousness might seem like a “first-world problem,” but with the [obesity epidemic expanding by the day](#), it’s the right thing to do. It’s also smart business.

Consumers change; so too must industries. Adapt or die, as they say.  
It’s time for the sports industry to adapt.

### References:

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