

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Mueller, Thomas S. and Sutherland, John C. (2010) "Heroes and Villains: Increasing Fan Involvement in Pursuit of “The Elusive Fan”," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol2/iss1/4>

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Heroes and Villains: Increasing Fan Involvement in Pursuit of “The Elusive Fan”

Practitioner’s Choice Award

Thomas S. Mueller & John C. Sutherland

KEYWORDS:

Sports fans, Game attendance, Sport viewership, Fan involvement, College football, NFL football, Sport marketing, Sport media, Sport communication, Sport business, Sponsorship, Heroes, Villains, Rivalries

ABSTRACT

The sport consumption experience apparently facilitates a higher symbolic meaning, indicating a symbolic communicative role in the social psyche of consumers. Involvement with group members in the social (sport) setting appears to influence attendees’ self-concept. Despite a postmodern shift to individuality, Americans still choose to exist within the parameters of collective traditions and within communities of shared interests through the social institution of sport (Bellah, 1985). According to Rein et al. (2006), one of seven vital way sport properties can attract/retain such elusive fans involves heightening their attractions to the properties by emphasizing rivalries, which, in turn, increases fan involvement. Rivalries create the foundation for story lines that ingratiate the sport fan and consumer to one team or athlete over another. Sport administrators, event managers, and sport product marketers can observe fan response to heroes and villains to frame promotional campaigns, use them to heighten fan interest, and thus better connect with fans in a crowded marketplace. The purpose of this research was to gain insight into fan perceptions of heroes and villains within team sport, specifically the sport of American football played in the National Football League (NFL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), through a pilot test designed to determine the feasibility of a larger study.

Mueller, T. S., & Sutherland, J. C. (2010). Heroes and villains: Increasing fan involvement in pursuit of “the elusive fan”. *Journal of Sport Administration & Supervision* 2(1), 20-30. Published online April, 2010.

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Introduction

Sport has become an increasingly important part of societies around the world. The fabled English football (soccer) club Manchester United (ManU), a prominent global sports brand, touts more than 75 million fans (Hill, 2006). Mega-events such as the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) produce 17 of the top 25 sporting events in the United States and attract 75 million fans that purchase \$2 billion in licensed products each year (Newman & Giardina, 2008).

From a marketing communications perspective, the continued attractiveness of sport as a marketing platform has resulted in increased sponsorship spending. In the U.S., for example, sport sponsorship spending for

2009 was \$11.28 billion, indicating mere a one percent decline within a market that saw a 7.8 percent decrease in media spending (IEG, 2010). Unfortunately, this proliferation of sport and sponsorship—coupled with technology that gives fans constant, real-time access—has created an environment in which sport marketers must develop strategies to attract and retain what Rein, Kotlar, and Shields (2006) call “the elusive fan.” The modern sports fan holds high expectations for the presentation of a sport event, has multiple media viewing options, and is selective in how dollars are investing in the live viewing of sport attractions (Rein et al., 2006).

According to Rein et al. (2006), one of seven vital way sport properties can attract/retain such elusive fans involves heightening their attractions to the properties by emphasizing

rivalries, which, in turn, increases fan involvement. Rivalries create the foundation for story lines that ingratiate the sport fan and consumer to one team or athlete over another. Sport product manufacturer Nike, NASCAR, and Major League Baseball (MLB) serve as examples of organizations using rivalries as a marketing strategy. Sport fans hold an inherent desire for a competitive sport contest, and the association with rivalries can enhance the sport experience and increase attendance, viewership and overall consumption (Rein et al., 2006).

Sport administrators, event managers, and sport product marketers can observe fan response to heroes and villains to frame promotional campaigns, use them to heighten fan interest, and thus better connect with fans in a crowded marketplace. The purpose of this research was to gain insight into fan perceptions of heroes and villains within team sport, specifically the sport of American football played in the National Football League (NFL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), through a pilot test designed to determine the feasibility of a larger study.

