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Keywords

Motorsport, NASCAR, stock cars, Confederate Flag, National Anthem, Star Spangled Banner, Donald Trump, diversity, auto racing, fandom

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Abstract

The National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) is undergoing a radical shift in social perception. Controversial current actions have included the CEO's endorsement of President Donald Trump; a Confederate Flag exchange program at Daytona International Speedway; and race team owners who were opposed to "taking a knee" during the National Anthem. As the sport – and society – shift in perspective, it is important to understand the psychological underpinnings of motorsport enthusiasts. This study (N=489) builds on existing research to better understand NASCAR fandom. An 18-item Perception of NASCAR Scale produced a 4-factor solution that captured the dimension Social Change, which collected a negative relationship between "macho sport" and "more diversity." Analysis of variance testing for "like to see more diversity" indicates Christians and those of Jewish faith were significantly different. Christians and those who identified as non-religious also held significantly different views. Regarding politics and diversity, Republican and Independent voters held significantly different views. The factor Violent History supported the most highly correlated scale items "When drivers and crews get into fights it heightens my NASCAR experience" with "Crashes are an important part of my NASCAR experience." The factors Man and Machine and Commercialized represented a perception of high risk auto sport used to sell sponsor products and services.

Keywords

NASCAR, fandom

Introduction

NASCAR (the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) has been caught in recent political and cultural turmoil. A series of events has transitioned the motorsport from an on-track attraction, to an off-track lightning rod for political debate. NASCAR CEO Brian France publicly responded to tragic murders when Dylann Roof opened fire on members of a bible study group at a historic African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina (Ellis,

Payne, Perez & Ford, 2015). The shooter was quickly associated with an allegiance to the confederate flag. France developed a "flag exchange" program, where fans could accept an American flag in trade for a surrendered Confederate Flag. This action was considered lukewarm by one faction, but uncalled for by another (Kerasotis, 2016).

Soon after, France was out early and vocally during the 2016 presidential campaign, supporting candidate Donald Trump. France

followed an example set by his grandfather, NASCAR founder Bill France, Sr. and his father, Bill France, Jr. These staunch Republicans had endorsed Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. Brian France indicated his political position was related to the core NASCAR audience, who supported traditional American values and were identified as middle-class factory workers (Knight, 2017).

Not all of France's actions have been supported by NASCAR executive management. The Wall Street Journal reported France sold his stake in NASCAR to other family members more than a decade ago and now serves as an employee to sister Lesa France Kennedy, CEO of International Speedway Corporation (ISC), and Jim France, his uncle. Sources indicate Brian France did not inform France Kennedy of his initiative to set a policy against Confederate Flags, despite the fact Daytona International Speedway is owned by ISC. It was reported Lesa France learned of Brian France's endorsement of Trump via a news report (Mickle & Bauerlein, 2017).

Most recently, NASCAR once again went center stage when team owners Richard Petty and Richard Childress stated at-track employees would be fired if they "took a knee" during the National Anthem (Martinelli, 2017). Childress stated if a crew member opted to use the Star-Spangled Banner for protest, it would "get you a ride on a Greyhound bus when the national anthem is over." Trump used Twitter to state he was proud of NASCAR and its fans, identifying them as individuals who would not disrespect the country, or the flag (Gelston, 2017).

This chaotic polarization presents risk for NASCAR and its future success. Sport entities tied to specific cultural points of view risk alienating fans and sponsors, which can affect revenue. Opposing political views can influence attendance, sponsorship and media partnerships (Peralta, 2017). Understanding fan perception is paramount, as the sport is driven by external

sponsor funding. During an era when politics and opinions can affect success or failure, NASCAR may be at odds with the companies that showcase products and services at each event.

Understanding the psychological dimensions of race enthusiasts can prove useful and provide insight for stakeholders associated with NASCAR. Sport scholars and academic researchers have conceptualized the distinct motivation of fan association with their sport as fandom. Methodology for measuring fandom has also been drawn from sociology, psychology, consumer behavior and marketing (Funk & James, 2001). Reysen and Branscombe (2010) identified the construct of fandom as strength of identification with other fans, focus on the sport entity, and a collective happiness among similar fans. Most recently, researchers have studied fandom through the intersection of sport and social media, sometimes referred to as eSports. Fandom indicates that in the age of interactive media, eSports elicits greater devotion and desire, more than any other traditional form of consumption in sports arenas (Brown, Billings, Murphy, & Puesan, 2017). Wann and Goeke (2017) added to the fandom construct by associating fans with the use of war terminology. The authors concluded high identity team association was not a predictor of sport-war measures. Rather, high fandom was predictive of approval and appropriateness, while the trait of dysfunction was significant in predicting perceptions of sport and war.

