PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY OF SPORTS ARTICLES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SPORTS SOURCES AND MEDIA: THE ROLE OF SPORT FAN IDENTIFICATION

By

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To my family and friends for the constant support throughout my life
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PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY OF SPORTS ARTICLES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SPORTS SOURCES AND MEDIA: THE ROLE OF SPORT FAN IDENTIFICATION

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The 24-hour nature of the Internet has altered the news landscape, and the pressure to break stories first has raised questions about the veracity of reported information. The present study examined whether sports journalism has experienced a diminished level of credibility, looking specifically at how article source, medium, fan identification, and user comment tone can all impact the credibility of the sports article or one’s attitude towards a news or sports source.

An online experiment was distributed to participants (N = 376), who were randomly assigned a sports article in one of twelve stimuli groups. The article source was indicated to have appeared on a mainstream sports website (ESPN.com), a sports blog (alligatorarmy.com), a social networking site (Facebook©), or a wire service (Associated Press). Participants also received the stimuli with either positive user comments, negative user comments, or without comments as well as a pre- and post-test questionnaire.

Analysis revealed that fan identification level was an important factor in credibility ratings. There was minimal difference in credibility scores between the wire service and
online medium and both were only seen as slightly credible. For the two identification groups, highly identified fans found the article to be significantly more credible than fans with low identification as a whole and in 11 out of 12 stimuli groups. Highly identified fans also rated all three websites significantly higher than low identification fans. The disparity in ratings was evident as highly identified fans rated all the online sources favorably, and low identification fans rated all the websites slightly negatively, except for Facebook©. Both identification groups rated the blogs as the least favorable online source, and Facebook© was the only website that received a positive score from each group.

Additionally, scores on the user identification scale were significantly higher for the positive comments than for the negative comments for both highly identified fans and fans with low identification. User comments did not, however, affect credibility ratings or evaluation scores of the sports sources. The implications of fan identification level on the discrepancies in ratings of perceived credibility and attitudes toward a sports source were explored.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Few sports rivalries compare to a University of Florida and Florida State University football game. Every year, coaches and players spend all season preparing for this rivalry game that they desperately want to win. For the players, it means glory on the gridiron and a chance to embarrass their most hated rival. For die-hard fans, this rivalry may mean even more. Crowds pack the campus parking lots hours before the game to tailgate with friends and show support for their team. UF and FSU symbols can be seen on cars and clothing throughout campus. The attitude between opposing fans can get contentious and even belligerent at times. This is all before the game even starts. From the opening kickoff to the final whistle, the crowd is raucous and loud as fans from both teams are screaming and performing cheers. When the game is over, the fans from the winning team go home ecstatic with great memories and a year of bragging rights. For a sports fan, this is completely ordinary, and there are millions of fans around the world who feel this same passion for sport.

Sport has become a staple of our society as millions of fans are influenced by sport every day, and more individuals are becoming interested and active in sports (Wann et al., 2001). Sports have even come to carry cultural meanings that reflect the cultural ideologies of our wider society (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). The inherent competition within sport can also represent the ultimate struggle of good and evil, where “winning is a sign of goodness, rightness, and divine approval” (p. 110). Additionally, sport and exercise can be common elements of civic engagement, and, ultimately, work to revive civil society (Harris, 1998). The impetus is on the fan, however, to get the most out of the sporting experience through live events and mass media channels.
Sport fandom is often associated with one’s affinity for specific sports teams. For many fans, the connection to a sports team goes beyond the games themselves and carries over into a person’s daily life. Some fans are so engulfed by their team’s successes and failures that it becomes a part of their social identity (Hu & Tang, 2010). According to Tajfel’s (1981) social identity theory, maintaining memberships in important social networks will result in an enhancement of a person’s social identity, which results in a more positive self-concept (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). These memberships make up one’s social identity and are used in social comparisons to develop and maintain one’s self-esteem. The individuals within the group typically develop a system of role relationships, social norms, and values, which regulate their opinions and actions (Turner, 1982).

Fan identification, or the personal commitment or emotional involvement a person has with a sports organization, has been shown to predict fan consumption behavior through attending live sporting events and sport media usage (Milne & McDonald, 1999). Highly identified fans are more likely to watch games in person or through media (Laverie & Arnett, 2000), spend more on team merchandise, pay more for tickets, and stay loyal to a poorly performing team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Additionally, fan identification can positively affect self-esteem and eustress (positive levels of stress) (Hu & Tang, 2010). According to Wann (2006), when someone resides in the environment where the team is found (e.g. a fan of a college football team who lives on campus at the university), that person may gain enduring social connections. However, fans following a more distant team do not have the opportunity to make these enduring connections.
The connections established through sporting events and interpersonal fan relationships are seemingly amplified through sport media. Wann and Branscombe (1992) found that the emotional responses to a sports article were different based on degree of identification with the sports team. Highly identified fans experienced the most positive mood state from a sports article that described a victory for the ingroup, whose author was an admitted loyal fan of the same team. The most negative mood state was evoked when the team lost the competition and the article author was a disloyal fan of the participant's favorite team. Additionally, individuals with low fan identification were not significantly influenced by the game outcome, group membership of the author, or the author's commitment to the team.

When represented through the mass media, the most prevalent elements of sports are action, records, elite performances, aggressions, heroic actions, drama, emotions, and sports stars (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001). Newspaper discourses have also been found to create a sense of "generalized fandom" and "normalized fanaticism" toward major sporting events (Lee, 2005, p. 194). Lee (2005) describes a European soccer match that was transformed by the media from an insignificant preseason match into a hugely successful spectacle to fans. According to the author, the media can both create an artificial atmosphere of hysteria for its audience and create a space for constructive discourse in society. The media articulated the grand meaning of the event by placing it in both local and global contexts. Because of the media, sports fans now have a special relationship with the sport spectacle.

Sport fandom has also become an important aspect of social relations, and social scientists have shown interest in understanding fan involvement online (Wann et al.,
Online media coverage provides fans with sports experiences that did not exist in the 20th Century. New media has expanded the scope of sport coverage exponentially as the Internet has become a primary source of information for sport consumers (Delpy & Bosetti, 1998). Because of smart phones and iPads, the Internet has become an all-day, everyday experience for many people as online and offline lives have become interchangeable. Media usage patterns are shifting as more people begin to follow sports online. In a study done before the 2010 Winter Olympics, 18% of sport consumers planned on following the Games online, while 30% planned on following the Games in a printed source, such as a newspaper (O’Malley, 2010). Despite a majority still using print media, this growing online trend prompted Olympic sponsors, such as Visa and Coke, to put as much as 40% of their Olympic marketing budget into digital online media (O’Malley, 2010).

Because of advancements in technology, modern sport may now reflect the general values and understandings of nationalism for cultures around the world (Lee, 2009). Examining the online discussion of a prominent 2004 Chinese vs. Japan soccer match, Lee (2009) found that online discussants on message boards “constructed a vision of civilized sporting nationalism to critique the behavior of the ‘nationalistic’ Chinese fans” (p. 192). However, this vision was contested by other discussants with opposing viewpoints. Essentially, the online realm of sport provides those with an opinion that goes beyond the games an outlet to express their views, and others a right to refute those views.

The global popularity of sport is increasing rapidly as evidenced by the growth of online newspapers and sports-dedicated websites, which is now a multi-billion dollar
industry (Raney & Bryant, 2006). A recent survey found that more Americans now get 
their news from the Internet (61%) than from newspapers or radio, and over half (52%) 
said they search for and spend time reading sports news online (Gross, 2010). The 
gains in online readership over the years may suggest high credibility for news and 
sports websites, but these websites often lack sufficient factual verification, editorial 
review, and analysis of content (Chung, Kim & Kim, 2010). Online credibility has been 
questioned by some scholars (Newhagen & Levy, 1996), and there is a dearth of 
research on the impact of fan identification on online credibility.

**Sports Media and Credibility**

For this study, the primary focus will be on the components of online credibility for 
sports news websites, sports blogs, and social media, and the inherent differences from 
traditional sports media. In the Information Age, perceptions of media credibility have 
taken a hit in the eyes of citizens as people are now generally skeptical of news from 
the three major media channels: television, print, and online (Kiouxis, 2001). Others 
have found that blogs are perceived as more credible than traditional media by Internet 
users because users often seek out blogs that support their views (Johnson & Kaye, 
2004). Assumingly, fans of sports teams seek out blogs focused specifically on their 
favorite teams, but not all of these blog authors are trained journalists. By looking at the 
role of fan identification and source medium on credibility, sport media executives can 
better allocate their resources and sports journalists can better craft their articles to 
appeal to the most sports fans. Although the subject is sports journalism, the amount of 
scholarly research on this subject is extremely limited. However, the overall principles 
of online and traditional media credibility are applicable to sports (Oates & Pauly, 2007). 
Oates and Pauly (2007) assert that "sportswriting fundamentally resembles other forms
of reporting and that journalism should not use sports as an ethical straw man against which to defend the virtue of its serious work” (p. 332).