Literature Review

Rivalries: Heroes and Villains

Literature over the centuries has been rife with themes that make a statement related to individuals in nature, within society, in relation to higher entities (gods), within human relationships, and in forms of growth and initiation (Patten, 1999). The conflict of humans as experienced through relationships is easily and logically framed within the context of sport, where athletes can readily adapt to the roles of heroes and villains. Accordingly, fans are thus attracted to the familiarity of that type of storyline and can easily relate to the classic argument of good in an epic battle with evil, or the weak versus the strong.

Within the construct of conflict within sport, one major strategy for increasing and deepening fan involvement is to build rivalries, both among and between teams and among/between individuals (Rein, et al. 2006). According to Trail, Robinson, Dick, and Gillentine (2003), this means giving fans a team to cheer *for* and a team to cheer *against*. Thus, sporting events become metaphors of good versus evil, or heroes versus villains. Raney (2006) formulated the disposition theory of sport spectatorship, which focused on the mood shifts of fans as associated with the like or dislike of sporting teams: heroes are embraced, encouraged, and worshipped, while villains are cajoled, ridiculed, and scorned. Heroes and villains often serve as the conflict around which storytelling is based (Paiva, Maachado & Prada, 2001). According to King (2000), violent action films use the hero/villain contrast to create tension and involvement for moviegoers.

When competition is less than stellar, television commentators bolster the on-air product with conjectured rivalry, heroism, power struggles, and intrigue (Schirato, 2007). Print publications personalize and sensationalize athletes in attempts to increase entertainment value, drama, and focus so that fans can more readily categorize sports stars as villains, fools, or heroes (Lines, 2001). While traditional Greek heroes held supposed god-imbued supernatural traits, modern athletic heroes are defined as individualistic, risk-takers, and role models (Goodman, Duke & Sutherland, 2002).

From this perspective, sporting events are a mode of *popular culture*, i.e., sport melodramas that "...present images and characters through hyperbolic, binary moralistic positions and arranges them within a plotline that restages the eternal battle between good and evil" (Anker, 2005, p. 23). The sporting event as melodramatic narrative "...expunges ethical ambiguity by segregating the camps (opposing

teams) of good and evil into Manicheistic absolutes, and individual (and team) actions and situations become metaphoric in their reenactment of this battle (between good and evil)” (Anker, 2005, p. 24). One result of this conflict is empathy for the victim (good/hero) and anger toward the villain, underscored by the aforementioned Trail et al. (2003) perspective, i.e., heroes and villains provide fans with teams to cheer *for* and teams to cheer *against*.

Sport has been documented as a fertile domain for ritualized behaviors. Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak (2002) found that sport fan association and identity within a social group could prove to be a powerful indicator of passion. Players and fans adhere to patterns and orders of repetitive acts, many times lacking in rational motivation (Jackson & Masters, 2006).

Involvement

Product and advertising involvement has received widespread theoretical and empirical attention since it was introduced in the 1960's (Krugman, 1965; Krugman, 1966). With the general conceptualization that involvement can represent a human state of motivation, arousal or interest in a product, activity, or object (Rothschild, 1984), involvement theory has been applied to consumer behavior research to explore purchase behavior patterns (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Rothschild, 1984) and, more recently, to sport and leisure activities.

Campbell (1996) concluded that the number of heroes and villains in the minds of sport fans was related to the level of fan involvement. Capella (2002), Trail, et al. (2003), and Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman (2004) focused on the development of instruments to measure fan involvement with sport teams. These studies explored factors such as importance, enjoyment, and self-expression, as well as the relationship between involvement and sports-related behavioral indicators such as sporting event attendance and television viewing.

Generally, the results support a positive relationship between sport-related behaviors and involvement, i.e., more involved sports fans become more likely to attend sporting events or view them on television (or some similar format of new media).

Sociologically, sport fans are theorized to have a better quality of life, and sport fan involvement has a positively oriented cohesive effect on society (Smith, 1988). Further, Shank and Beasley (1998) created a sport involvement construct that delved into the behavioral aspects of fans regarding sports spectating, media viewing habits, and personal participation in sport. Even further into the sociological realm, Wann, Schrader, and Wilson (1999) developed a Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) that measured eight different motives: *eustress*, *self-esteem*, *escape*, *entertainment*, *economic*, *aesthetic*, *group affiliation*, and *family*. Fans with preferences for certain team sports indicated higher scores on eustress and self-esteem scales, while fans who chose non-aggressive sport reported higher levels of aesthetic motivation than those who chose an aggressive sport (those who chose an aggressive sport rated higher on the economic scale).

