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Fan Rituals, Belonging, And Social Capital: A Cross-Sectional Survey Study

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ABSTRACT

Fan rituals, belonging, and social capital are all associated with Sports. In Sports, rituals (chants, lucky charms, and routines) create shared experiences that foster a strong sense of belonging (community, identity), which in turn shapes social capital (trust, cohesion) within fan groups and even broader communities, solidifying loyalty and shared identity beyond just the game itself. The present study aimed to examine the relationship between fan rituals, perceived belonging, and bonding and bridging social capital among sport spectators. In this regard, A survey study was carried out by the researcher among adult sports fans during various national sports competitions in Lahore, Pakistan, and thus through an available sampling technique, six hundred and twenty-four (624) adult sports fans were taken as the sample of the study. For the collection of data, the researcher used Fan Ritual Intensity Scale (adapted from Dixon & Delaney, 2019), Sense of Belonging Scale (Likert-type, 5-point), Social Capital Scale measuring bonding and bridging capital (Putnam, 2020) and Demographics and fandom history. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78-.91$). Pilot testing ($n = 40$) ensured clarity and cultural relevance. The collected data were tabulated and analysed by using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version-32) and thus suitable statistical tools were applied. Results show that the level of fan ritual was largely correlated with exaggerated feelings of belonging ($r = +.61, p = .001$) and bonding social capital ($b =$



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+48, $p = .001$). The moderated positive yet significant relationship between bridging social capital and ritual participation was observed ($b = .29$, $p < .01$). These relationships were moderated by length of fandom and attendance at the event. On the basis of results, the study concluded that Fan rituals are potent social processes that change individual spectatorship into group identity to solidify social cohesion as well as create social capital. These results emphasize the sociocultural importance of structured fan culture and the development thereof upon communities and fans of athletes.

Keywords: Fan Rituals; Belonging; Social Capital; Sports Fandom; Community Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Sports are a tool of socialization because they promote social qualities among their participants. Sports offer a variety of opportunities for collective gathering, emotional sharing, and mutual identification among the players. In addition, beyond entertainment, sporting spaces frequently serve as informal public arenas where citizens interact across age, class, and cultural backgrounds (Khan et al, 2016). Sports improve the quality of life because it makes a person physically, mentally, economically and socially sound. A person who is physically, mentally, economically and socially developed not only proves to be a good member of his/her family but of the whole society as well.

Sports participation not only makes a personal social but it develop sports fans. Sport fandom is a unique aspect of social life whereby collective affect, symbolic acts and shared stories have already combined to result in enduring social relationships. The modern academic community acknowledges fandom as a stream of consumption behavior and as one that can be socially institutionally enshrined, and that can create identity, meaning, and community (Giulianotti, 2020; Wann et al., 2021).

The key elements in the process include fan rituals, which are repetitive, symbolic, emotionally intense behaviors that include chanting of fans, use of team colours, coordinated actions, as well as pre-match customs. According to ritual theory, emotional entrainment and solidarity develop through repeated group behavior and strengthen group boundaries, as well as collective moral orders (Collins, 2020).

Rituals are the means by which, in the sporting context, the fans convert abstract affiliation to lived being. Recent sociological endeavor points to the fact that they provide better perceived inclusion and psychological bonding to fan communities (Dixon and Delaney, 2019). In line with this, the social capital theory focuses on the importance of social networks, trust, and reciprocity in contributing to collective action (Putnam, 2020).

Bonding social capital reinforces relationships among homogeneous groups, whereas bridging social capital bonds different people along social lines. The new studies in the sociology of sport prove that ordered sporting space could be advantageous in cultivating both types of capital, especially by means of repeated interaction and the formation of shared identity (Umar et al., 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025). Notwithstanding these insights, fan ritual, belonging, and social capital are not commonly combined in one analytical scheme in empirical research, especially when it is based on quantitative survey techniques. This knowledge gap constrains our insights into the way in which micro-level practices of fans are translated into social results on larger scales.

METHODOLOGY

The current study was associated with the relationship between fan rituals, perceived



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belonging, and bonding and bridging social capital among sport spectators. In this regard, A survey study with cross sectional approach was applied by the researcher. Adult sports fans during various national sports competitions in Lahore, Pakistan, and thus through an available sampling technique, six hundred and twenty-four (624) adult sports fans were taken as the sample of the study. For the collection of data, the researcher used Fan Ritual Intensity Scale (adapted from Dixon & Delaney, 2019), Sense of Belonging Scale (Likert-type, 5-point), Social Capital Scale measuring bonding and bridging capital (Putnam, 2020) and Demographics and fandom history. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78-.91$). Pilot testing ($n = 40$) ensured clarity and cultural relevance. Data were collected over eight weeks via an online platform. The survey contained 42 items and ensured anonymity. Participation was voluntary with informed consent, and no identifying data were collected. The collected data were tabulated and analysed by using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version-32).

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Table no.1 shows the Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 624)

Testing Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	378	60.6
	Female	246	39.4
Age Group	18–25 years	182	29.2
	26–35 years	241	38.6
	36–45 years	131	21.0
	46+ years	70	11.2
Primary Sport	Football	312	50.0
	Cricket	194	31.1
	Basketball	118	18.9
Length of Fandom	1–5 years	169	27.1
	6–10 years	228	36.5
	>10 years	227	36.4

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the sample. The distribution shows slightly higher participation from male fans, with the majority clustered in the 26–35 age group. Football emerged as the primary sport, followed by cricket and basketball. Notably, more than two-thirds of respondents reported fandom extending beyond six years, indicating a generally experienced and socially embedded fan base.