Much of the academic research on online credibility has focused largely on political news, with online sports journalism receiving seemingly no investigation from academia. Because the literature on sports media (both print and online) is severely lacking, there is a need for a study on this previously unexplored research area. In turn, this study will focus more on the broader concepts of online credibility, while examining the credibility relationship that remains with print media. Since the turn of the century, the Internet has been blamed by some for the decline in media credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2000). Because both print and online are being examined, it is useful to explore literature that compares the two.

Kiousis (2001) looked at the perceptions of news credibility for three media channels: television, newspapers, and online. The results suggest that people are generally skeptical of news from all three channels. However, newspapers were rated as having the highest credibility, followed by online news, and, finally, television news. The author suggests that the dissemination of new technologies often shifts opinions of older media. In essence, access to the Internet may have increased the public trust in newspapers, while simultaneously reducing the trust in television.

A reliance on online and traditional media has also been shown to be a strong predictor of perceived credibility of online sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2000). Those who use media most frequently typically find it to be more credible than others who use it less often. In a study of politically-interested web users, Johnson and Kaye (1998) examined the credibility of online publications and traditional print media. The study
found that the web users viewed online newspapers and online candidate literature as more credible than their traditionally-delivered counterparts. However, both traditional and online media were only judged as somewhat credible. Conversely, political opinion polls have been found to be more credible for traditional news media than online polls (Kim, Weaver & Willnat, 2000).

Recent technological advancements have made the job of the journalist much easier, but have also changed how people get news and what they expect from it (Meyer, Marchionni & Thorson, 2010). Meyer, Marchionni, and Thorson (2010) assert that an online author’s perceived expertise is the strongest predictor of article and organizational credibility. The authors argue that in the modern digital age, perceived expertise is predominantly determined by the level of shared meaning between sender (journalist, blogger, etc.) and receiver (audience). Gunter et al. (2009) examined the rise of blogs as news sources of significance. The authors discovered that although some blogs have become reliable information sources in specific news areas, most do not have the key credibility characteristics of mainstream news and do not drive the public trust.

Online newspapers are no longer a simple web-based version of a newspaper. They now implement additional content and provide users up-to-the-minute updates of the day’s events. The Internet has also given rise to the online-only news site, which can offer users another perspective on national and global news. Chung, Kim, and Kim (2010) examined the credibility of online newspapers and divided it into three distinct categories: mainstream, independent, and index. The mainstream category is the most common online news form and is basically a redistribution of printed newspapers. The
independent category is news that is developed specifically for a media outlet’s online site only. The index category is characterized as online search engines that provide a collection of online news content. The results of the study indicate that the mainstream type of online newspapers, such as USA Today, received the highest scores on most credibility items.

Like some readers of online-only news sites, web users seek out blogs that are tailored to their specific interests. However, many blog authors are not trained journalists, and do not feel compelled to be objective with their arguments. Traditional journalists often cite the 2004 presidential election as an example of flawed reporting where some political blogs released incomplete exit polls, which erroneously predicted a victory for Democratic candidate John Kerry (Carlson, 2007). The author argues that journalists have a role as authoritative providers of political news, but that the current media environment has new forms of complexity and competitiveness. Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that blog users judged blogs as highly credible and more credible than traditional media sources. Blog users “say they rely on blogs because they provide more depth and more thoughtful analysis than is available in other media” (p. 633).

Fairness to all political parties is often considered a hallmark of traditional journalism, but the authors suggest that bias is seen as a virtue by blog users. For example, the majority of respondents rated themselves as conservative, so they actively seek out blogs that support their views. This is similar to sports fans who seek out blogs that are dedicated to their favorite team but may not be objective or critical of that team.

**Theoretical Framework**

Social identity theory is inherently based in comparisons, so this theory can be applied to sports fans who often compare themselves to the outgroup (fans of rival
teams). According to Wann, Dimmock, and Grove (2003), one “societal connection that may have important benefits for psychological health involves the strong ties fans often feel for their chosen sport teams (i.e., those fans who are highly identified with their team)” (p. 289). Team identification facilitates a fan’s well-being by increasing temporary and enduring social connections for the fan (Wann, 2006). Conversely, this beneficial relationship for fans is moderated by threats to social identity, such as a team’s poor performance and efforts to cope with threats.

The highs and lows experienced by wins and losses for fans may even extend past the sports environment itself. Van Leeuwen, Quick, and Daniel (2002) assert that fans feel a sense of attachment to a university represented by the school’s team. Essentially, students at a university, such as the sample population of this study, may feel closer to their university through sport than everyday college life. The social identity that accompanies identified sports fans goes beyond on-field success and is profoundly affected by interpersonal relationships. College students list their parents, the talent of the players, geographical reasons (i.e. rooting for the home team), and the influence of one’s friends and peers all ahead of team success as reasons they originally started following their favorite team (Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). At certain institutions, university athletic programs also provide a sense of communal involvement within the institution, the local community, and, in some cases, an entire state (Melnick, 1993). Some scholars have found a positive relationship between identification for a university’s men’s basketball and football teams and a student’s satisfaction and enjoyment with the university, the extent to which the university met expectations,
involvement with the university, and persistence at the university (Wann & Robinson, 2002).

This study also examines the impact of user comments on perceived credibility in sports articles. The social identification/deindividuation (SIDE) model of computer-mediated communication effects is useful for understanding the influence of visually anonymous peers (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995). From this model, the readers’ level of identification with the people posting comments is expected to affect whether the comments influence evaluations of credibility. Unlike Facebook© wall posts, the SIDE model puts primary emphasis on visual anonymity, which is essential for predicting and understanding behavior in new media (Lea, Spears, Watt & Rogers, 2000). Applying the SIDE model to their study, Walther et al. (2010) examined the influence of user comments on perceptions of YouTube anti-marijuana public service announcements (PSAs). The results showed that supportive or negative comments affected the participant’s evaluations of the PSAs, but did not affect attitudes toward marijuana. However, the combination of user comments along with the social identification of the participants to the users affected both PSA evaluations and attitudes towards marijuana positively or negatively, depending on the tone of the comments. This is useful for examining the role of user comments in sports articles where most of the users are completely anonymous. One component of this study examined how identified sports fans react to the tone of the user comments. Highly identified sports fan are, perhaps, more likely to find the author and article more credible if the user comments are positive about their team than if the comments are negative. Also,
participants with low fan identification may not differentiate in perceived credibility because of user comments.

Ultimately, many factors play into the level of credibility attributed to online sports articles. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the medium and sports news source on the credibility of sports articles for sports fans with both high and low identification. Looking specifically at differences in online media (sports websites, Facebook©, Twitter©, etc.) and comparing it with a more traditional form of media (wire service), this study tested the effects of sports fan identification on the perceived credibility of a sports article. Using fan identification and social identity theory as the primary theoretical frameworks, the study also analyzed how attitudes towards a website and a sports article are affected by positive and negative user comments. Building off of Chung, Kim, and Kim’s (2010) study on online credibility, this study examined the influence of the website itself on credibility by comparing a mainstream sports news source (ESPN.com), an independent sports news source (a sports blog), and an index sports news source (a Facebook© note) in the experiment.

Currently, there is no consensus on the elements that build online credibility, so this study aimed to provide media professionals a blueprint of what works for each different medium. Several facets of online journalism will be addressed, including new insights on social networking websites. The relevance of this study is also amplified by the sheer lack of research on sports journalism. However, the scope of this study is not limited to sports as all features of perceived credibility can be dictated by some social identity, such as political partisanship. Ultimately, the present study is meant to bring clarity and insight to the evolving discourse on online credibility.
The following chapters will illustrate the different aspects of the study that led to the findings and final conclusions. Chapter 2 will discuss the relevant literature that has been published about the elements that are being examined in this study: credibility, social identity theory, fan identification, and the SIDE model. For credibility, the literature will include studies that have examined medium, source, and online credibility, and the criteria that have been used to measure credibility empirically. The literature on social identity theory will include research on group differentiation, ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias, and social identity’s effect on media and sports. Studies on fan identification will examine identification with a specific team and how this can influence sport consumerism, information-seeking behavior, and connection to a university or community. The final section will discuss the literature published on the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model) and the potential social influence of anonymous online users.