Armstrong (2007) found a significant value in *symbolic interactionism*, which is seen as an individual's involvement with a select sport group and how this interaction affects sport consumption frequency. Factors that influenced consumer attendance were a composition of the game audience, purchases made at game events, and general consumption of other leisure-related activities. First-time sport attendees most frequently attended American football, baseball and soccer events. However, repeat attendees most frequently attended hockey, baseball and American football events. Repeat attendees hold a higher response to events and form a stronger relationship with events and sponsors related to those events (Lacey, Sneath, Finney, & Close, 2007).

In sum, the sport consumption experience apparently facilitates a higher symbolic meaning, indicating a symbolic communicative role in the social psyche of consumers. An involvement with group members in the social (sport) setting appears to influence attendees' self-concept. Despite a postmodern shift to individuality, Americans still choose to exist within the parameters of collective traditions and within communities of shared interests through the social institution of sport (Bellah, 1985).

An interesting result of the research on sport involvement and the development of sport involvement scales was the identification of two unique segments: *Fans* and *Spectators* (Trail et al., 2003). The two groups shared a motivation to "...attend a game to escape from the responsibilities of everyday life and to socialize with others before, during and after a game" (p. 225). However, Trail et al. (2003) found that *Fans* were motivated to attend a game to cheer on their favorite teams and players while *Spectators* were motivated to see a well-played game regardless of which team won or loss.

Existing academic literature generally supports the recommendation that sport marketers should move fans from lower to higher levels of involvement (Rein, et al. 2006). One of the most effective methods for achieving increased involvement is through the development of sport as a landscape of heroes and villains, where fans can create meaning and attachment within the consumer experience. No one athlete or team can win forever, but the drama attached to heroes and villains can sustain and perpetuate fan interest and participation.

Based on the intent of this study to explore fan perceptions of heroes and villains within the American version of football within the NFL and collegiate sport, a pilot study was designed to test the two following hypotheses:

H1: NFL fan involvement is positively related to the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans.

H2: College football fan involvement is positively related to the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans.

Method

Design

Pilot studies were employed by Funk, et al. (2004) to develop and refine their work with the Sport Interest Inventory and by Armstrong (2007) to gain insight into symbolic interactionism in sport consumption. Based on factors of availability, affordability, and access to a sample population at an academic institution that theoretically boasted a high association with sports through recently-won national championship academic institution, this pilot study utilized college students who were recruited from two large sections of an undergraduate introduction-to-advertising course at a large, southeastern public American university. Extra credit was offered to students as a modest incentive for their participation in the study.

To justify the utilization of such a sample to examine the aforementioned hypotheses in this study, Ferber (1977) stated that convenience samples are justifiably used for exploratory purposes in which researchers attempt to "explore constructs for dealing with particular problems or issues" (p. 58). Further, the use of convenience samples consisting of college students is well documented within sport fan scholarly research, including: Pham (1992), who utilized a study group of 85 undergraduate students to examine the effects of involvement within sports events as influenced by arousal and pleasure in reaction to the event; McDaniel (1999), who examined the relationship between consumer schemas and advertising related to sports sponsorships using 32

undergraduate students for his initial ranking of product categories in sport sponsorship and conducted the main phase of his research through a convenience sample consisting of 216 undergraduates; Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008), who conducted research to explore the motivational profiles of sports fans over several sport categories (including NFL and collegiate football) with an original sample group of 1,372 college students; Wann (1995), who developed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale, a 23-item Likert scale measure, through research conducted with a 272-subject sample group, 116 of which were university students receiving course credit for participation; and Koo, Quarterman, and Flynn (2006), who conducted a study of the effect of sport event and sponsor image on behavioral intentions utilizing 162 undergraduates in pre-testing and a convenience sample of 452 undergraduate students for the main test stage.

For this study, an online survey instrument was utilized to assess the awareness of heroes and villains related to fan involvement for NFL and college American football. NFL football was selected to represent a sport in which students might be somewhat less involved, while college football was selected to represent a sport in which students at this particular institution were likely to be more involved, particularly given the level of success recently achieved by the institution's football team.

