



## NFL Fanatics Communication of Identity through Apparel and Merchandise: A Gender Comparison

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**Introduction:** The licensing business of the National Football League (NFL) is a 15-billion-dollar industry (Borchers, 2013). The female fan represents a significant percentage of the NFL fan base. The NFL's fan base is 45% women, and women have grown to represent more than a third of the league's viewership (Harwell, 2014). Many believe that the female market is the last untapped demographic for the NFL. Because females buy for themselves, their families and friends, and organize household social activities, there is a multiplier effect when females are targeted by marketing activities. Females are the purchase decision makers, but current NFL marketing efforts geared towards women are limited.

**Literature review:** According to social identity theory, individuals who feel as though they belong in a group exhibit behaviors that communicate and protect their membership (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). Sports fans purchase licensed merchandise to identify them as a follower of a specific team and distinguish them from fans of other teams. It also enables them to feel socially identified with the team (Kwak & Kang, 2009). However, most literature addressing fan consumption concentrates on the white male fans (e.g., Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). Given the increasingly important role of female fans in NFL fandom, this study attempts to answer the research question, are gender differences observed in NFL fans' supportive behavior of teams, and do male and female NFL fans demonstrate different purchasing behaviors with regards to licensed products.

**Methods:** Qualitative methods were used to examine behaviors and apparel consumption for supporting NFL teams. Participants (N=18), who self-identified as fans of one or more NFL team(s), were recruited using a snowball sampling technique to ensure data collected yield insight into the phenomenon being studied. Nine male and nine female participants were recruited equally between the Midwest and Northeast regions of the United States and represented fans of eight different NFL teams. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 67 years old. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. Interview questions included the following: participants' definitions of loyalty and fandom, their apparel consumption patterns and supportive behaviors of NFL teams, and their observations and perceptions of female versus male fans' participation. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with an open-coding process. Researchers used a constant comparative method to look for themes that emerged from the data.

**Findings:** Three major supportive behaviors of being an NFL fan were identified from the interviews: Loyalty, knowledge, and wearing team apparel. Participants suggested that a loyal fan is passionate about the game and has stayed committed to their NFL team through the good years and bad years (i.e., winning and losing). To be a true fan, one has to understand how the game works and the key details about the players, such as their statistics and position played. All

of the participants in this study associated wearing of apparel with fandom, team loyalty, supporting of a team, and they expect apparel to be worn on game day.

Females and males showed different supportive behavior in terms of emotional connections, frequency of watching games, and types of licensed apparel/merchandise purchased. Knowledge of the game, the sport, and the teams are very important to male fans; they displayed more knowledge about the team's key players, coach changes, vintage colors and mascot changes. Unlike females, it was a priority for male fans to watch their team and many other teams play. Male fans concluded that female fans were not as serious as males about the outcome of the game because female fans did not display the same enthusiastic level of cheering. In terms of licensed apparel and merchandise purchases, females purchased more gifts for family members and friends and a greater variety of products such as apparel, home decorations, signed photographs, and framed jerseys. Most male participants could easily recall team clothing and memorabilia that they owned but had difficulty recalling household items. Male fans appeared to be more interested in collectables and vintage-inspired apparel. It was important to both genders that the entire family shows their support of the team. Participants felt that watching games with friends and family inspired camaraderie regardless of the team supported. Showing support by wearing clothing that reflected their team wearing team colors was important to both genders. Traditional team colors were preferred.

**Conclusions:** Based on the findings of this study, we make the following conclusions and recommendations. Data showed that genders do exhibit different supportive behaviors of teams in terms of types of product interests and purposes of purchase. The results also indicate that male fans perceive the fandom of female fans differently than do female fans. Wearing team apparel is an important aspect of being a fan and is associated with team loyalty for both genders, as indicated by social identity theory. This study has important implications for retailers because male and female fans differ on what apparel items they want to purchase. Vintage style clothing and collectible items are important to males; whereas, females want more variety in styles and sizing in their apparel items.

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