Chapter 3 will explain how the research questions and hypotheses were formulated and developed, and why they are relevant to the study. Chapter 4 will look at the methods used for this study, focusing on the sampling method, the experimental instrument, and the experimental procedures. Chapter 5 will discuss the results of the experiment, and provide all the relevant data and analysis that was conducted to examine the research questions and hypotheses. Finally, chapter 6 will discuss the overall findings of this study, and interpret why the results either did or did not reflect the previous literature. This chapter will also delve into the implications for future research, the limitations of this study, and the final conclusions that can be drawn from the study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Credibility

With widespread access to sports information online and a platform in which seemingly everyone with a computer has a voice, media credibility has recently come into question (Gunter et al., 2009). Traditional news sources and their online counterparts are subject to professional and ethical pressures to provide unbiased, accurate information, but these same pressures are not expected for many Internet websites (Calabrese & Borchert, 1996). Unregulated Internet media sites, such as blogs, also operate in a 24-hour window, so these sites are more likely to report on rumors that traditional media would take the time to investigate (Gunter et al., 2009; Bucy, 2003). The current media environment still operates in three distinct channels (print, broadcast, and online), but the credibility of every channel has been questioned by media users (Kiousis, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2010). In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2010), it was found that the public continues to take a skeptical view of reporting with “significant erosion in the believability ratings of several news organizations.”

Although this study is focused on the impact of online credibility for sports articles, addressing all aspects of media credibility offers a more accurate perspective on the public’s perception of media trustworthiness. Additionally, sports journalism resembles other forms of reporting, and the principles of media credibility are applicable to sports media (Oates & Pauly, 2007). Credibility in the media is often described as having two broad components: medium credibility (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Kiousis, 2001; Sundar & Nass, 2001) and source credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Markham, 1968;
Whitehead, 1968). Medium credibility focuses on the differences in perceived credibility based on the format in which the information is presented, such as print, television, radio, or Internet (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Sundar & Nass, 2001). Westley and Severn (1964) conducted one of the first comprehensive studies on medium credibility and noted that demographics, such as age, gender, and education, are variables that can dictate one’s perceived credibility with television news being deemed more accurate than print news at the time. The authors also found that people did not always feel that the medium they preferred most was the most credible. In a contemporary study on medium credibility, Kiousis (2001) found that people considered newspapers to be the most credible medium, followed by online news, and finally television news.

Source credibility, on the other hand, involves the impact of different communicator characteristics and how the characteristics influence the processing of media messages (Addington, 1971; Markham, 1968). In these studies, the communicator is typically defined as a person, group, or organization. Earlier scholars determined that the two key components to source credibility are source expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), although later scholars argued that this description of source credibility was too simplistic (Markham, 1968). Competency and objectivity were also added as factors that contribute to source credibility (Whitehead, 1968). Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1970) argued that source credibility was multidimensional with three dimensions: safety, qualifications, and dynamism. Although there has been debate over the years as to how to define it, Bucy (2003) classified the dimensions of credibility as believability, fairness, accuracy, informativeness, and depth.
Some argue that the legitimacy of news is a matter of branding, where particular news brands have credibility among news professionals and news consumers (Gunter et al., 2009). News branding is developed through high standards of credibility. Among the most important aspects of credibility are factuality and impartiality (Westerhahl, 1983). Factuality is determined by its truthfulness and its relevance, while impartiality is defined by balance in coverage and neutrality. The key defining aspects of truthfulness were defined by McQuail (1992) as accuracy, factualness, and completeness. He states that news reports should be devoid of opinion and should correspond with verifiable versions of reality. McQuail (1992) also asserts that stories should have enough detail for news consumers to have an accurate impression of the issue covered or the event that occurred. Relevance is defined by the idea that news only has value to consumers if it deals with matters that currently concern to them (Gunter et al., 2009). Impartiality can occur on several different levels. It can be conceived as bias in the selection of news stories with more coverage being given to certain topics (Gunter, 1997). Impartiality can also occur within the stories themselves with more attention being given to specific sources or to specific viewpoints than to others.

While news media is an important aspect of American life, only about half of the adult population is properly exposed to it. Using a national sample of nearly 25,000 respondents, Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster (2010) found that about half of the American adult population is classified as news avoiders and the other half as news-seekers, who read newspapers, news magazines, and the Internet, as well as watch news on cable and network television. According to the authors, news-seekers make up about 50.5% of the population and tend to be older, have greater income, and are
twice as likely to have a college degree. In a related study, Chan and Leung (2005) examined the predictive power of a person’s lifestyle on traditional mass media use and potential online news adoption. The authors discovered that *experiencers* (people who savor new experiences) read more online international news. In contrast, *survivors* (people who live narrowly focused lives) seldom read news online. Chan and Leung (2005) also discovered that interactivity is important for satisfying the enjoyment needs and desires for self-expression of certain online users.

**Perceptions of Online Credibility**

Online journalism is subject to the same credibility standards of other journalistic media, but the round-the-clock nature of the Internet has changed the way news is reported (Arant & Anderson, 2001). The emergence of the Internet as a news source in the mid-1990s altered the news landscape and introduced a different news reception platform that was still connected in certain ways to traditional news media (Gunter et al., 2009). Early comparisons of offline and online news found few differences between the two (Peng et al., 1999). However, online news outlets became more sophisticated in their presentation of news when the capabilities of the online format became more advanced (Gunter et al. 2009). The professionalism of online news was questioned in regards to fact checking and accuracy, and new forms of storytelling challenged the established norms of journalism (Deuze, 2003). The credibility judgments of online news were originally linked to both specific news organizations and their reputation (Gunter et al., 2009) and to the perception from news consumers of the Internet as a medium (Choi et al., 2006). Suggesting that online news is more about public perceptions than anything else, Choi et al. (2006) said that “news credibility is both a subjective perception by audiences and a function of their cognitive processing
mechanisms, rather than simply an innate quality of news stories or sources themselves” (p. 223). Essentially, the quality of online news stories may remain at a high standard, but the perceptions of credibility have changed with newer forms of sourcing and storytelling available to online journalists.

Online news has become a staple of American culture, but the vast amount of misleading information on the Internet has called online credibility into question in the past (Newhagen & Levy, 1998). Although the print medium was shown to be most credible medium in an earlier cross-medium study (Kiousis, 2001), print news media has recently experienced a fall in public trust (Gunter et al, 2009). A Pew study found a significant drop in the percentage of people who said they believed what they read in newspapers from 84 percent in 1985 to 59 percent in 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2006). However, some scholars have discounted the value of credibility as it relates to media consumerism. Blake and Watt (2002) found that there was no link between media credibility and either support for free expression or purchasing newspapers. They claim that “if credibility matters, it probably matters more for its own intrinsic value than for its impact on such bottom-line behaviors as buying newspapers or supporting First Amendment rights” (p. 76).

According to a recent poll, Americans now spend as much time on the Internet as they do watching television (Brustein, 2010). The poll indicated that people under 30 years old have spent more time with the Internet than television for years, but now even people over 66 are spending about eight hours a week on the Internet. The prevalence of blogs and social networking websites, such as Facebook© and LinkedIn, in today’s
media environment has changed the way credibility is perceived by the modern, tech-savvy individual (Gunter et al., 2009).

The perception of bias or a lack of accuracy in online news arose from observations that standards of fact checking are less stringent than they are in mainstream news distributed by news broadcasters and newspapers (Bucy, 2003). There have been differing accounts from some in the online media industry about the fact-checking process. While the Internet circulates an abundance of information on a minute-by-minute basis, there may be pressures or temptations to take short-cuts in fact checking (Allan, 2006). Arant and Anderson (2001) found that this perception was reinforced by some online news editors who claim that less time is spent verifying facts for online posts as compared to news intended for publication in a traditional news medium. However, in the context of blogs, some argue that bloggers check each other’s facts and do so with such veracity that inaccuracies are quickly cycled out (Allan, 2006). Additionally, online journalists claim to place greater trust in web-based news than more traditional sources for perceptions of source accuracy, believability, fairness, and overall credibility (Cassidy, 2007). Those who work in print journalism typically regard print newspapers as the more credible news source, but do not dismiss online news sources as completely lacking credibility (Cassidy, 2007).