Fan Involvement: Psychological and Behavioral

Psychological fan involvement was measured for this study using the Trail et al. (2003) fan scale, which identifies the strength of orientation to watch a game when having a team to cheer for and a team to cheer against. The measure included three items, rated by subjects on a 1-9 scale where "1" was "Strongly Disagree" and "9" was "Strongly Agree": (1) I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of the (NFL/college football); (2) Being a fan of the (NFL/college football) is very

important to me; and (3) I consider myself to be a real fan of the (NFL/college football). These items were randomly ordered and placed in the questionnaire.

Behavioral fan involvement was assessed using two open-ended questions: (1) How many (NFL/college games) did you attend last year? and (2) How many (NFL/college games) did you watch on TV last year?

Total fan involvement was calculated for each league by summing each respondent's score on the fan scale, games attended and games watched.

Heroes and Villains

The number of heroes and villains for each respondent was assessed with open-ended questions, one for heroes and one for villains: "Among the various (NFL/college) teams with whom you are familiar, which ones would you describe as being 'heroes or villains?' Please list at least one team. You may list others if you'd like."

Hypotheses Testing

Stepwise multiple regressions were used to test the two hypotheses. The dependent variables were (1) psychological fan involvement; (2) number of games attended; (3) number of games watched; (4) total behavior (the sum of games attended and games watched); and (5) total involvement (the sum of the fan scale, games attended and games watched).

Results

Sample Description

The majority of respondents in this pilot study were white (64.0%), females (73.9%) classified as juniors (44.5%) with an average age of 19.9 years old (see Table 1). The large proportion of females in a study of a male-oriented sport (American football) dictated the inclusion of gender as a variable in the final discussion.

TABLE 1
Profile of Sample Population

Gender	#	%
Male	74	26.1
Female	209	73.9
Classification	#	%
Freshman	14	6.7
Sophomore	95	33.6
Junior	126	44.5
Senior	43	15.2
Missing	5	1.8
Ethnicity	#	%
White/Non-Hispanic	181	64.0
White/Hispanic	53	18.7
Hispanic/Non-White	25	8.8
Black	14	4.9
Asian	6	2.1
Native American	3	1.1
Age		
Average	19.90	
Range	18-26	
Standard Deviation	1.19	

Psychological and Behavioral Involvement of Sample Population

The fan scale of the sample population (see Table 2) had a strong Cronbach's alpha, and significant differences were found between genders regarding psychological fan involvement and games watched on television. Males (n=74) had high fan involvement scores and a higher number of games watched on television than females (n=209). This reinforced the concept of American football as a male-oriented sport and the need to include gender in the final discussion of the relationship between involvement and heroes and villains.

Heroes and Villains

Comparisons between male and female respondents were identified as related to each gender's association with heroes and villains. For the NFL (Table 3), significant differences were found between genders regarding the

TABLE 2
Psychological and Behavioral Involvement of Sample Population

Fan Scale*	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
NFL	5.10	2.71	.00
College	7.10	6.27	.01
Games Attended	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
NFL	.55	.36	NS
College	5.74	5.24	NS
Games Watched on Television	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
NFL	20.07	6.35	.00
College	32.00	12.73	.00
Total Psychological and Behavioral Involvement	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
NFL	22.74	8.57	.00
College	37.14	22.48	.00

*Cronbach's alpha = .966 for the NFL and .929 for college football

number of heroes and villains. Males listed (M = 1.59) significantly more heroes and more villains (M = 1.74) than females (M = 1.16 for heroes and M = 1.47 for villains). A repeated measures analysis of variance indicated that the numbers of heroes and villains for males were not significantly different and that females listed significantly more heroes than villains.

For college football, no significant differences were found between genders regarding the number of heroes and villains. Males listed a mean of 1.73 heroes compared to females' mean of 1.49. Likewise, males listed a mean of 2.78 villains compared to females' mean of 2.31. A repeated measures analysis of variance

provided evidence that both males and females listed more villains than heroes for college football.