Limited research exists identifying a psychological and social measure for NASCAR fans. This study explores further within the NASCAR construct to develop the Perception of NASCAR Scale (PNS). The 18 PNS items were factored, tested for reliability using the split-half data method, then reduced to a 4-factor dimensional solution. To better predict consumer perception related to current political events, the study used the scale item related to diversity as a

dependent variable, testing for variance among groups within demographic measures.

Defining NASCAR Fandom

Early research focused on understanding NASCAR fans by using a geographical adaptation to predict behaviors. Spann (2002) posited geographic location held implications for NASCAR, with fandom related to culture embedded in the southeastern United States. Southern social identity ties fans to teams and drivers and a sense of community is found through commonality. Amato, Peters and Shao (2005) identified a unique cluster of fans who were deeply motivated by the formative southern culture of the sport. A group less engaged with southern culture held a lower commitment to race events, related media and sponsor-related products.

Nonetheless, not all scholars suggest NASCAR is bound to its southern roots. Alderman, Mitchell, Webb and Hanak (2003) argued NASCAR was transcultural, moving onto a national stage through new track locations in major metro markets. Newman and Beissel (2009) also supported the argument NASCAR had shifted its political, cultural and economic paradigms from a local to a global platform. However, this study indicates there is a reported level of core consumer backlash, those fans who resent the hybrid version of NASCAR and desire an identity closer to the foundational roots of the sport. The construct of fandom as a collectivistic activity was identified by Levin, Beasley and Gilson (2008). They concluded perceived group norms and social identity were significant predictors of purchase intention related to NASCAR sponsors.

However, a drop in economic prosperity created an external influence affecting NASCAR fan response. Berkowitz, Depken and Wilson (2011) explored data across the 2007-2009 seasons and stated the price of gasoline, increased unemployment and competition with other high

interest sporting events affected NASCAR engagement.

Shared identity and economic status can be significant in measuring fan attachment to motorsport, however the deepest association may be generated by the athlete behind the steering wheel. Amato, Bodkin and Peters (2010) explored the relationship between NASCAR fans and their favorite race drivers. Fan communities around drivers supported and enforced a deeper engagement. Group interaction increased folklore, heightened awareness of driver identity and created drama through conflict framed in storytelling. Pettinga and DeGaris (2011) analyzed fan response related to driver traits. Aggressiveness, competitiveness and overall ability as a driver were key indicators of attraction and brand association with sponsors. Dees, Bennett and Ferreira (2010) reported personality traits such as ruggedness, competence, sophistication and sincerity all proved to have a positive effect on sponsor and purchase intentions.

Several research studies identified the demographics of consumers who best attached to the NASCAR fandom model. Kinney, McDaniel and DeGaris (2008) surmised brand recall was stronger for fans with a higher education, who were male, and those who skewed younger. This study also surmised higher levels of Internet exposure and televised race viewing produced a higher brand recall for NASCAR related sponsors. O’Roark, Wood and DeGaris (2009) conducted research and summarized fans who self-identified and attached with NASCAR had stronger brand association, were younger, and watched more races than average fans. Males in this study scored predominantly higher in brand association measures. The authors concluded increased consumption of NASCAR media and related products and services builds brand affinity.

Understanding NASCAR culture, association to the sport and driver attachment led to a

dimensional view of how fans define their racing experience. Spinda, Earnhardt and Hugenberg (2009) introduced parasocial interaction (PSI) and stated audience activity was dimensionalized through intentionality, affinity and involvement. Levin, Joiner and Cameron (2001) also used the dimension of involvement to measure fan response to NASCAR sponsors. Low involvement fans may see a blur of cars traveling around a race track. High involvement fans know the sport, the rules, specific teams, and the identities of drivers. They are more likely to engage with, and purchase, sponsor products and services.