Factors that Influence Online Credibility

Among online news websites, the reputation of the media source and linking to several other sources can profoundly affect credibility. Chung, Kim, and Kim (2010) examined the credibility of online newspapers and divided it into three distinct categories: mainstream, independent, and index. The results of the study indicate that the mainstream type of online newspapers, such as USA Today, received the highest
scores on most credibility items, but that the index type was the highest in attractiveness, creativeness, and interesting items. The authors assert that a website like Google News presents users with many choices of content, which empowers users. The Drudge Report, an online-only news site, had the lowest reported scores of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, perhaps because it was originally created as “a gossip sheet for political happenings” (p. 680). For citizen journalism websites, Johnson and Wiedenbeck (2009) found that information about the author and hyperlinks to other information enhanced perceived story credibility. The results showed that credibility was enhanced most when both a hyperlink and writer information were included and, to a lesser extent, when one of the two was present.

Perceived credibility can also be dictated by an individual's political affiliation. Choi et al. (2006) investigated the perception of medium credibility of news coverage about the Iraq War. The authors conducted an online survey of respondents who either listed themselves as war supporters, opponents, and neutrals. The results showed that war opponents viewed the Internet as the most credible medium because they perceived the Internet as less aligned with a pro-government stance. The opponent group viewed the Internet as more credible than did neutrals or supporters, and also showed a strong negative correlation between perceived pro-government alignment and perceptions of online credibility (Choi et al., 2006). Also, the opponent group cited diversity of information and views on the war as the main reasons for perceptions of high Internet credibility.

As a news source, the reputation of the Internet is continually evolving. Gunter et al. (2009) asserts that the credibility of news, whether it be online or offline, is mediated
by two factors: the reputation of the established news supplier’s brand and the relative partisanship or neutrality of news consumers on specific issues. The authors view the Internet as more than simply a news “medium,” but instead as a source of news content provided by a number of suppliers. They argue that in terms of credibility, the focus should be on specific news suppliers, in which Internet users typically trust online news produced by established news providers more than news produced by independent online sources. Additionally, established news brands offline that migrate online generally command more trust from consumers than newer online only brands (Gunter, 2006). Interestingly, Rainie et al. (2003) found that a major news brand’s online news source was perceived as more trustworthy than its traditional news source.

**Blog Credibility**

Blogs have become an online media source in which authors and readers can share information and opinions in an “accessible self-published forum” (Bolt et al., 2007, p. 6). The popularity of blogs continues to rise on the Internet, and many issues published in blogs are recognized as part of the public discourse (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). However, many blogs are maintained by untrained laymen who do not operate with strict ethical standards for journalism. Because blogs can be much more informal than traditional news websites, blogs can offer readers news as well as a personal interpretation of the news (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Additionally, blogs present readers with a participatory discourse and interaction that distinguishes it from traditional media (Shannon, 2006).

Today, major news organizations typically operate across more than one media platform. Print newspapers and broadcast news stations generally have a complimentary online website with additional information. There is also evidence that
suggests that the reputation of established news brands carries over from the offline world and into the online world (Gunter, 2006). This principle may also apply to blogs, given their highly opinionated nature and the ability for anyone to create a blog and publish their thoughts on a subject (Gunter et al., 2009). As blogs become more prominent and influential in our society (particularly blogs affiliated with a news organization), the imperative to know whether they can be trusted is increased (Gunter et al., 2009).

Looking specifically at news blogs, Robinson (2006) identified seven different forms of media blogs that report the news: 1) a reporter’s notebook of news tidbits, 2) a readership forum, 3) a question-and-answer format, 4) a column or opinion for the web, 5) a rumor-mill blog, 6) a round-up of news summaries that promote the publication, and 7) a confessional diary written by a reporter about a beat. Robinson (2006) suggests that even with the variety of content offered by blogs, rarely do blogs offer news in a traditional sense. This has brought forth the emergence of a post-modern form of journalism, which can be both nonlinear and interactive. Modern news blogging, thus, breaks the boundaries of conventional reporting through elements such as speculation and first-person narration (Robinson, 2006). Robinson’s study also found that mainstream journalism blogs have now become a way of adopting the potential of blogs within traditional journalism.

Demographic variables, such as frequency of Internet use and author gender, can also impact perceived credibility of blogs. One study of regular web users in the United States found that frequent Internet users perceive blogs to be the most reliable information outlet across all media because they offer more depth and thoughtful
analysis than traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Armstrong and McAdams (2009) examined the influence of gender on perceptions of credibility for informational blogs. They found that male authors were deemed more credible than female authors, and that the writing style and blog topic were likely to influence the perceived credibility of the post. Also, because the blogs were informational blogs, information seekers perceived the blogs as more credible than non-information seekers.

Because research on the perceived credibility of information on social networking sites, such as MySpace© and Facebook©, is extremely limited, it is a research area worth testing empirically. Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) used focus groups to examine how people view information and source credibility. The authors found that most Internet users rely on others to make credibility assessments, often by using group-based tools. The participants cited web-based applications and social networking sites to help them assess information or its source. The authors state that social networking, and digital media in general, deviate from a perception of credibility based on authority “by calling into question traditional conceptions of authority as hierarchical, impenetrable, and singularly accurate” (p. 434). In earlier times, credibility was a top-down concept with people often deferring to experts on a subject. Today, bottom-up assessments of information quality are easily constructed through collective efforts enabled by technology (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010).

In the Technological Age, perceptions of credibility are seemingly changing daily. In the sports world, fans have a bevy of options for online sports information, such as online versions of traditional media outlets (ex. ESPN.com and SportsIllustrated.com), sports blogs, and social networking sites (ex. Facebook© and Twitter©). Because re-
tweeting and re-posting hyperlinks has become so simple, erroneous information can spread extremely quickly. This current study tests the credibility of these online sports sources to see how sports fans perceive the credibility of the information, and to potentially resolve some of the issues that damage credibility.

**Social Identity Theory**

While credibility is judged on several factors dealing with medium and source, it is inherently based on the perceptions of media consumers. These perceptions can be different based on a person’s social identity. As a theoretical perspective, Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). Social identity theory asserts that maintaining memberships in important social networks will result in an enhancement of a person’s social identity, which results in a more positive self-concept (Tajfel, 1981). These memberships make up one’s social identity, and are used in social comparisons to develop and maintain one’s self-esteem. Additionally, an individual’s identity is intertwined with the characteristics of the social groups in which that person belongs (the ingroup). The individuals within the group typically develop a system of role relationships, social norms, and values, which regulate their opinions and actions (Turner, 1982). This group structure eventually evolves with mutual interaction and influence. Turner argues that positive self-esteem motivates a person to use social comparisons, which differentiate oneself from the ingroup through positively valued group characteristics and differentiate one’s own group from other groups (the outgroup).
Modern scholars have suggested that emotional involvement with a group results in a reduction of uncertainty, which produces a favorable evaluation of ingroup members relative to outgroup members (Hogg & Mullin, 1999). The factors in which ingroups are most positively evaluated become emphasized by the group member, and negative distinguishing characteristics of the outgroup are favored as well (Jackson et al., 1996). Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) investigated three different components of social identity to better understand how specific group characteristics affect reported levels of social identification. Relative ingroup size (majority/minority), relative ingroup status (high/low), and the group formation criterion (self-selected/assigned group membership) all affect the extent to which people identify with a group. The authors argue that the relative size of the ingroup (whether the group makes up the majority or minority of a population) has the largest impact on whether people self-categorize as group members. Conversely, group self-esteem is only affected by the relative status of the group, where members of lower status groups are expected to show less social identification than members of groups with higher status (Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Furthermore, minority group members reported strong self-categorization as group members and strong personal identification. For example, an African American would be more likely to categorize himself as African American and identify strongly with that group than someone who is part of the majority group, such as a White person.

The overall opinion one has of his or her ingroup can also have a profound impact on the judgments one makes about others (Marquez, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988). Using social identity theory as the basis of their study, Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens (1988)
predicted that judgments about both likeable and unlikeable ingroup members are more extreme than judgments about outgroup members. Coined the “Black Sheep Effect”, when an ingroup member’s behavior was relevant for a positive ingroup definition, this phenomenon appeared within the study. The results also suggest that ingroup favoritism can emerge in the form of an outgroup bias to preserve the overall positive image of the group. In a related study, Ojala and Nesdale (2004) examined how bullying among children could be moderated by ingroup norms and perceived threats to group distinctiveness. The authors discovered that the participants were much more likely to have retained an ingroup member when he behaved in accordance with group norms (i.e. did not bully other ingroup members). The results also suggest that bullying was more acceptable when directed at an outgroup member who was similar and possibly represented a threat to the ingroup. This is analogous to sport where an athlete’s negative behavior, such as fighting, toward the ingroup (teammates) is often seen as more detrimental to team unity than a negative act toward the outgroup (members of the opposing team).