Table no.2 shows the Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Fan Ritual Intensity	3.94	0.68	1.90	5.00
Sense of Belonging	4.12	0.61	2.10	5.00
Bonding Social Capital	3.87	0.72	1.85	5.00



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Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Bridging Social Capital	3.41	0.77	1.60	4.95

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the core variables. Mean scores indicate moderately high levels of ritual intensity, belonging, and bonding social capital, while bridging capital showed comparatively lower values. The relatively small standard deviations suggest consistency across participants, implying broadly shared fan experiences within the sample.

Table no.3 shows the Correlation Matrix of Study Variables for the associations among fan ritual intensity, belonging, and social capital dimensions.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Fan Ritual Intensity	—			
2. Sense of Belonging	.61***	—		
3. Bonding Social Capital	.58***	.64***	—	
4. Bridging Social Capital	.33**	.41***	.46***	—

p < .05**, p < .01**, p < .001***

Table 3 shows strong positive correlations among ritual intensity, belonging, and bonding social capital, and moderate associations with bridging social capital. These results suggest that greater participation in rituals is consistently linked with stronger psychological connection to the fan community and broader social relationships.

Table no.4 Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Assessing fan ritual intensity predicted belonging and social capital after controlling for demographic and fandom-related variables

Predictor	B	T	P
Age	.06	1.54	.124
Gender	.04	1.08	.281
Length of Fandom	.19	4.72	<.001
Attendance Frequency	.21	5.11	<.001
Fan Ritual Intensity	.48	12.36	<.001

Model R² = .52, Adjusted R² = .51

The regression model in Table 4 demonstrates that fan ritual intensity is a robust predictor of belonging even after controlling for demographic and fandom variables. Attendance frequency and length of fandom also contributed significantly, highlighting the importance of both behavioral engagement and long-term involvement.

Table no.5 Hierarchical Regression Predicting Bonding Social Capital

Predictor	B	T	P
Age	.05	1.31	.191
Gender	.03	0.89	.374
Length of Fandom	.24	5.68	<.001
Attendance Frequency	.18	4.22	<.001



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Predictor	B	T	P
Fan Ritual Intensity	.45	11.07	<.001

Model R² = .49, Adjusted R² = .48

Results in Table 5 indicate that ritual intensity strongly predicts bonding social capital. Fans who actively engage in ritual practices report deeper trust, emotional closeness, and supportive ties within their fan networks, beyond the influence of age, gender, or fandom duration.

Table no.5 Hierarchical Regression Predicting Bridging Social Capital

Predictor	β	T	P
Age	.09	2.11	.035
Gender	.02	0.64	.521
Length of Fandom	.16	3.91	<.001
Attendance Frequency	.14	3.47	.001
Fan Ritual Intensity	.29	6.84	<.01

Model R² = .31, Adjusted R² = .30

As shown in Table 5, ritual intensity also predicts bridging social capital, although the effect is comparatively smaller. This suggests that rituals may extend connections beyond immediate in-group relations, fostering links with diverse others encountered in sporting environments.

DISCUSSION

The current research study found a significant relationship between the intensity of fan ritual and the feeling of belonging, supporting theoretical propositions generated by interaction ritual theory. This theory states that activities full of harmony and meaning create emotional power and solidarity among the group.

Consistent with these findings, prior research demonstrates that ritualized fan behaviors heighten emotional energy and strengthen identification with teams and fellow spectators. Dixon and Delaney (2019) observed that collective chanting and coordinated displays transform spectators into morally bound communities. In contrast, Theodorakis et al. (2019) and Khan (2016) found that stronger fan identification was associated with higher social well-being and perceived inclusion.

The findings also show that fan rituals especially work best in creating bonding social capital, not to mention a strong, trust-based relationship between people who identify with the same fan.

Earlier work confirms that shared fan practices create tight relational networks characterised by mutual trust and reciprocity. Hoye, Nicholson, and Brown (2020) showed that sport participation nurtures dense interpersonal ties, and Wann et al. (2019) reported that highly identified fans develop durable friendships that extend beyond the stadium and into everyday life.

The study also shows that their bridging social capital and fan rituals have a strong relationship, not despite the fact that it is lower than the bonding effects but because it has a theoretical meaning. Evidence also suggests that sport can link individuals across otherwise separated social boundaries. Weed (2020) emphasized that sporting events encourage interaction among strangers, while Woolcock (2018) argued that repeated civic encounters build broader, outward-facing networks that support cooperation across groups. These findings align with the moderated yet meaningful relationship observed in



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the present study.

Results highlighted that there is a perceived moderating effect of length of fandom and attendance frequency indicates that there are more extended directions of ritual effects established in more general fan socialization. Longitudinal research indicates that identification strengthens as fans repeatedly return to the same social spaces and relationships. Lock et al. (2018) documented that team identification grows cumulatively through sustained engagement, and Kim et al. (2021) showed that frequent attendance reinforces ritual familiarity, emotional attachment, and the gradual accumulation of social resources.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of data analysis and findings, the study concluded that fan practices are strong social processes that bring a sense of belonging and social capital to sport groups. The research has contributed to sociological knowledge of sports as a space where people gather by empirically associating ritualized fandom with bonding and bridging social capital. In practice, the enhancement of the inclusion of the ritual among fans can be considered a feasible course of action to improve cohesion within the community and to improve the relations between players and fans.

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