

Sports Fandom: Reflection of a Cultural Mosaic

An analysis of the Nets versus Knicks rivalry in New York City

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the origins of sports fandom and the various factors that impact it. It reports results from an experiment which measures support of two NBA teams based in New York City. Interviews of random samples were collected, totalling 234 entries, with key demographic features collected from each interviewee. The analysis reveals that there are differences in fandom with respect to certain demographic features, especially race, age, and location. It shows that Black people are more than 3.5 times as likely to support the Nets over the Knicks, and that young people are 2 times as likely to support the Nets. The further away from New York a person was born, the less likely they are to support the Nets. People living in Manhattan are less likely to support the Nets. Overall, the data highlights how personal choices can be influenced by factors you can't control, and the results expose a divide within the melting pot in the City of Dreams.

Introduction

The origins of sports fandom date back to Ancient Roman times. The Romans originally hosted sports events as a form of punishments for prisoners and deviants, at the same time providing entertainment for the spectators. This would involve a brutal fight between the two competitors. This later evolved into a chariot-racing contest. In this event, the true essence of fandom can be traced, as the participation was voluntary. Eventually, these participants became so popular that they started getting sponsored by wealthy Roman men, and thus the "owners" would get more popularity within Roman society.

At this basic stage in Roman sport, it can be argued that there are three basic factors to support a contestant. Usually first and foremost, is the success and legacy of the racer. If the racer had won several races in the past, he is more likely to gain a lot of fans. This is termed by psychologists as the "bandwagon effect". This effect is part of human nature, as we tend to support the person who is already successful. This effect is especially operative for gaining support for fans that are new to the sport. Humans tend to feel more rewarded if "their" team wins and thus, tend to support more historically successful teams.

Furthermore, fandom can depend on the background and legacy of the owner. The popularity of the owner affects the racer's following greatly. If the owner is involved in a scandal, which diminishes his or her popularity within the society, it will take its toll on the team, too.

The last one is the background of the racer. The physical and personal characteristics help fans "identify" with the racer. For example, if the racer was from Naples, it is highly likely that a significant proportion of his fan following was Neapolitan. This situation can currently be related to more recent times, with nationalization, and its effect on fandom.

Nationalization is a relatively new movement. Until the late 19th century, most of Europe was separated into empires, which had no unique identity of its own. Then, there was a strong nationalistic movement, which created

rivalry between countries. These rivalries would have monumental effects. One of World War I's key causes was the rivalry between France and Germany.

The historical rivalry and nationalist movements, dating back decades and centuries translates into sport fandom. People feel a sense of patriotism when supporting their national team, as when they are with fellow supporters, they feel a sense of unity and belonging. Additionally, they hope that their country's bitter rivals (with respect to historical events) do not win. On the contrary, in club level competitions, some people may support a specific team due to their whole family supporting that specific team.

Unfortunately, these factors are not all the ones applicable with the intricate system of sporting events nowadays. There are more people and organizations involved. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the most significant factor in current sports fandom to be considered is nationalization and rivalry, coming under this sense of "identity". There are many factors that make a person support a specific team and over the years, additional factors make this fandom more intricate. Certain situations complicate this already multifarious decision. When playing in a tournament, for a team to qualify, additional fixtures results may play an influential role. In some cases, the fans may need to support their bitter rivals in these fixtures for their national team to qualify. But, does the hatred for their rivals outweigh their support for their team? It is a decision that fans need to make.

But, at the end of the day, fandom is just support for a team or an individual and it is a personal choice made. There are no distinct boundaries as the rationality of the human mind is never perfect. The priorities of a person are showcased when supporting a team, such as loyalty and patriotism.

To explore these issues further, I designed an experiment to investigate the rivalry between two NBA teams based in New York (the Brooklyn Nets and the New York Knicks). The goal was to determine the level of support of each team in the city, and how various demographics impact the support.

The experiment consisted of brief interviews with 234 participants, randomly selected across New York City. Of the 234 participants, 79 were Nets fans (34%), the remainder were Knicks fans. Note that throughout the entire paper, all statistics are based on the percentage of Nets supporters.

After conducting this experiment, three key factors – race, age, and location – had a large impact on the support level. Black participants and young participants were more likely to support the Nets. The further away from New York a person was born, the less likely they were to support the Nets. People living in Manhattan were less likely to support the Nets. However, interestingly white people were more likely to support the Knicks if they did not live in Manhattan.