Media characterizations may also have a major influence on social comparisons. Mastro (2003) argues that the comparative dimensions of these social categories may not be based in reality, and television images have the potential to influence comparison between groups. The author determined that negative racial depictions in the media were found to be associated with social judgments. Mastro (2003) argues that the media can prime certain aspects of social identity, and can impact social judgments and self-esteem. In sports media, social identity and social judgments can be influenced by the racial depictions of athletes. Bob Costas, for example, came under scrutiny during
the 2012 London Olympics for making a comment about Gabby Douglas becoming the first African-American to win the women’s all-around event in gymnastics, despite there being an imaginary barrier up for gymnasts of her race (Holmes, 2012). Holmes (2012) argued that while only 6.61 percent of the participants in American gymnastics programs are Black and 74.46 percent are White, there was no need for Costas to draw attention to her historical achievement; Douglas just happened to be a minority in a historically White sport. As long as there are perceptions of certain sports being divided along racial lines (ex. swimming as predominantly White), there is the potential for the media to prime social judgments from sports consumers toward athletes.

**Group Differentiation and Categorization**

Because social identity is so rooted in group comparisons, Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) assert that when certain categories are deemed important, differentiation between groups is intensified. In their article on social identity theory and social mobility, Jackson et al. (1996) examined the social creative strategies people use when they are members of negatively distinctive ingroups. The authors found that when an individual perceives that there is a realistic possibility of changing group membership, he or she will move away from the negatively distinctive ingroup and toward a positively distinctive one. This is either done psychologically (by perceiving themselves as less similar to the ingroup), in reality (by joining another more desirable group), or both. The authors also discovered that an individual may be less motivated to distance himself from the negatively distinctive ingroup if membership is temporary because temporary membership is less threatening to social identity than permanent membership.

Group differentiation can also be learned through the media characterizations of ingroup and outgroup members (Mastro, 2003). Anastasio, Rose, and Chapman (1999)
used a social identity approach to examine the media’s effect on public opinion. The authors argue that the media have the potential to distort an individual’s view of reality and may also create the public opinions it seeks to replicate in the news. According to the authors, even subtle nonverbal cues from television newscasters can influence voting behavior. Their study was designed to mimic the media coverage of the O.J. Simpson case, in which opinions of guilt or innocence were depicted as being correlated with racial group membership. The experimenters showed a video of a peer tribunal in which a fraternity member was being accused of vandalizing school property, where members of Greek organizations were classified as the ingroup and nonmembers as the outgroup. The subjects were also shown a video of fellow “students,” who were either portrayed as members of Greek organizations or as nonmembers, revealing their opinions of his guilt or innocence. The authors found that homogeneity of opinion significantly influenced opinions of the defendant’s guilt and the degree of recommended punishment. When opinions of others were perfectly correlated with group membership, Greek subjects sided with the defendant and nonmembers sided against him. The authors assert that this type of media exposure can exacerbate the strong tendency to side with one’s ingroup, which, in turn, minimizes one’s motivation to consider the information about a trial closely.

Societal roles, such as cultural and gender roles, are also subject to the potentially harmful differentiation that accompanies being a member of a less desirable outgroup. Looking at stereotypical gender roles, Amancio (1989) examined the social differentiation between “dominant” and “dominated” groups and how individuals in these groups deal with social stereotypes. The results suggest that members of a dominant
group can manage social stereotypes in a way that maintains a positive individual distinctiveness. Conversely, members of a dominated group are more likely to strive for intergroup and interindividual differentiation by either identifying more with the outgroup or becoming “asocial” or “imaginative” (p. 8). Using similar concepts from social identity theory, Outten et al. (2009) tested the capacity for group identification to foster beliefs in a person’s ability to cope with problems and negative emotions, which would, in turn, predict psychological well-being. The participants (all self-reported African Americans) who were higher in racial group identification reported having a more positive well-being. The findings suggest that the relationship between minority group identification and well-being may be due to its influence on a person’s sense that they and their group can respond effectively to a collective disadvantage.

Social Identity and the Media

Media usage and media messages have also been shown to differ by race, which has been shown to relate to social identity (Fujioka, 2005; Adams & Cleary, 2006). For example, minorities are more likely to consider media content as real than Whites (Greenberg & Brand, 1994). They are also more critical when evaluating how the media represents ingroup members (Davis & Gandy, 1999). Some suggest that African Americans have developed strategies for dealing with biased media images and representations of Blacks to protect themselves from possible negative influence (Davis & Gandy, 1999; Outten et al., 2009). Fujioka (2005) examined the influence of Black images in news and entertainment media on respondents’ endorsement of affirmative action. Basing his study on group threats and coping with threats to social identity, the author found that as Black respondents found Black media images more negative, they judged the images to be less accurate. Because of the media representations, the
respondents (all of whom were African American) perceived there to be a lower evaluation of Blacks by other ethnic groups, which, then, encouraged Black respondents to endorse affirmative action (Fujioka, 2005). Conversely, increasing minority staff members at a newspaper may not have an impact on attracting minority readers. In a study on newsroom diversity, Adams and Cleary (2006) found that increased minority staffing on editorial content at newspapers did not correlate to increased subscriptions and trust in local newspapers by minority residents. Surprisingly, one finding from that study suggested that minority reader trust may actually be hindered by increased minority staffing levels (Adams & Cleary, 2006). A similar issue arises in the sports world when college sports writers are alumni of the university they are covering or when a retired athlete becomes a neutral sports analyst and provides commentary on a former team. This scenario could hinder reader or viewer trust for identified sports fans who seek unbiased reporting and analysis from members of the sports news organization (like they are more likely to receive at ESPN vs. a fan sports blog).

There have also been concerns from women about their representations in mass media and their roles in the profession. Ferguson (1990) points to the liberal feminist movement, which aims to change the professional pecking order of women in media organizations and their under-representation in the media. The author disputes, however, the notion that women who are promoted in media organizations will incorporate a feminist agenda within the media. He argues that there is a common “feminist fallacy” in which feminists believe employment in the media equals more representation and more empowerment from women, but that these assumptions are
rarely manifested in actual news content. Thiel (2004) conducted a qualitative study on women online journalists to examine the ways in which the Internet has changed female roles in newsrooms. She argues that new media has forced women to negotiate their identities as journalists and technophiles in a continually evolving online medium. The women in the study suggested that online newsrooms offered them an opportunity to increase cultural capital and become more tech-savvy, but that these newsrooms are led by mostly male managers from traditional newsrooms with no technical background. While the subjects believe there is a need to shift their identity to achieve greater success in the online newsroom, most feel that “the glass ceiling is as much at work in the online newsroom as it was perceived to be in the traditional newsroom” (p. 32).

Despite the overall growth in online newsrooms regarding women and minorities, the sports desk remains overwhelmingly white and male (Lapchick et al., 2011). In a 2010 Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) analysis of more than 320 websites and newspapers, the APSE received a C+ grade for racial hiring practices and an F grade for gender hiring practices. The percentage of sports editors who were women or minorities fell from 11.7 percent in 2008 to 9.4 percent in 2010. The percentage of white males, however, increased by 3 percent for sports editors (Lapchick et al., 2011).

The lack of minority and female voices in the sports world may impact the way sports consumers perceive credibility because the coverage may not accurately reflect the sports, the athletes, or the fan demographics. Certain professional sports, such as the NFL (67%) and the NBA (77%), are made up of mostly African American athletes (Lapchick et al., 2010a; Lapchick et al., 2010b), and if the people making the decisions about coverage of issues are predominantly white, then the coverage can get skewed to
push certain agendas (Paulsen, 2011). For example, during the 2011 NBA lockout, it was in the best interest of the media organizations to skew coverage and opinions toward ownership in the labor dispute with billions of dollars in television revenue potentially lost with a cancelled NBA season (Paulsen, 2011). However, media organizations, such as ESPN and Time Warner, need a perception of objectivity from fans, so they did not blatantly come out against NBA players, although spent much of the coverage on ways to end the lockout (Paulsen, 2011). Because sport media members are predominantly white, identity conflicts among races can threaten newsroom cohesion and perceptions of impartiality from readers.

