

Understanding Sports Fandom and Psychosocial Well-being in Cancer Survivors: A Conceptual Framework

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In this article, sports fandom is proposed as being a possible resource to improve cancer survivors' psychosocial well-being. The idea to explore this relationship is driven by the two primary factors. The first is that the number of cancer survivors in the United States is increasing, and cancer survivors are living longer with cancer-related psychosocial difficulties. The second is that a portion of adults in the United States identify as sports fans, and studies have shown that engaging in sports fandom can positively impact psychosocial well-being. Despite this, the relationship between sports fandom and cancer survivor psychosocial well-being does not appear to have been studied significantly. A brief introduction to the research about cancer survivor psychosocial well-being and psychosocial benefits of sports fandom is provided. The Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) theory of well-being is presented as helpful theory for exploring how sports fandom might support psychosocial well-being among cancer survivors. The potential implications of further empirical research into this relationship could identify sports fandom as a possible innovative, non-medical resource to address social isolation, restoration of identity and meaning, and promote long, healthy, and productive lives among cancer survivors.

Keywords: cancer survivorship; psychosocial well-being; social isolation; sports fandom

Introduction

Sports fandom is a pervasive cultural phenomenon, with recent studies indicating that roughly 68%–75% of American adults identify as sports fans (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St. Bonaventure University, 2023). Seminal work by Brill (1929) suggested that being a sports fan provides mental, physical, and moral benefits through identification and catharsis. Sports fandom and sports spectatorship research empirically supports this notion, demonstrating fandom and spectatorship behaviors such as but not limited to sports consumption (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St. Bonaventure University, 2023), fan identity, and belonging to a fan community can enhance individual well-being by promoting social interaction, providing entertainment and emotional catharsis, and fostering a sense of community and belonging (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Kesler & Wann, 2020; Kumai et al., 2024).

In parallel, more individuals are living beyond a cancer diagnosis. By 2040, the U.S. is projected to have 26 million survivors (Office of Cancer Survivorship, 2024; Tonorezos et al., 2024). Cancer survivors include people with varying kinds of cancer and include a population of people with a diverse range of demographic information, identities, backgrounds, life experiences, lifestyles, abilities/skills, experience of disparities, resilience, and coping (American Cancer Society, 2024; American Cancer Society, 2025; American Association for Cancer Research, 2024; Ligus et al., 2020). While such diversity exists, cancer survivors can experience any number of psychosocial challenges including anxiety, depression, isolation, fear of recurrence, impaired family functioning and relationships, loss of a sense of normalcy, existential concerns, identity and self-image distress, struggles with uncertainty, distress from loss of control, and difficulties with returning to life duties and responsibilities following the more intensive phase of treatment (Bagautdinova et al., 2024; Chong et al., 2024; Elkefi & Matthews, 2024; Evan & Khan, 2024; Hannum et al., 2016; Melhem et al., 2023; Osann et al., 2023; Visser et al., 2025). However, exploring the intersection of sports fandom and psychosocial well-being of cancer survivors specifically remains sparse, highlighting an important gap in our knowledge for interdisciplinary sports fan research.

Sports Fandom and Psychosocial Well-being

The psychosocial benefits of sports fandom have been extensively documented satisfaction (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2017; Brill, 1929). Initial theoretical propositions suggested that identification with sports teams can significantly contribute to an individual's mental health by providing emotional catharsis, reducing stress, and fostering meaningful social interactions (Brill, 1929). Recent empirical research has supported these early observations, consistently demonstrating positive relationships between sports fandom and diverse psychosocial outcomes such as happiness, emotional well-being, social connectivity, and life satisfaction (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2017).

Both Wann (2006) and Wann and Fast (2021) found that fan identification with sports teams fulfills basic psychological needs, including belongingness, social integration, and emotional support. These needs, in turn, contribute significantly to positive psychosocial outcomes. Multiple studies confirm that high team identification enhances social connectedness, increases perceived emotional support, and mitigates feelings of isolation and loneliness,

particularly among older adults who are vulnerable to reduced social networks (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017). Moreover, Kesler and Wann (2020) differentiated personal and social life satisfaction, showing that both forms are positively associated with higher levels of fan engagement and team identification.