TABLE 3
Gender response to association with heroes and villains

NFL	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
# of Heroes	1.59	1.16	.04
# of Villains	1.74	1.47	.00
College	Avg. Males	Avg. Females	Sig.
# of Heroes	1.73	1.49	NS
# of Villains	2.78	2.31	NS

Relationship among Fan Psychological and Behavioral Involvement and Heroes and Villains

The stepwise regression tests of the hypotheses included psychological and behavior involvement measures as dependent variables with number of heroes and villains as predictor (independent) variables. In addition, on the basis of the analysis of the summary statistics and comparisons of genders, gender was included as a dummy variable (0 = Female and 1 = Male) and age as an independent variable.

The number of heroes and number of villains were included as separate variables in the regression with an understanding that the two variables had some correlation (r for NFL Heroes to NFL Villains = .245, $p = .00$ and r for College Heroes to College Villains = .373, $p = .00$) that might result in their multicollinearity influencing the results. The number of heroes was also multiplied by the number of villains to create an indicator of the interaction between the two variables.

The results of the regression analyses for psychological, behavioral, and total fan involvement in the NFL presented in Table 4 provided partial support for the first hypothesis.

All of the regressions produced significant results. However, only two variables consistently appeared in the final regression equations: NFL villains and gender. Therefore, the significance of villains supported the hypothesis that NFL fan involvement is positively related to the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans. However, across the psychological, behavioral, and total involvement measures, the number of heroes in the minds of fans was not related to any of the measures. This did not support the hypothesis that NFL fan involvement is positively related to the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans.

The number of villains was related to each of the involvement measures. Likewise, gender was a significant variable. This suggested that, for the NFL, having teams to cheer *against* was more important than having teams to cheer *for* and supported the strategy of building rivalries for NFL teams as a means of attracting “the elusive fan” (Rein et al., 2006).

The results of the regression analyses for psychological, behavioral and total fan involvement in college football, presented in Table 5, also provided partial support for the hypothesis that NFL and college football fan involvement is positively related to the number of heroes and villains. All of the regressions were statistically significant. However, in the results for the NFL regressions, only two variables consistently appeared in the final regression equations: college *heroes* and *gender*. The significance of heroes supported the hypothesis. However, across the psychological, behavioral and total involvement measures, the number of villains in the minds of fans was not related to any of the measures, which did not support the hypothesis.

The number of heroes was related to each of the involvement measures. Likewise, gender was a significant variable. This suggested that, for college football, having teams to cheer *for* was more important than having teams to cheer

TABLE 4

Regression Analyses: Heroes and villains as a predictor of involvement for NFL football

			# Heroes	# Villains	HXV Interaction	Age	Gender
NFL-Dep. Variables	R*	R ²	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta
Fan Involvement	.53	.28	NS	.34	NS	NS	.34
Games Attended	.13	.01	NS	.13	NS	NS	NS
Games Watched	.48	.23	NS	.22	NS	NS	.38
Total Behaviors	.41	.17	NS	.17	NS	NS	.34
TOTAL Involvement	.45	.20	NS	.20	NS	NS	.36

*p < .05

against and supported the strategy of building rivalries for college teams as a means of attracting “the elusive fan” (Rein et al., 2006).

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this pilot study raised some noteworthy points for consideration regarding fan base building and suggest that additional research to study the implications of heroes and villains on fan involvement levels is definitely warranted. Probability samples attained from a random selection of collegiate and NFL American football fans will quite

likely be more highly representative of the general population. However, the initial findings of this study indicate that practitioners who market sport events and related products may be able to utilize *villains* to target fans having lower involvements, while building rivalries by focusing on *heroes* for fans with higher levels of involvement.

Initial findings also suggest that attraction to a specific team or sporting event may be heightened for fans with lower levels of involvement by focusing outwardly upon the competition, framing them as evil villains and a deterrent to the success of the home

TABLE 5

Regression Analyses: Heroes and villains as a predictor of involvement for college football

			# Heroes	# Villains	HXV Interaction	Age	Gender
College Football -Dep. Variables	R*	R ²	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta	Std. Beta
Fan Involvement	.33	.04	.16	NS	NS	NS	.14
Games Attended	.20	.04	.20	NS	NS	NS	NS
Games Watched	.36	.13	NS	NS	NS	NS	.36
Total Behaviors	.30	.09	.16	NS	NS	NS	.24
TOTAL Involvement	.31	.09	.17	NS	NS	NS	.24

*p < .05

team. Fans who exemplify higher levels of involvement appear to be more affected by hometown heroes; therefore, marketing campaigns featuring key athletes as icons and protectors of the organization may play well to this group and encourage a positive response.