Female journalists in the sports world also experience similar identity conflicts. In a qualitative study, Hardin and Shain (2006) conducted interviews with 20 women sports journalists. The authors found that female sports journalists must negotiate tensions to their identity, where they are forced to balance their conflicting identities as women and as professional journalists. These women’s struggles are complicated by their consent to be a part of a male-dominated domain. The authors even suggest that the interviewees perpetuate myths about women who attain power in newsrooms as either too much like men (i.e. too bossy) or too much like women (i.e. sexualized, not enough of a journalist). The tensions with identity may “encourage women to leave the profession in search of careers that involve less cognitive and emotional dissonance” (p. 334).

This history of identity conflicts in media organizations even extends past our own borders (Boyer, 2000). Boyer (2000) suggests that “public cultural institutions such as mass media organizations and universities are significantly responsible for both
formalizing and accrediting informal knowledges of identity difference” (p. 469). He argued that professionals within these institutions bridge local, national, and global spheres of social belonging. He references the media organizations that were formed in Germany after the Berlin Wall was torn down and differing ideologies of East and West German journalists were at odds in newly-formed German newsrooms. Despite East and West Germans working together in these newsrooms, Eastern Germans were being “disallowed critical voices and, as a result, being interpellated always again with their ‘innate’ professional deficiencies” (p. 481). The author concluded that these workplace dynamics were manifested in media representations, and identity differences were ingrained in the German culture through the media.

Social Identity in Sport Spectatorship

Besides the social identity of the journalists, Wann and Grieve (2005) suggest that there is “strong evidence for Social Identity Theory in the sport domain” and that “this perspective is useful framework for understanding the social perceptions of spectators” (p. 533). Research on the social identity of sports fans indicates that fans also display ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation (Wann et al., 2001). Also, these biases are most likely when individuals are highly identified with a team and have been threatened. Wann and Grieve (2005) designed a study to better understand threats to social identity in a field setting. The authors hypothesized that fans of a home team and fans of a losing team would experience threats to identity, and, subsequently, show high levels of ingroup favoritism. Data gathered at two North American college basketball games confirmed a presumed interaction in which highly identified fans rooting for a home team that had lost would exhibit the most amount of bias, which were both overly positive biases of ingroup members and unjustly negative biases of outgroup members. An
example of this situation is when a supporter of the home team reacts to a questionable call by an official during a game (Wann & Grieve, 2005). If this person reacts by yelling loudly or disrespectfully at the official, this fan’s behavior is representative of the ingroup to some and the outgroup to others. The bias occurs when other ingroup members see the behavior as much less negative, or even justified, than they would if this reaction had been exhibited by an outgroup member.

Along the lines of Wann & Grieve (2005) study, Krumm and Corning (2008) tested the effectiveness of moral credentials at concealing one’s prejudice. Participants in the study were most swayed by moral credentials, which are pieces of evidence that can be presented as proof of lack of prejudice, by those who shared an ingroup status with the person displaying the credentials. For example, an African American making a joke about other African Americans would be seen as much more acceptable than a White person telling the same joke. In the context of sport, this theory asserts that a person with disparaging remarks about the play of one’s favorite team would be more acceptable if the person making the remarks is a member of the ingroup (a fan of the same team).

The fan group one is a part of can also impact how one’s social identity is formed. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) conducted a study on three distinct fan groups of a collegiate basketball team (current students, alumni, and the general public) and how heightened social identity can build brand equity of a team. According to the authors, social identity formed differently for the fan groups. Team history was shown to be significantly related to social identity for alumni and the general public. Interestingly, current students were most influenced by their sense of the basketball program being a
part of the community. The results provide strong support for the effect of social identity on brand equity of the athletic program overall. Essentially, social identity plays an important role in the way people consume sports, especially at the collegiate level where the university’s sports brand equates to more revenue for the school.

**Developing Social Identity through Online Social Networks**

In the Technological Age, social network websites have also been shown to affect one’s social identity and self-esteem (Barker, 2009). For adolescents, using social media facilitates interpersonal relationships as well as intragroup and intergroup relationships (McKay, Thurlow & Toomey-Zimmerman, 2005). Barker (2009) examined the motives for social network site use for older adolescents and the influence of gender, group identity, and collective self-esteem. The author found that communication with peer group members was the most important motivation for social networking. Participants high in positive collective self-esteem were strongly motivated to communicate with peers using a social network site. Women were more likely than men to report greater overall use, high positive collective self-esteem, and high social networking use to communicate with peers. Men were more likely to report negative collective self-esteem and social network site use for social identity gratifications. Additionally, negative collective self-esteem correlated with social compensation. The author suggests that adolescents who feel negatively about their social group use social network sites as an alternative to communicating with other ingroup members.

Online communities and cyber societies have sprung up over the last two decades, and many have the potential to work as a communication system which develops potentially fulfilling online networks and relationships (O’Connor & Mackeogh, 2007). Some scholars have addressed online identity and acknowledge the anonymity
aspect of the Internet that can allow users to mask parts of their identity, such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Turkle, 1995; Markham, 1998). These authors suggest that these communities and this form of online communication can function as expressiveness, bonding, sharing, and identity construction for those involved. In a qualitative study on online women’s magazines, O’Connor and Mackeogh (2007) investigated the creation of “women’s worlds” in online discussion boards and the forms of identity that accompany these online discussions. According to the authors, the discussion boards provided users an extremely open forum of “female space” that female users perceive as welcoming and supportive. Given that the discussion board was not moderated, it created a highly feminized identity for the users, which some viewed as empowering. The authors conclude that unlike print magazines, the discussion board in an online women’s magazine offers self-actualizing interactivity where women can communicate directly in an environment that is seen as non-judgmental and open. The authors also acknowledge that the boards exist in a commercial forum where users are primarily viewed as consumers, so the strength and duration of the bonds formed were too difficult to measure.

Social identity can also impact the online articles a person reads about one’s ingroup and outgroup. Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall (2010) tested the selective exposure to positive and negative news articles about people in similar and different age groups. Using software to log reading times of an online news magazine, the authors discovered that younger individuals (18-30 years old) focused most of their reading attention on same-aged individuals, with a preference on positive news about the ingroup. Older individuals (50-65 years old) were more likely to select negative
news about the outgroup (young individuals) than positive news and negative news about their ingroup. Additionally, selective exposure to negative news about the outgroup bolstered the older individuals' self-esteem.

**Fan Identification and Fan Involvement**

Social identity theory suggests that people are motivated by a need to enhance their self-esteem, and that this self-esteem is established by being members of social groups (Tajfel, 1981). People in these groups continually make social comparisons to enhance self-esteem, in which ingroup members are judged more favorably than those in outgroups (Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1990). This is also true of sports fans in which highly identified fans are more likely to show favoritism towards fans of their own team and criticize fans of opposing teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Identified fans of a university sports program have also been shown to be more satisfied and more involved with their university than non-identified fans (Wann & Robinson, 2002). Additionally, the presence of an athletics program on a university campus has been shown to influence the perceived sense of community on campus (Clopton, 2007), exemplified at a school like the University of Florida where athletics are an integral aspect of college life for many students. Because group identification has been shown to influence evaluations and perceptions of media (Fujioka, 2005; Greenberg & Brand, 1994), sport fan identification among university undergraduate students may have the same potential influence on evaluations of a sports article or a sports news source.

While sports fans are similar to fans of other interests, sports fans perceive themselves as being in a group even when they are not actively part of an organized group (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Sports fans are a unique group of individuals,
and several terms have been used by sport researchers to describe a fan’s psychological and behavioral attachment to sport, including fan identification (Sutton et al., 1997; Zhu & Won, 2010), team identification (Bizman & Yinon, 2002; Fink et al., 2009; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996), and fan involvement (Shank & Beasley, 1998; Wann et al., 2003). Fan identification is more firmly rooted in psychological attachment, and has been described as the degree to which a fan’s relationship to sport contributes to their social identity (Fink et al., 2002). Similarly, fan involvement is more behavioral and has to do with the perceived interest in sports to an individual (Shank & Beasley, 1998). Team identification has to do with a fan’s loyalty to a team, a fan’s likelihood to attend games, and the level of satisfaction that accompanies a positive game outcome (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Madrigal, 1995). These fans inherently see their chosen team as an extension of themselves (Wann et al., 2001). Although most of the research in the current study covers the impact of fan and team identification, fan involvement will also be introduced to provide background for the behavioral attachment of sports fans to their favorite teams, sports, and other fans.