Continued research, to better measure and understand NASCAR fandom, may contribute to the organization's survival. In a midseason "state of the sport" report CEO France stated the sanctioning body was aware of declining attendance issues (M. Brown, 2016). In addition to attendance, television ratings have declined. France indicated TV ratings were down for "obvious reasons" but NASCAR had increased digital interest and was aggressively pursuing a digital content strategy. TV ratings in 2016 were reported to have decreased 6 percent over telecasts in 2015. (Brown, 2016).

There is a history of exploring NASCAR fan motivators. However, few research studies exist that develop and identify scale measures for the multidimensional fan. This study will assist NASCAR officials, team owners, media partners and sponsors as they respond to difficult social and political issues. Operationalizing fandom in terms of attractors and detractors will provide a unique dimensionality, testing for factor reliability, correlations among items and differentiated group perspectives.

Methodology

NASCAR fandom scale development in this study incorporates a multistage approach (Soh, Reid, & King, 2009) used in the development of a dimensional model (Churchill Jr, 1979). This

study was conducted through an undergraduate research methods class at a southeastern state university. Phase one was qualitative, using personal interviews with NASCAR fans to prompt a general discussion of NASCAR racing. Scripting for interviews was framed to capture perceptions including both deterrents and attractors to NASCAR. Students completed interviews, then compiled key passages and responses offered by the interviewees. Responses were crafted into topical themes. Themes were examined for commonalities and redundancies, then operationalized into 18 distinct statements representing the Perception of NASCAR Scale (Table 1).

Phase two was the development of a survey instrument. The survey contained informed consent language, which met requirements for Institutional Review Board (IRB) accreditation. The 18 scale items were measured through a 5-point Likert scale, 1 as "strongly disagree" to 5 as "strongly agree." Demographic variables included age, gender, income, marital status, education, political persuasion, religious preference, and ethnic heritage. Data was collected through convenience, snowball and judgmental sampling. A survey web link was forwarded to targeted individuals who professed to have a familiarity with NASCAR through either event attendance or media consumption. After data cleaning, 489 useable cases were retained.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were used to dimensionalize and test the model (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). To identify relationships, correlation testing was used to identify associations among the 18 statements in the scale. ANOVA testing with the dependent variable "like to see more diversity" allowed insight into significant differences among demographic groups. NASCAR survey data held

Table 1. Perception of NASCAR Scale

Item	Mean	SD
Restricting speed and equalizing competition is good for NASCAR	2.73	1.18
NASCAR provides fair pricing for its events, products and services	2.95	1.03
I would like to see more diversity in NASCAR	3.38	1.00
A car manufacturer's performance in NASCAR affects my auto purchasing decisions**	2.12	1.11
I am pleased with the information drivers share during media interviews*	3.54	.78
NASCAR races take an appropriate length of time to complete	3.34	1.03
I can appreciate the commercialization of NASCAR	3.78	1.07
Social media is essential to my NASCAR experience	2.70	1.12
Seeing teams build fast cars and watching them race excites me	3.39	1.22
NASCAR is a sport that cares about its fans	3.65	.97
NASCAR racing today is as good today as it was 30 years ago	2.77	1.13
I like the fact NASCAR is a macho, masculine sport	2.89	1.04
I am inclined to purchase products and services from sponsors that support NASCAR**	2.75	1.10
When drivers and crews get into fights it heightens my NASCAR experience***	3.42	1.23
The commercialization of NASCAR is good for the sport	3.41	1.03
NASCAR media provides the right amount of driver information and news*	3.65	.80
Crashes are an important part of my NASCAR experience***	3.31	1.22
I enjoy connecting the Internet and television while viewing a NASCAR event	2.78	1.17

*Note: Scale anchored on 5-point measure strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). * and ** indicates medium effect size between corresponding items. *** indicates large effect size between corresponding items.*

a proportional distribution related to gender (56% female, 44% male) with a sizable number of respondents in the 22-29 year age group (30%) followed by the 42-45 year age category (10%). Thirty-six percent held a gross annual income of \$20,000 to \$39,999 annually. Most (54%) were married and 44% indicated “employee” as their employment descriptor. Twenty-four percent held a high-school degree and 29% held a university or college undergraduate degree. Most (80%) indicated they were Christians and most (88%) were of a non-Hispanic white or Euro-American ethnic heritage. There was a variety of political persuasions with 22% Democrat, 44% Republican and 27% Independent.