While the results of this pilot study provided partial support of the general hypothesis that the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans were related to fan involvement, the importance of gender as a predictor of involvement with NFL and college American football becomes critical for further consideration, since this study found gender to be a significant predictor across the various measures of involvement used in this study. This study found heroes and villains to be related to fan involvement, but the relationship was not consistent across NFL and college football. In the NFL, the number of *villains* was a significant predictor of involvement. In college football, the number of *heroes* was a significant predictor. These initial results suggest that in a sport in which the subject population is *less* involved (both psychologically and behaviorally), *villains* may be more important in building fan involvement than in situations in which fans are *more* involved. Accordingly, in such situations, *heroes* appear more important.

This pilot test also supports the postulation of sporting events as melodramas, since participants appear to have understood and were able to identify and distinguish heroes and villains. Since this study found the number of heroes and the number of villains to be related to psychological and behavioral involvement in NFL and college sport, the melodramatic

perspective of sport should provide a fruitful area for future research regarding fan involvement.

Limitations

While the focus of this study was on the sport of American football and the results provided evidence of heavy fan involvement in the sport, the convenience sample of university students had limitations which merit consideration when examining its results. To begin, the convenience sample did not fully represent the demographics of collegiate football fans or NFL fans. Scarborough Research data on NFL fans demonstrates a wider distribution of age, income and education (SportsBusiness Daily, 2006). Likewise, the study focused on American football, an 11-person team sport; results for studies focusing on smaller teams or on individual sports (such as tennis or golf) may be different. One should be cautious when generalizing the results beyond the group of respondents and beyond NFL and college football, since this research was a correlational study performed as a pilot study to test feasibility for future topical exploration. Care should be taken with drawing causal conclusions.

Nevertheless, because of the relationships between low involvement/villains and high involvement/heroes, this study's findings indicate a significant predictor for how marketers and event managers can frame the team sport experience. The findings provide saliency that may warrant further exploratory analysis of this phenomenon concerning fan involvement.

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Journal of Sport Administration & Supervision

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS!

HEROES AND VILLAINS: INCREASING FAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE PURSUIT OF “THE ELUSIVE FAN”

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Research problem addressed:

The purpose of this pilot study was to provide an introductory assessment of how sport fans view heroes and villains as part of their experience with team athletics, specifically with the American version of football as played in the National Football League (NFL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The premise of the study was that under higher fan involvement, a higher the number of heroes and villains would exist in the minds of fans, for both NFL and collegiate football activity.

Issues:

Sports have become an increasingly important part of societies around the world. The fabled English football club Manchester United (MU), a prominent global sport brand, touts more than 75 million fans. Mega-events such as World Cup soccer headline major sport stadiums, and within the United States, professional football, collegiate sports, and the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) are packing facilities across the nation.

From a marketing communications perspective, this growth has resulted in increased sponsorship spending. In the U.S., for example, sport sponsorship spending in 2009 was \$11.28 billion, indicating mere a one percent decline within a market that saw a 7.8 percent decrease in media spending. Unfortunately, this proliferation of sport and sponsorship, coupled with technology that gives fans 24/7 access, has created a complex environment in which sport marketers must develop strategies to attract and maintain the “elusive fan.”

The major objective for the various strategies for targeting the “elusive fan” is increased fan involvement. Product involvement has received wide spread attention since it was introduced in the 1960’s, but its application to sport has gone virtually ignored until the past few years. Involvement represents a state of motivation, arousal or interest in a product, activity or object.

Much of the research on sport and leisure activities has focused on the development of scales to measure fan involvement with sport teams. Sport fan scales explored the dimensions of team involvement (importance, enjoyment and self-expression) as well as the relationship between involvement and sport-related behaviors, such as attendance, television viewing, etc. Generally, the results support the positive relationship between sport-related behaviors and involvement: the more involved, the more likely a person is to attend/view a contest.