The dimensions of psychosocial well-being associated with sports fandom have been explored through varied frameworks, including hedonic, eudaimonic, and social well-being (Kumai et al., 2024; Oshimi & Kinoshita, 2022). Hedonic well-being, representing the pursuit and experience of pleasure, is frequently evident in the immediate joy and excitement derived from watching sports, experiencing victories, or participating in celebratory rituals. Eudaimonic well-being extends beyond immediate pleasure, involving deeper psychological benefits such as meaningful personal growth, resilience, identity construction, and a sense of purpose derived from allegiance to a particular team or sport (Guo et al., 2023). Additionally, social well-being highlights the crucial role sports fandom plays in facilitating enduring and supportive social interactions. Fan communities, whether physical or virtual, offer rich opportunities for social integration, development of meaningful and supportive relationships, and collective emotional experiences, often leading to enhanced emotional resilience and reduced psychological distress (Wann et al., 2017).

The integration of these well-being components through fan experiences has been theoretically framed by social identity theory (Wann & Fast, 2021). Social identity theory states that sports fandom offers individuals a meaningful social identity, which not only facilitates personal satisfaction and pride but also bolsters psychological resilience through collective experiences of success and failure (Wann & Fast, 2021). Identification with sports teams has consistently predicted increased resilience, improved mental health, and enhanced life satisfaction (Inoue et al., 2017; Wann & Fast, 2021). Thus, sports fandom emerges not merely as entertainment but as a significant psychosocial resource with tangible benefits for psychological health and community building.

Psychosocial Well-being in Cancer Survivors

Despite significant medical advancements in cancer treatments improving survival rates, cancer survivors often continue to face extensive psychosocial challenges, affecting their quality of life even after treatment ends (Low et al., 2024; Tonorezos et al., 2024). The chronic nature of survivorship means some survivors live with persistent emotional burdens, including anxiety related to recurrence, chronic fatigue, depression, and social isolation, which significantly impacts their overall well-being and daily functioning (Elkefi & Matthews, 2024; Melhem et al., 2024). Psycho-oncology literature highlights that the post-treatment period can be particularly distressing, characterized by fears of recurrence, challenges of returning to a sense of normalcy, and difficulty in re-establishing social roles and relationships disrupted by illness and treatment (Osann et al., 2023; Pituskin, 2022).

Social support, leisure activities, and creative interventions are widely recognized as integral to psychosocial care for cancer survivors, contributing to both coping and recovery of emotional well-being (Ryu et al., 2022; Yildirim et al., 2024). Leisure and recreational engagement have been associated with reduced stress and loneliness, enhanced mood, and a stronger sense of meaning and happiness in daily life (Mengqin et al., 2024; Ryu et al., 2022).

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These activities not only alleviate psychological distress but also foster social connection and emotional resilience by creating opportunities for community involvement and peer support. Furthermore, therapeutic approaches, such as mandala art therapy, music therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and expressive therapies, have also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing psychosocial distress and enhancing emotional resilience among survivors (Mengqin et al., 2024; Yildirim et al., 2024). However, despite these promising results, existing psychosocial oncology interventions typically do not explicitly incorporate survivors' pre-existing interests, identities, or hobbies, including sports fandom, into structured psychosocial interventions. (Murnaghan et al., 2024). The oversight is notable, given the widespread prevalence of sports fandom and the extensive evidence supporting its psychosocial benefits in broader populations (Kesler & Wann, 2020).

This knowledge gap presents an opportunity for interdisciplinary research, integrating insights from sports psychology, social work, oncology, and positive psychology to examine how sports fandom could effectively serve as an innovative psychosocial resource for cancer survivors. Leveraging sports fandom as a therapeutic resource aligns well with contemporary strengths-based approaches in social work and psycho-oncology, emphasizing the importance of using personal interests, existing social networks, and culturally relevant activities in psychosocial interventions for chronic illness management (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2024a, 2024b).

Integration and Implications of the Literature

The lack of clarity in existing literature regarding whether study participants are cancer survivors highlights an important gap—and a compelling opportunity—for integrating two distinct but related bodies of research (Murnaghan et al., 2024; Kesler & Wann, 2020). Specifically, examining how the well-documented psychosocial benefits of sports fandom might support cancer survivorship warrants further exploration. Sports fandom has been linked to emotional uplift, social connection, identity formation, and resilience (Wann et al., 2017), all of which align with key psychosocial challenges faced by survivors, such as isolation, emotional distress, identity disruption, and diminished support networks (Yildirim et al., 2024). Despite this overlap, current psychosocial interventions seldom incorporate survivors' leisure identities or personal interests. Leveraging sports fandom as a therapeutic or supportive element—through structured group activities centered on sporting events or facilitated online fan communities—represents a novel and potentially impactful direction for survivorship care.