The 18-item Perception of NASCAR Scale held acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .75$). Removal of specific statements did not improve the alpha score. Correlation testing was performed to identify strength in relationships among scale statements. “When drivers and crews get into fights it heightens my NASCAR experience” and “Crashes are an important part of my NASCAR experience” produced a large effect size ($r = .62$) and significant correlation. “A car manufacturer’s performance in NASCAR affects my auto purchasing decisions” had a medium and significant effect size ($r = .45$) with “I am inclined to purchase products and services from sponsors that support NASCAR.” Also demonstrating a medium effect with significance ($r = .41$) was “I am pleased with the information drivers share during media interviews” and “NASCAR media provides the right amount of driver information and news.”

EFA with Varimax rotation was used to dimensionalize the themed statements. An initial test captured six clusters, however two clusters were close to cut off at Eigen values slightly greater than one. A second test, restricted to four factors, provided an acceptable solution. The four clusters were named to indicate latent themes among the factors and were identified as *Man and*

Machine, Commercialized, Violent History and Social Change.

The four-factor solution explained 47.20% of the variance, which is sufficient. The KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) measure for sampling adequacy tested at .78, well above the acceptable limit of .6. The Barlett’s test of sphericity held statistical significance. Alphas among the clusters ranged from low to acceptable: .75 for “Man and Machine” (5 items); .68 for “Commercialized” (6 items); .76 for “Violent History” (2 items). “Social Change” collected 2 items and presented an insightful alpha, at -.47. The factor loading indicating NASCAR was a “macho sport” was .66, while the theme indicating NASCAR needed more diversity loaded at a -.77. This indicates the diversity construct held a negative relationship within the model, hence the negative alpha. Themed items related to NASCAR commercialization, retro values from 30 years ago, and the association between telecasts and Internet, loaded as confounded and were not included in the structural model (Figure 1).

Discussion

NASCAR exists in an era of polarized politics, aggressive social tactics, and shifting consumer interests. Sport managers have the daunting task of developing complex endeavors with revised strategies using data analysis to increase fan engagement and brand conscience (Hickman, 2017). The factors presented in the Perception of NASCAR Scale demonstrate a fandom battling between macho foundations and increased diversity.

Most pertinent to social reflection on President Trump and the other polarizing events cited here, are the factors Violent History and Social Change. Violent History collects items pertaining to crashes and fights - both framed as positive actions. Stanovich (2010) suggests correlations are a useful gateway test, where relationships are determined and predictions can