I consider various cultural, historical, and geographical factors that may explain these results. To sum up fandom as a whole and in this specific context, I would like to quote iconic journalist Richard Gilman, by saying, "Being a sports fan is a complex matter, in part irrational but not unworthy; a relief from the seriousness of the real world, with its unending pressures and often grave obligations."

Data Collection

The data collected for the experiment was done with primary research with the help of interviews. The samples taken were at random, across all five boroughs of New York City. The experiment was based on the interviewees choosing between the Knicks and Nets (two New York NBA teams), which became the baseline question of the interview. For the demographic data of each participant, some data was asked, along with some being inferred by the interviewer. Data such as an approximate age, race, and gender were noted by the interviewer and were entered in. Non-observable demographic data was directly asked by the interviewer, with data extracted with the help of a few short questions. These questions would be relating to the interviewee's place of birth, years they have lived in New York City, as well as the location of their residence. All people were approached in the experiment, with no exceptions. There were no forms of discrimination of any sort during the sampling for the collection of data.

It is important to note that there were a few inaccuracies in the experiment. First, one of the data types collected was based off physical appearance. This might lead to various technical issues. For example, the race of a

person may be hard to classify in some instances, leading to less reliable results. Preferably, data like the mentioned above must be accurately collected, not approximated. Another specific instance can be pinpointed as such. One of the participants’ predicted age was registered as less than 20, while the actual data from the participant revealed that she had lived in New York for 24 years. Such data was removed from the raw data set. Secondly, when analyzing the data from the experiment, it is necessary to be aware of the causation vs. correlation fallacy. Just because there is a correlation between two factors, it may not be a cause.

Analysis

Analysis – Univariate

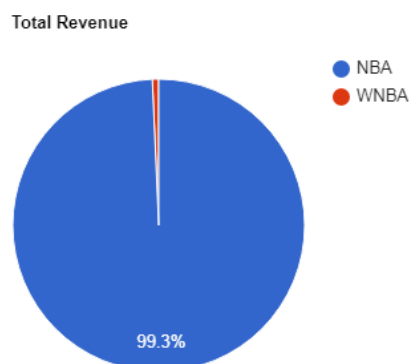
Table 1: Mean Nets Support Across Gender

	Mean (Observations)
Female	34% (83)
Male	34% (151)

Gender

Men and women had almost the same percentage of Nets supporters. It should be noted however that in this data, women comprised only 36% of entries, while New York’s population is 53% female. During data collection, women were approached at approximately the same rate as men. However, women were more likely to decline participation in the interview. Many cited lack of interest or awareness in the two teams as their reason for declining.

This lack of participation raises questions about why women might be less interested or less aware in the Nets, the Knicks or basketball in general. The NBA, the leading basketball league, is a men’s only tournament. They founded a women’s league in the 1990’s and called it the WNBA. But, the NBA dwarfs its female counterpart, grabbing most of the TV deals and sponsorships.



The graph shows that the NBA generates about \$7.4 billion dollars annually, while the WNBA generates only about \$52 million dollars. This suggests that basketball is still primarily a “men’s game,” and is consistent with the lower participation rates for women in this data sample.

Race

Table 2: Mean Nets Support Across Race

	Mean (Observations)
Asian	30% (40)
Black	62% (68)
Hispanic	28% (36)
White	17% (90)

In the experiment, race plays one of the larger roles. The average Nets support in the city is 34%. In this sample, Asians and Hispanics have Nets support relatively close to the average support, but the other races have drastically different support for the team.

Of the white community sampled, only 17% support the Brooklyn Nets, whereas 62% of the surveyed black community support the Nets.

Some of this difference may be related to historical context. The Knicks have been in New York for much longer than the Nets. The Knicks were an original member of the NBA, and have been in New York City since the founding of the NBA in 1946. Meanwhile, the Nets moved from New Jersey into New York in 2012.