The absence of explicit reference to cancer survivors in existing studies on sports fandom reveals a notable gap in the literature—and an opportunity to explore a meaningful intersection. While research has established the psychosocial benefits of sports fandom, including emotional uplift, social connection, identity formation, and resilience (Wann et al., 2017; Inoue et al., 2017), these outcomes directly align with the unmet psychosocial needs commonly reported by cancer survivors, such as isolation, emotional distress, identity disruption, and diminished social networks (Mengqin et al., 2024; Yildirim et al., 2024). Despite this alignment, current psychosocial interventions for survivors rarely draw on individuals' personal interests, leisure identities, or existing sources of joy. Integrating sports fandom into survivorship care—through structured group viewing events, online fan communities, or collaborations between cancer

support organizations and local sports teams—represents a promising and underexplored avenue for enhancing psychosocial support and fostering community engagement.

In summary, scientific literature has documented that cancer survivors face significant psychosocial burdens long after more intensive periods of medical treatment end, and literature on sports fandom demonstrates robust psychosocial benefits among general populations. The lack of research explicitly connecting these two domains highlights a meaningful opportunity for interdisciplinary research, providing a theoretical and empirical basis for exploring how sports fandom could enhance psychosocial well-being for cancer survivors. Such research would not only fill a critical knowledge gap but also offer novel, evidence-based directions for future psychosocial interventions in oncology care.

Exploration Based in the PERMA Well-being Theory

The PERMA theory of well-being is a helpful theory and model to support the exploration of how engaging in sports fandom might support psychosocial well-being among cancer survivors. The PERMA theory of well-being was developed by Martin Seligman (2011). The PERMA framework emphasizes five essential dimensions integral to achieving psychological flourishing and overall well-being. Each dimension captures distinct aspects of psychological and social functioning, making it particularly suitable for exploring the comprehensive benefits sports fandom might offer to cancer survivors who face ongoing psychosocial challenges.

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions are central to human flourishing and include feelings such as joy, excitement, contentment, pride, and optimism. Within the context of sports fandom, positive emotions frequently arise from various fan experiences such as witnessing victories, engaging in celebratory rituals, participating in pre- and post-game activities, and sharing emotional highs and lows with fellow fans. Cancer survivors, who often grapple with significant emotional distress, anxiety about recurrence, and mood disturbances, could particularly benefit from the regular infusion of positive emotions that fan engagement provides. Sports events can offer distraction and relief from health-related stressors, momentarily lifting survivors' moods and fostering optimism. Such emotional uplift has the potential to significantly enhance overall emotional resilience and subjective well-being among survivors.

Engagement

Engagement refers to the experience of being deeply immersed in an activity—often described in psychological literature as a state of "flow" (van der Linden, Tops, & Baker, 2021; Cheron, 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Flow states occur when individuals are fully absorbed in an activity, experiencing intense focus, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation, to the point that they lose track of time and external concerns (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Sports fandom, through activities such as watching games, following team news, participating in fantasy leagues, or engaging in in-depth discussions about sports, offers opportunities for survivors to enter such immersive states (Carmichael, 2024; Morning Consult, 2023; Sienna College and St.

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Bonaventure University, 2023). This deep engagement may function as a therapeutic distraction, temporarily diverting attention away from illness-related worries, fears of recurrence, or daily stresses associated with survivorship (Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010; Uchino, 2006). Additionally, the frequent experience of engagement through fan activities may promote greater psychological resilience, better emotional regulation, and enhanced overall psychosocial functioning in cancer survivors.

Social Relationships

Social relationships are critical determinants of psychosocial health, significantly influencing emotional well-being and quality of life (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Uchino, 2006; Leary & Baumeister, 1995). For cancer survivors, maintaining strong social networks and receiving consistent emotional support are crucial components of psychosocial recovery and resilience (Breitbart et al., 2021; Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010). Sports fandom uniquely facilitates relationship-building by providing structured opportunities for social interactions, shared experiences, and community participation. Fan communities—whether online forums, social media groups, local fan clubs, or team or sport supported charitable organizations and foundations—provide opportunities to create meaningful social connections based on common interests and emotional experiences (Kim et al., 2023; Ringlad & Wolf, 2022; Scardaville, 2005). These interactions can reduce survivors' sense of isolation, enhance feelings of belonging, and provide practical and emotional support from peers (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Bennett, 2014, Annett, 2014). Furthermore, shared fan activities can strengthen existing relationships with family and friends (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Benett, 2014), enhancing overall social support networks, which are critically important in managing the psychosocial aftermath of cancer diagnosis and treatment (Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010; Diener, 2005).