**Sports Fans and Social Identity**

Using social identity theory as their primary theoretical framework, Dimmock, Grove and Eklund (2005) examined the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of identification with a sports team and relationships between identification and intergroup bias. The findings suggest that cognitive (knowledge of membership to a group) and affective (emotional significance of group membership) identification were stronger for groups in which membership is self-selected rather than assigned. Because team identification is a voluntary group membership, the authors determined that a cognitive-affective dimension of identification is the best predictor of bias against
rival fans. Wann and Dolan (1994) also found that highly identified fans will relate a victory to internal factors such as the skill of the team or the coaching. Conversely, a loss is often ascribed to external factors, such as fate or poor refereeing, and not the play of the other team. Essentially, highly identified sports fans undergo a biased attribution process when dealing with a loss (Wann & Dolan, 1994).

Sports teams have even been regarded as hybrid identity organizations (Heere & James, 2007), meaning they have multiple components that would not normally go together. Heere and James (2007) suggest that a team may represent a collection of owners, coaches, and players, but also represent the city, state, or university in which they operate. Heere and James (2007) assert that fans no longer perceive the team and the surrounding community as different entities, but as being linked together. They also view team identity as symbolic of other types of group identities. These include two main types of external group identities: demographic identities, such as geographic, ethnic, and gender identities, and membership identities, such as university-based, corporate, religious, and political identities. At the collegiate level, many university sports teams are referred to by the state in which they reside. For example, the University of Florida is referred to as simply “Florida” and the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor is referred to as “Michigan” by sport spectators, despite the presence of several other in-state universities. In this sense, the external group identity goes from a university-based identity (the current students and alumni who identify with the team) and extends to a geographical identity (residents of the state). Heere and James (2007) suggest that sports teams should work to identify the external group identities that the
An individual’s cultural background may also be a factor in the way one perceives the social significance of sport. Gao and Kim (2011) examined the impact of cultural-values on spectator sport attitudes and team identification. The authors hypothesized that fans’ sports attitudes and team identification are weaker in cultures with value systems that center around the pursuit of knowledge versus cultures that center on individual liberties and life enjoyment. In support of their hypothesis, the results showed that the relationships between spectator sport attitudes and team identification were higher for American respondents than for Korean and Taiwanese respondents. The authors assert that American parents cultivate children’s interest in sport from an early age and that the importance of sport is then manifested later in life (Gao & Kim, 2011).

Effects of Team Identification on Self-Esteem

Identifying with a specific team has also been shown to positively affect a person’s health through social connections. Wann (2006) developed a Team Identification – Social Psychological Health Model, which asserts that team identification facilitates a fan’s well-being by increasing temporary and enduring social connections for the fan, which can have a profound impact on social psychological health. Conversely, the author also suggests that this beneficial relationship for fans will be moderated by threats to social identity, such as a team’s poor performance and efforts to cope with threats. According to the Team Identification – Social Psychological Health Model (Wann, 2006), team identification and social psychological health should be positively related because team identification leads to social connections which, then, facilitate well-being. Wann and Weaver (2009) tested this model in their study on identification
with a local and a distant team, and the impact this has on well-being. Consistent with predictions, identification with the local team was positively related to social well-being. However, this relationship did not appear for fans of distant teams. The results also showed that identification was a significant predictor of social integration and social coherence. Their findings imply that highly identified fans tend to view their social lives as satisfactory and meaningful, which can lead to social capital, generally defined as a network of relationships based on trust, mutual obligation, and cooperation (Putnam, 2000).

Team identification can also impact fan perceptions of wins and losses. Highly identified fans have been shown to enhance their own well-being after victories and protect it after defeats by using biased cognitions when recounting the outcome (Wann et al. 2002). Madrigal and Chen (2008) examined the role of team identification on the summary judgments of a game outcome. The authors found a self-serving bias in which highly identified fans were more likely to attribute a team win to causes deemed to be under internal control of that team. They also found that fans with high identification believed that the same game outcome would occur again if the two teams played in a future match. However, highly identified fans did not attribute losses to external forces, such as injury to key athletes, referees, etc. (Madrigal & Chen, 2008). In a related study, Wann and McGeorge (1994) found that highly identified fans report a greater increase in positive emotions after a win and a greater increase in negative emotions after a loss than fans with low identification. The authors also found that past team success was an important predictor of fan identification level, but that levels were not affected by game outcome.
Team identification and game outcome can also impact one’s self-esteem. Bizman and Yinon (2002) examined the effects of distancing tactics on self-esteem and emotions following a win or loss by one’s favorite team. The authors measured self-esteem and emotional responses of professional basketball fans immediately after their team played an official game. The fans were given the opportunity to increase or decrease their association with the team, and the fans typically associated more with the team after a team win than after a team loss. Additionally, self-esteem and positive emotions were higher and negative emotions were lower, when measured after the game, instead of before. These effects were more prevalent among fans with high team identification. The authors suggest that there is a distinction between the short-term and long-term effects of game outcome on willingness to associate with a team. In the short term, team association may fluctuate based on team performance, even for fans with high team identification. In the long term, only the fans with high team identification may maintain their allegiance to the team.

Team identification is not only affected by a player’s actions on the field, but their behavior off of it. Fink et al. (2009) found that unscrupulous acts by athletes off the field of play can impact one’s level of team identification. Participants were given a scenario in which an athlete on their university’s team was charged with a serious off-field offense and comments from team leaders either supporting the player or admonishing the player. When team leaders came out against the athlete and claimed that the athlete’s actions were out of line, team identification scores went up. When team leaders supported the athlete, even highly identified fans experienced a drop in team identification. The authors argue that this was a result of the “black sheep” effect,
where participants in the strong leadership response group could view the act as an anomaly, inconsistent with the group values of the team. Additionally, some evidence suggests that there is a significant correlation between team identification and a general belief in the trustworthiness of others (Wann & Polk, 2007).

**Team Identification in Collegiate Sports**

Team identification goes beyond the professional ranks as university sports teams are often the biggest draw in cities without a professional team. In their article, Wann and Robinson (2002) examined the relationship between university sports team identification and perceptions of the university for enrolled students at that institution using two studies. Assessing the level of identification with their university’s men’s basketball and football teams, undergraduate participants were asked to rank their undergraduate persistence intentions and their perceptions of the university. The results indicated significant positive relationships between identification for the two teams and satisfaction and enjoyment with the university, involvement with the university, the extent to which the university met expectations, and persistence at the university. In the same article, Wann and Robinson (2002) replicated the effects in a second study testing for identification with the university’s sports program in general, while controlling for level of sport fandom. The authors again found that higher levels of identification with the institution’s sports program led to more positive impressions of the school, in general. The findings from both studies imply that university administrators should better promote team identification among the student body, which may, in turn, result in more favorable evaluations of the university by students.

On college campuses, a student’s sense of community can also be impacted by the university’s athletics program. Clopton (2007) found a positive relationship between
the presence of an athletics program on campus and the perceived sense of community on campus, but that this relationship is moderated by gender and an institution’s membership in a major athletic conference. Applying Putnum’s (2000) social capital to their study, Clopton and Finch (2010) examined the contribution of team identification to the social capital of college students at 21 NCAA institutions. The results indicated that social capital was influenced by the level of a respondent’s identification with their university’s athletic teams. Also, race and gender were both significant in predicting social capital through fan identification. The results suggest that there is an empirical link between the psychological benefits of fan communities and the contribution to the community as a whole, and that this can lead to potential community building activities. Essentially, people in fan communities, such as college students at a Division 1 athletic university, are more likely to volunteer or give back to their community in some way than those not involved in fan communities (Clopton & Finch, 2010). In a related social capital study, Perks (2007) tested whether organized sport participation as a youth predicts involvement in community activities as an adult. The findings showed that youth sport participation was positively related to adult involvement in community activities, and that this participation lasted throughout the lifecycle. Essentially, sport participation early in life fosters social capital, which pays off as higher levels of community involvement as an adult.

**Sport Media Coverage and Fan Information-Seeking Behavior**

The workplace identity in newsrooms can also impact the coverage that fans are exposed to. In a study on the coverage of doping in sport, Sefiha (2010) found that while performance-enhancing drug use in sport is considered very newsworthy, there is limited coverage on the issue because of investigative costs, public fatigue, and lack of
medical and legal knowledge by journalists. The author asserts that these occupational and institutional identities exert pressure over what is perceived as possible and desirable by journalists. The coverage a fan receives is, ultimately, determined by the media organization, but even the most newsworthy issues receive less than stellar coverage based on the institutional identities of newsrooms (Sefiha, 2010). Because of this, fans may seek out information on an issue like doping through websites that are unaffiliated with major news organizations, but may not be as credible.