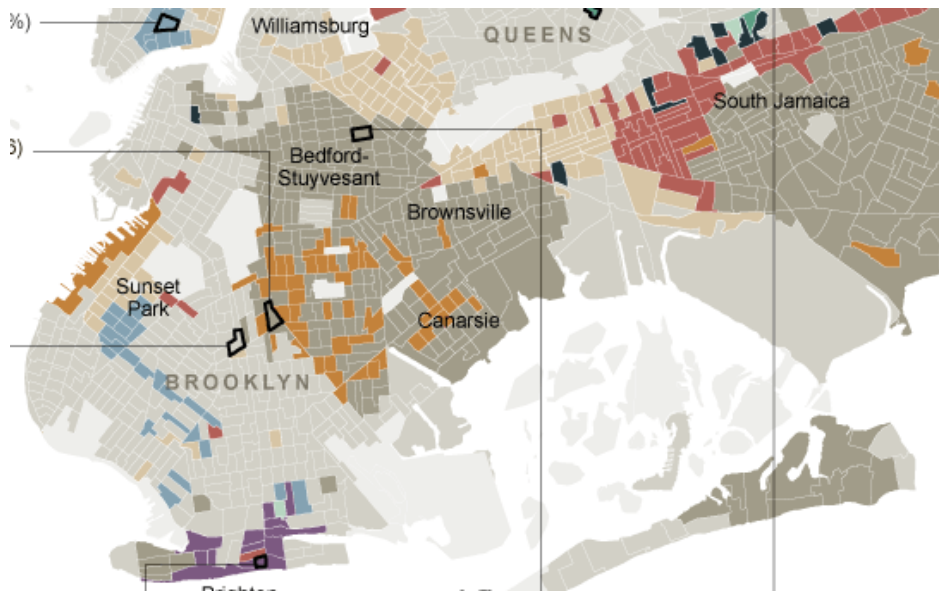
New York City’s population had a smaller proportion of African Americans when the Knicks were founded. Many African Americans moved into the Northern States of the US in the Black Migration of the 1960’s. This suggests that many current black New Yorkers have a shorter ancestral history in the city, compared to the average white New Yorker. This could mean that fewer black New Yorkers have a personal connection to the Knicks, and were more attracted to supporting a “new” team like the Nets.

The higher black support for the Nets may also be related to a late 20th century cultural movement called the “Harlem Renaissance.” During this movement, African Americans developed their own cultural identity, almost embracing the stereotypes that had previously defined them. This new identity was exhibited in several forms of media, especially movies and music. Movies like “Looking for Langston” showcased this unique cultural identity. Basketball was also major part of this cultural identity. The now fabled Rucker Park, nestled in the heart of Harlem, produced a new brand of basketball itself. This flashier, faster paced game was brought to the NBA by Rucker Park legends like Julius Erving (known as “Dr. J”). Music played a major role too, as hip-hop was a genre that came under this cultural rebirth. Hip hop artists like The Notorious B.I.G. and Jay Z revolutionized the music industry to make it what it is today.

The hip-hop movement was partially based on the struggle to escape poverty, often referred to as the “hustle.” Artists like Jay Z, worth around \$1 billion now, started off with no money at all. He is an idol in the black community, and his close association with the Nets helps to include the team as a part of this “renaissance” and black culture as a whole. This could also contribute to large support from the black community.

The team itself reinforces this image with its own promotional campaigns, which feature icons of the black community. As a campaign last year, they introduced a marketing line called “Start living the Brooklyn way,” paying homage to artist The Notorious B.I.G. who passed away 20 years ago.

Furthermore, Brooklyn, the home of the Nets, is a primarily African American community. The community would tend to support a team that is geographically closest to them. (Note: In this map of Brooklyn, primarily black communities are in dark grey)



These historical, cultural, and geographical factors could contribute to the spike in Nets support among black participants.

Location

Table 3: Mean Nets Support Across Location

	Mean (Observations)
Manhattan	29% (83)
Other	36% (151)

Location is an important factor to consider because the Knicks are based in Manhattan. The results show that people living in Manhattan were more likely to support the Knicks, which is not particularly surprising by itself. Similarly, the Nets are based in Brooklyn, so we might expect a similar finding. People living in Brooklyn would be considered as “Other” in this data, as there were too few samples to have their own category. However they are a little bit more likely to support the Nets.

Place of Birth

Table 4: Mean Nets Support Across Place of Birth

	Mean (Observations)
NYC	38% (85)
US	33% (88)
Other	30% (61)

There is a fairly visible trend that people who are born further away from New York are more likely to support the Knicks.

The Knicks are one of the iconic teams of the NBA, who have utilised their storied past to create awareness and better marketing of their team around the globe. This could be a possible explanation for why people born further away from New York are more likely to support the Knicks.

An example of this is when the Knicks are planning to use their large budget in the 2019 season to play the Wizards in London. Trips like these create brand awareness in other countries. People living in other countries, who would immigrate to New York, would tend to support the team they already know.