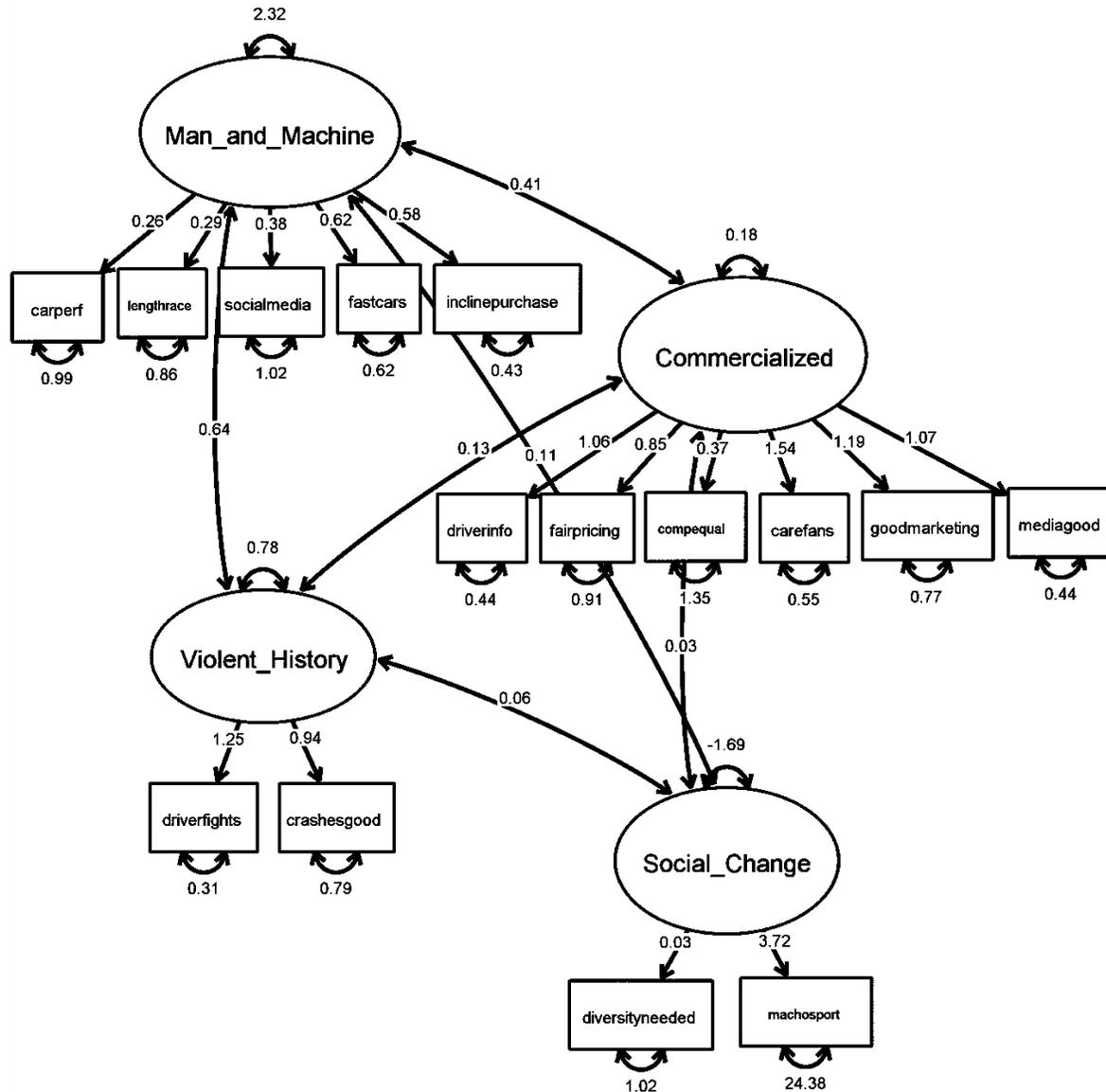


Figure 1. Structural model depicting 4-dimension Fan Perception of NASCAR.

be made. Crashes and fights demonstrate the strongest correlation within this research. There is controversy in NASCAR related to the missive “Boys, have at it” (Turner, 2015) regarding pit fighting among crews and drivers, and related retaliatory crashes. NASCAR has been known as a sport that resolves conflict with fisticuffs. Both fighting and crashes were a high appeal component of historical NASCAR. That element of racing remains appealing today. Based on the results of this study, skirmishes both on and off the track contribute to positive fandom.

When NASCAR officials considered a confederate flag ban, then exchange program, fan sentiment was abrupt and immediate. Rather than conform to change, many infield attendees hoisted confederate flags atop poles on motor homes (Hembree, 2017). This presents an attraction to fights, crashes and defiance, a behavior model that might incite future violence. The negative association with “Violent History” might be based in the deep southern moonshine runner mentality that built the sport. This is supported in the Alderman et al. (2003) research

but opposes the Spann (2002) research. Earlier research by Newman and Giardina (2008), and Amato, Peters and Shaw (2005) both supported a southeastern geographic overtone. A sport symbolized through fights and crashes supports the fan's perception of a prototypical driver. As in the Wann (1995) scale, Trail and James identify self-actualization and awareness indicators, which posits internal, rather than external motivators in the fan experience.

In opposition to violence is the model's *Social Change* factor. This progressive, yet controversial dimension included a pro diversity theme, but also collected those who adhere to the macho sport underpinnings of NASCAR. Diversity was the stronger of the two items, but it held a negative relationship with macho. That indicates as the call for diversity increases, the interest in macho identity will decrease. Conversely, if the macho sport aspects increase, the call for diversity will decrease. Wann's (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale holds similarity with the *Perception of NASCAR Scale* in this regard. Wann identified an aesthetic factor, emotional and built on sensation. This might relate to an openness to substantial change through an increase in diversity. Wann frames the human condition of self, while the Funk and James (2001) Psychological Continuum Model presents awareness as the primary motivator, which is necessary if social change will be possible.