Meaning

The dimension of meaning within the PERMA framework encompasses the pursuit and experience of purpose, value, significance in life, and serving and belonging to something bigger than oneself (Seligman, 2011). Cancer survivors often experience disruptions to their sense of identity and purpose, struggling to reconcile their pre- and post-cancer diagnosis selves (Bhattacharjee, 2013; Bilgrami, 2006). Engaging in sports fandom may offer survivors a meaningful and affirming aspect of their identity and help survivors reconstruct and reinforce a positive and meaningful personal identity beyond their cancer-related experiences. Loyalty to and support of a sport and/or team, identification with fan communities, and participation in longstanding fan traditions and rituals can provide the means of participating, belonging to, and contributing to something bigger than themselves (Guo et al., 2023; Inoue et al., 2017; Kesler & Wann, 2020; Kumai et al., 2024). This renewed sense of meaning, belonging, purpose, and identity derived from sports fandom may enhance survivors' emotional resilience, motivation for recovery, and overall satisfaction with life.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment refers to the pursuit and achievement of goals, milestones, and tangible outcomes, contributing significantly to a person's sense of self-efficacy, pride, and overall well-being (Wang et al., 2017). In the context of sports fandom, accomplishments may include vicarious victories achieved through team successes, personal milestones such as long-term fan loyalty, mastery of sports knowledge, or active participation in community or team-related activities (Gordon, 2013; Funk & James, 2006). Even though these accomplishments are often indirect or symbolic, they remain psychologically significant. For cancer survivors, recognizing and celebrating accomplishments through their fan activities—such as successfully organizing fan gatherings, achieving personal milestones related to their fandom, or simply experiencing the thrill of their team's success—can foster a greater sense of efficacy, personal pride, and emotional resilience (Faaj et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). These experiences of accomplishment may significantly enhance survivors' self-esteem and overall psychosocial well-being.

Integrating PERMA with Fan-specific Well-being

The PERMA model has been used in studies focused on sports fandom and spectatorship (Doyle et al., 2016; Doyle et al., 2021; Kumai et al., 2024; Oshimi & Kinoshita, 2022) and cancer survivor well-being (Fang et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024), which makes it well-suited for grounding the proposed conceptual framework to help explain the relationship between sports fandom and cancer survivor well-being.

Kumai et al. (2024) highlight a meaningful alignment between their multidimensional model of fan well-being and Seligman's PERMA framework, suggesting that sports fandom can serve as a holistic contributor to well-being. In their model, hedonic well-being corresponds to the experience of positive emotions, while eudaimonic well-being encompasses engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. Social well-being, in turn, aligns with the relational aspect of the PERMA model (Kumai et al., 2024, p. 5). This conceptual overlap underscores the potential of sports fandom to address multiple interrelated domains of psychosocial well-being for cancer survivors. Through fan-based engagement, individuals may access positive emotion, reconstruct identity through meaningful experiences, and foster social connections—all critical areas often disrupted by the cancer experience. Framing sports fandom within the PERMA model offers a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how structured fan engagement can support emotional resilience, strengthen social bonds, and enhance overall life satisfaction among cancer survivors (Kumai et al., 2024).

Potential Implications

Engaging with sports fandom may present innovative opportunities to reduce isolation among cancer survivors, strengthen their social support networks, and enhance overall life satisfaction (Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020). Oncology social work practices could incorporate sports-related activities and participation in fan communities as part of therapeutic interventions, offering creative, non-clinical approaches to holistic survivor care. These strategies also align with the current priorities of the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare,

particularly in addressing social isolation and supporting long, healthy, and fulfilling lives (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2024a, 2024b).

Conclusion

This conceptual article proposes an interdisciplinary framework integrating sports social work and psycho-oncology to investigate the potential of sports fandom as a meaningful psychosocial resource for cancer survivors across diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. Sports fandom may contribute to survivor well-being by promoting positive affect, psychological engagement, participation in purposeful and value-driven activities, the cultivation of supportive social relationships, experiences of achievement, and the reinforcement of personal and social identity. Recognizing these potential benefits, future empirical research is needed to rigorously examine the role of sports fandom within the context of survivorship.

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