Age

Table 5: Mean Nets Support Across Age

	Mean
1 (Under 40)	41% (155)
2 (Over 40)	20% (79)

As discussed from before, a mass migration movement only swept in during the 1960's. This means that most of the older New Yorkers would support the Knicks. As a result, the Nets support in the oldest age category (60+) is the lowest.

The youngest age category (0-20) is very susceptible to riding with the bandwagon. From 2012-2018, the Nets won a mere 200 games, while the Knicks won a respectable 236 games. So, younger fans will be more likely to support the more popular team. Additionally, from a historical perspective, the Knicks have been more successful, winning two titles.

On the other hand, the young group tends to be more supportive of the Nets. There are two possible explanations for this. First, around 56% of these participants were black compared to 29% overall, which leads to higher Nets support, as shown in Table 2. Secondly, the young age group generation, which as mentioned above, was primarily black and was born during the Harlem Renaissance. This would possibly influence them more to support the Nets. This suggests that age should be considered together with race as well.

Years in New York

Table 6: Mean Nets Support Across Years in NYC

	Mean
1-7	27% (68)
7-17	38% (55)
17-29	50% (56)
29-79	22% (55)

New York is one of the largest cities in the world, a financial and cultural hub. Large and influential events and movements taking place there is commonplace. These events, which may or may not be related to sports strongly affect the sports fandom in the city.

Addressing the first group (moved to NYC in 2011-2018), there are a couple of possibly correlating events. First, during this time, many people immigrated to this city from Asian countries in search for jobs. In this case, as the NBA is an American league, there could be a lower awareness about the league in these Asian countries. However, more famous teams like the Lakers and the Knicks, which have celebrated histories, can create public awareness of their team. As more immigrants move into the city from these parts of the world, they tend to support teams they are already familiar with. As a result, this group tends to favor the Knicks. Also, people who have recently moved to the city would tend to support the Knicks as they had signed big-name players in recent years, such as Carmelo Anthony in 2011 followed by Jason Kidd and J.R. Smith in 2012.

On the contrary, the older native New Yorkers in New York for more than 29 years may have a different narrative. Most of this generation have seen how the Knicks made the NBA Finals in 1994 and 1999 and won the

NBA Finals in 1970 and 1973. Most of the people who are in this group are of European descent and the city had been their only home. As a result, they tended to support their hometown team.

Similar to the age factor, the middle generation of New Yorkers tended to support the Nets more, compared to other groups. This could also be due to the fact that major movements and events took place around them. Additionally, this generation witnessed only 5 playoff appearances in 18 years from the Knicks, with a 6 year playoff drought. On the contrary, this generation could have witnessed an Eastern Conference powerhouse in the New Jersey Nets, with the likes of Jason Kidd.

Analysis – Multivariate

Race-Location

Table 7: Fandom across Race and Location			
Mean (Observations)			
	Manhattan	Other	Grand Total
Asian	30% (20)	30% (20)	30% (40)
Black	40% (20)	71% (48)	62% (68)
Hispanic	20% (7)	28% (29)	28% (36)
White	22% (36)	13% (54)	17% (90)
Grand Total	29% (83)	36% (151)	34% (234)

From the data above, it is visible that the residence of a black person plays a major role when concerning fandom. If a black person lives in Manhattan, there is only a 40% chance of being a Nets fan, while if he/she lives outside the borough, the odds of being a Nets fan skyrocket by more than 177%, to 71%.

On the contrary, white people are 59% less likely to be a Knicks fan if they live in Manhattan compared to a white person living outside of Manhattan, even though it's the borough home to that team.

Race and Place of Birth

Table 8: Fandom across Race and Place of Birth				
Mean (Observations)				
	NYC	United States	Other	Grand Total
Asian	0% (8)	50% (6)	35% (26)	30% (40)
Black	67% (33)	62% (29)	33% (6)	62% (68)
Hispanic	33% (9)	22% (9)	28% (18)	28% (36)
White	20% (35)	14% (44)	18% (11)	18% (90)
Grand Total	29% (83)	33% (88)	30% (61)	34% (234)

When place of birth is aligned with respect to race, the data looks drastically different than on its own. In this particular data set, the preferences of the Asian community are the most unexpected. The Nets support from Asians born in New

York is 0% among 8 eligible entries. Additionally, US born Asians have a comparatively high support for the Nets at 50%.

As discussed earlier, the trend in the White participants is that they tend to have less support for the Nets, the further away they live from New York.