Despite its southern heritage, it might not be advantageous to stereotype NASCAR fans as one prototypical group. NASCAR CEO France framed the sport's fans as supporting "traditional" American values, of the middle class, and factory workers. However, this study demonstrates differentiation in the audience, based on religion and politics. Respondents who identify as Christians in this study have a significantly different view of diversity, than do Jewish or non-religious fans. Those who identified as Republican held a dissimilar view of diversity in NASCAR, from those who are

Independent. Here too, the *Social Change* dimension of the model indicates that one must look to what divides us as a nation. If a track skirmish pitted a white Anglo driver against a Hispanic driver at the next NASCAR Cup Series event, would a non-religious Independent voter hold the same response as a Christian Republican? This is the reality of a fandom that not only holds an opinion on the diversity issue, but is also diverse within its own enthusiast base.

Commercialized correlates well with the Hierarchy of Effect Theory's supposition. Consumers must first be aware of the product. Brand perception is key among NASCAR fans, which is the identity of the sport. The desire to engage product features in the Hierarchy Theory relate to effective marketing and positive media perspective in the fan model. NASCAR fans want to associate with the sport's identity, which includes quality of racing and attraction of competitors. There is an old NASCAR adage stating, "Win on Sunday, Sell on Monday" (Jensen, 2014). That is supported in this study by a medium effect in the correlation between "A car manufacturer's performance in NASCAR affects my auto purchasing decisions" and "I am inclined to purchase products and services from sponsors that support NASCAR." Advertisers can reinforce the premise that having products and services associated with a winning program will increase sales.

However, sponsors are highly sensitive to public perception, when mere mention of President Trump or Confederate Flags evokes cognitive dissonance. For many a visceral response is immediate, either as validation or repulsion. What if an association with NASCAR becomes detrimental? Will NASCAR's profile through its current fandom model drive away much needed sponsors who promote products and services through the sport?

Consider 4-time NASCAR champion Jeff Gordon, who held a long and fruitful relationship with sponsor and supporter PepsiCo. Forbes

magazine reported the Pepsi brand is worth \$9.5 billion, down 6 percent from the prior year (“The World’s Most Valuable Brands,” 2017). When Donald Trump was elected, PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi publicly stated her employees were terrified, that “all of her employees were crying (Taylor, 2016).” What can be expected when the CEO of NASCAR promotes Donald Trump, stating Trump represents the values of NASCAR fans and attendees? Perception of politics, tied to perception of sport property, will surely impact future sponsorship negotiations.

The *Man and Machine* dimension of NASCAR validates the foundation of fandom identity. Fan engagement and interactive experiences are essential in connecting with the benefits available from event attendance and related media. The Trail and James (2001) Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption posits physical attractiveness of participants, the quality of the physical skill of the participants, and aesthetics are key indicators. Attraction may be defined not necessarily in an aesthetic sense, but rather in personality and physical performance.

The future of NASCAR may be bound by its associations, more so than to the racing entertainment product. Future measures of the NASCAR fan construct will be needed to explore complex issues in propensity for fighting, related on track accidents, gender equality, gender identity, a diverse driver roster as well as a diverse fan base.

Limitations

The sample for this study was collected through nonprobability convenience sampling, in a non-funded, learning-outcome-oriented university setting. Future research might be more representative of the general population using a random, stratified sample. ANOVA testing identified significant differences among politics and religion, related to a pro-diversity view in NASCAR.

Though a difference exists, this study does not identify the specifics of that difference. Further research is needed, possibly focus groups with Christian, Jewish, non-religious, Republican and Independent fan groups. The data collected for this study is ethnically challenged. It would be advised this study be replicated with a highly diverse sample of NASCAR fans, so the perception scale can be retested for reliability.

Future studies should continue to develop additional measures to test for social and political perception related to motorsport. It would be beneficial to measure fan engagement and loyalty, both before a political act occurs, then following that act’s association with NASCAR, drivers, teams and sponsors.

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