An interesting result of the research on sport involvement and the development of sport involvement scales was the identification of two unique segments: *Fans* and *Spectators*. The groups differed in their team support motivation. *Fans* were motivated to attend a game to cheer on their favorite teams and players, while *Spectators* were motivated to see a well-played game regardless of which team won or lost.

One major strategy for building fan involvement is to build rivalries. This means giving fans a team to cheer for and a team to cheer against. Thus, a sporting event becomes a metaphor of good versus evil, heroes versus villains.

Summary:

This pilot study utilized an online survey of college students to assess the relationship between heroes and villains and fan involvement for the NFL and college football. College football was chosen to represent a sport in which students were likely to be more involved and the NFL to represent a similar sport, but one in which students would be somewhat less involved.

The majority of respondents were white (64.0%), females (73.9%) classified as juniors (44.5%) with an average age of 19.9.

Sample Profile

Gender	#	%
Male	74	26.1
Female	209	73.9
Classification	#	%
Freshman	14	6.7
Sophomore	95	33.6
Junior	126	44.5
Senior	43	15.2
Missing	5	1.8
Ethnicity	#	%
White/Non-Hispanic	181	64.0
White/Hispanic	53	18.7
Hispanic/Non-White	25	8.8
Black	14	4.9
Asian	6	2.1
Native American	3	1.1
Age		
Average	19.90	
Range	18-26	
Standard Deviation	1.19	

Significant differences were found between genders regarding the number of NFL heroes and villains. Males listed significantly more heroes ($M = 1.59$) and more villains ($M = 1.74$) than females who have an average of 1.16 heroes and an average of 1.47 villains. For college football, no significant differences were found between genders regarding the number of heroes and villains. Males listed an average of 1.73 heroes compared to females' average of 1.49. Likewise, males listed an average of 2.78 villains compared to females' average of 2.31.

Heroes and Villains

NFL	Avg. Males	Avg. Females
# of Heroes	1.59	1.16
# of Villains	1.74	1.47
College	Avg. Males	Avg. Females
# of Heroes	1.73	1.49
# of Villains	2.78	2.31

In the analysis for the NFL, the two variables most notable were villains and gender. The number of villains was related to each of the involvement measures. These findings suggested that, for the NFL, having teams to cheer *against* was more important than having teams to cheer *for* and supported the strategy of building rivalries for NFL teams as a means of attracting the “elusive fan.”

The analysis for collegiate football indicated that the two most prominent variables were heroes and gender. This suggested that, for college football, having teams to cheer *for* was more important than having teams to cheer *against* and also supported the strategy of building rivalries for college teams as a means of attracting the “elusive fan.”

Analysis and implications:

While the results of this study provided partial support for our assumption that the number of heroes and villains in the minds of fans were related to fan involvement, the importance of gender as a predictor of involvement for both the NFL and college football becomes important to note for further consideration and research. Across the various measures of involvement used in this study, gender was a significant predictor. The effect of gender should be a key consideration in future studies related to sport fan involvement and the melodramatic framing of competition.

Heroes and villains were related to involvement, but the relationship was not consistent across both NFL and college football. Data related to the NFL indicated that the number of villains was a significant predictor of involvement. In college football, the number of heroes was a significant predictor. The results suggested that in a sport where the subject population is *less* involved, both psychologically and behaviorally, casting *villains* may be more important in building involvement. In situations where fans are *more* involved, casting *heroes* may be more important. The heroes-and-villains concept thus may have strong implications for sport marketers, event managers, and media content developers.

In terms of exactly what casting technique to use at which junctures, this preliminary research indicated that, when fan involvement measures are *low*, marketers in both collegiate and NFL football might consider focusing outwardly on *other* teams and casting them as *villains* standing in the path of home team victory. In cases of *high* fan involvement, marketers might consider focusing *inwardly* on the home team as *heroes*, as they prepare to do battle with the competition.

The results of this pilot study suggest that further research is warranted, using probability samples attained from a random selection of collegiate and NFL football fans. Understanding the level of fan involvement as related to heroes and villains could prove vital in attracting and keeping the “elusive fan.”