Race and Age

	Under 40	Over 40	Grand Total
Asian	36% (28)	17% (12)	30% (40)
Black	65% (54)	50% (14)	62% (68)
Hispanic	26% (27)	33% (9)	28% (36)
White	24% (46)	9% (44)	17% (90)
Grand Total	41% (155)	20% (79)	34% (234)

It was expected that older people would support the Nets less frequently. When combined with race, this pattern is even stronger than expected, with the exception of the Hispanic community. In the Asian community, older people are half as likely to support the Nets. In the Black community, support of older people dips 12 percentage points below the mean for all blacks. In contrast, there seems to be an increase in support with the older aged group in the Hispanic community. The decline of Nets support with age is most evident in the White community as a mere 9% of older white people support the Nets on a significant 44 occasions.

Race and Years in New York City

	1 to 7	7 to 17	17 to 29	29 to 79	Grand Total
Asian	42% (19)	25% (12)	13% (8)	0% (1)	30% (40)
Black	20% (10)	71% (14)	78% (27)	53% (17)	62% (68)
Hispanic	23% (13)	36% (11)	29% (7)	20% (5)	28% (36)
White	19% (36)	22% (18)	29% (14)	6% (32)	18% (90)
Grand Total	50% (68)	22% (55)	38% (56)	26% (55)	34% (234)

Within the Asian community, there tends to be more support for the Nets among people who are new to the city, at 42%, but as the years lived in New York increases, the Nets support decreases.

The middle groups (7 to 29 years in NYC) of African Americans have the most Nets support, peaking at 78%, but the youngest group is only at 20%, with a fair number of observations. Additionally, possibly due to the timing of the generations, there is less support for the Nets from the long-time African American New Yorkers.

Meanwhile, the oldest White New Yorkers have a measly 6% Nets support, with 32 observations. Again the middle groups (7 to 29 years in NYC) in this race tend to be more supportive of the Nets.

Age and Years in New York City

Table 11: Fandom across Age and Years in NYC					
Mean (Observations)					
	1 to 7	7 to 17	17 to 29	29 to 79	Grand Total
Asian	56% (45)	45% (11)	37% (46)	30% (53)	41% (155)
Black	27% (11)	16% (44)%	44% (9)	13% (15)	20% (79)
Grand Total	50% (68)	22% (55)	38% (56)	26% (55)	34% (234)

For the younger ages, there is a direct trend, showing that more years in the city translate into less support for the Knicks. On the other hand, for the older group, there are more inconsistent results. One group spikes up to 44% while most of the other groups have lower levels of support. It is also important to keep in mind that the 44% group had only 9 entries.

Conclusion

The data shows how demographics greatly affect fandom. Most of the tested demographics showed differences in fandom by themselves and when combined with other variables, but race, age, and location played the biggest role.

Examining race by itself shows the lack of support for the Nets from the White community, while the African American community has a Nets majority. When combined with other demographic variables, the effects on fandom are even larger. For example, black people who have lived in New York between 17 and 29 years support the Nets at a level of 78% (Table 10).

There is also a trend that younger people tend to support the Nets more than older people. This trend remains when coupled with race, in all but the Hispanic group.

Looking at location reveals that people born further away from New York are less likely to support the Nets. And people currently living in Manhattan are less likely to support the Nets. But surprisingly, white people are actually more likely to support the Knicks if they don't live in Manhattan.

Overall, there can be many applications with these data. These data show some of the effects that the Harlem Renaissance has had on future generations. It also reveals personal characteristics of New Yorkers themselves, shown through their loyalty to their team.

Many of the arguments referred to earlier in this paper have provided explanations for the data, especially the concept of "identity", which is most prominent in the race demographic. This sense of "identity" is important for all fans, as they feel more connected with the individual or team they support if they share similar characteristics. This idea plays a large role in national sporting events, where by supporting a country the supporter feels a sense of patriotism.

History also plays a role, as key events in the second half of the 20th century could have possibly led to these results, especially for fandom across race. The data clearly shows the divide between people living in a so-called melting pot of New York. Several factors that people cannot control (age, race, gender, place of birth) influence them in their personal decisions. These factors are the basis of "identifying" with an individual or team that they support. In conclusion, there is no melting pot if there are no different roots. The effect of a person's origins, as shown, can greatly affect their personal decisions. This is true not only in sports, but in all walks of life. Jimmy Carter, former US president, once commented on this topic, saying "We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different

people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, and different dreams.” Carter’s mosaic is made of different tiles. But instead of melting together to all look the same, they keep their differences. These intricate differences combine to create a unified and beautiful picture, visible only from the wider perspective.

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