In 2012, former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky was convicted of child molestation, an independent investigation determined that school officials covered up the scandal by not reporting the abuse, and Penn State was hit with NCAA major sanctions including a $60 million dollar fine and a four-year postseason ban (Chambers, 2012). In the wake of the conviction and the lengthy cover-up by head football coach Joe Paterno and other university administrators, the news coverage of the university and its football program have been overwhelmingly negative. As the coverage continues, Penn State football fans may seek out local news organizations or fan websites that are more sympathetic toward the university and local community to alleviate threats to a negatively distinguishable group in which they identify strongly. In this case, when seeking information, group identity and finding a news source that reflects that identity outweighs the perceived credibility of the source.

The identification of a sports team or sports in general inherently leads to seeking out information about that team or sport through media use (Randle & Nyland, 2008). In their study on fantasy sports leagues, Randle and Nyland (2008) found that participation in fantasy sports leagues was significantly related to an increase in
traditional television, newspaper, and radio use. The results also showed that participants in fantasy sports frequently visit the websites that host their own league. The authors suggest that mass media organizations should implement interactive fantasy sports leagues via their sports websites to build customer loyalty and increase the use of their traditional media. Additionally, attitude toward the televised sport (American football), perceived ease of use of the website, perceived knowledge of the sport and subjective norms all contribute to a participant’s attitudes and behavioral intentions toward playing fantasy football (Dae Hee & McDaniel, 2011).

Hutchins, Rowe, and Ruddock (2009) suggest that “it is now time to think less in terms of the longstanding relationship between sport and media, and more about sport as media given the increasing interpenetration of digital media content, sport, and networked information and communication technologies” (p. 89). The authors discuss the current role that MyFootballClub (MFC), which is a popular computer game and website as well as the first Internet community to buy and takeover a real-world football club in England, plays in the realm of sport media. The appeal of this franchise is due to its ontological value as real-life competitions (not digital simulations or fantasy sports) where actual players, a team, and genuine competition are involved. The authors claim that “whether it is a success or failure in the medium-to-long term, MFC is a case study that ably highlights the changing character and dynamics of the media sports cultural complex” (p. 101). They argue that this professionalization of sport and sport media has created a longing to construct communities around fan participation in the ownership and running of a team.
The factors that motivate broadcast viewership of sporting events are also affected by fan identification. Hu and Tang (2010) found that entertainment, self-esteem, and eustress (positive levels of stress) positively affected fan identification, which positively impacted viewing behavior of sports broadcasting. Fan identification as a mediator was important as none of the motivational factors had a significant relationship with viewing behavior. The motivating factors that were most important to viewers were entertainment and excitement, and supporting sports figures from their own country. The authors assert that increasing fan identification clearly helps increase international viewership and ratings.

Team identification may also impact the way people respond to sports media. Wann and Branscombe (1992) found that the emotional responses to a news article were different based on degree of identification with the sports team. Highly identified fans experienced the most positive mood state from an article that described a victory for the ingroup, whose author was an admitted loyal fan of the same team. The most negative mood state was evoked when the team lost the competition and the article author was a disloyal fan of the participant’s favorite team. Additionally, individuals with low fan identification were not significantly influenced by the game outcome, group membership of the author, or the author’s commitment to the team. Essentially, fan identification had a strong influence on a fan’s emotional response to a sports article, but other research on the impact of fan identification on credibility is severely lacking.

**Fan Involvement**

Scholars have also identified an absence of fan involvement research for sport spectators (Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997; Bee & Havitz, 2010). According to Bee and Havitz (2010), a spectator’s involvement with a sport and their attraction to the sport are
important in their development of psychological commitment. According to Trail et al. (2003), fans and spectators have similar motivations because both groups attend sporting events to socialize with others and escape everyday responsibilities. However, the authors found that fans attend games to cheer on their favorite teams, while spectators root for a well-played game, regardless of which team wins.

While many consider males to be more involved fans, some scholars have found different results. Dietz-Uhler et al.’s (2000) survey on fan involvement determined that an equal number of males and females considered themselves to be sports fans, although males identified more strongly as fans than females. The results also indicated that males engage in more sport fan behavior than females. Additionally, females were more likely to report being a sports fan because they watched or attended a sporting event, while males were more likely to report themselves as fans because they played sports and wanted to acquire sports information.

Regarding the NFL’s Super Bowl broadcast, female viewers had more positive attitudes toward the entertainment elements of the broadcast, such as the national anthem and the halftime show, than men (Clark, Apostolopoulou & Gladden, 2009). Wann et al. (2003) found that although many women consider themselves to be sports fans, men were twice as likely to be self-classified as avid, highly involved fans. The study also discovered that more than half of highly involved fans attend multiple home games throughout the season. Interestingly, the authors also discovered that involved fans admitted to changing their work or school schedules to accommodate their sport-viewing plans.
Wann and Branscombe’s (1992) study on the impact of identification on emotional responses to the sports page shows that the connection one shares with a team can affect a fan’s mood state. Thus, it seems logical that it can affect their perceptions of credibility of those same articles, although previous research on this particular issue is essentially nonexistent, making the need for this study more vital. Because fan involvement and identification is essential to better understanding fan attitudes toward sport media, scholars have developed instruments to measure these concepts (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Trail et al., 2003; Shank & Beasley, 1998). The results of these studies suggest that there is a relationship between involvement and sports-related behaviors, such as watching sporting events on television, on a computer, and in person. Not surprisingly, the previous studies found that more involved fans are more likely to attend a live sporting event or watch one on television than someone with low involvement. The fan involvement scale developed by Shank and Beasley (1998) incorporated fans’ psychological feelings about sport with their behavioral habits. Sport spectating and levels of participation in sport were combined with media viewing habits to create a scale that effectively measures fan involvement and identification as it relates to media. For this reason, Shank and Beasley’s (1998) scale will be used as a measurement instrument for this study. Additionally, the current study looks at a fan’s identification to a specific team, so Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) team identification scale will also be used as another measurement instrument of fan identification.

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) Model

While social identity theory is firmly rooted in social comparisons between ingroup and outgroup members, group polarization refers to the finding that after a group discussion, individuals in the group tend to endorse a more extreme position in the
direction already favored by the group (Lee, 2007; Hogg, Turner & Davidson, 1990). Essentially, people move beyond the mean position of the group to fully differentiate themselves from people holding contrary positions. From this viewpoint, the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model) asserts that anonymous computer mediation can obscure the interpersonal differences that inhibit group identification, which, in turn, heightens group salience and increases adherence to group norms (Lea & Spears, 1991; Spears & Lea, 1992). In other words, anonymous communication lacks individuating cues, which shifts the attention from distinctive characteristics of group members, thereby making people more susceptible to group influence (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998).

On the Internet, anonymous user comments in discussion boards and online articles are common, and modern interpretations of the SIDE model claim that the lack of individuation information fosters group identification (Lee, 2007). In an experiment on deindividuation, Lee (2007) examined how deindividuation affects group polarization in computer-mediated communication. Before exchanging opinions about social dilemmas with three partners via a computer, participants either shared personal information (individuated) or did not (deindividuated). Consistent with the SIDE model, deindividuated participants not only exhibited stronger identification with anonymous partners than did the individuated participants, but they were also more likely to polarize their opinions. Interestingly, participants rated the partners’ arguments more positively when they identified with the partners, but this had no significant impact on a post-discussion opinion shift. The author argues that the profound effects of deindividuation are highlighted in this study because the mere exchange of minimal personal
information created variance in the perception of ingroup similarity and opinion polarization.

In a similar study, Lee (2004) designed two experiments to see how visual representation of interacting participants affects depersonalization and conformity to group norms in anonymous computer-mediated communication. In the first experiment, participants were asked to make a decision about social dilemmas after seeing two other anonymous participants’ unanimous opinions. After the decision, the participant and two fictitious, anonymous peers exchanged supporting arguments. On their computer screen, the participant was shown an avatar of him/herself and the other participants. In this study, depersonalization was initiated by the participant seeing uniform responses from the computer-mediated partners, which led to greater conformity to the group norm. According to the author, “the perception that the other group members share similar values and beliefs appears to reflect the perceived ‘salience’ of group norm” (p. 254). The second experiment aimed to test the causal links between depersonalization, group identification, and conformity. Participants were informed that the other avatars were for students at other schools, but the same uniform responses were shown to the participant. The results indicated that group identification, rather than interpersonal similarity, is the reason for the impact of depersonalization on conformity.

Scholars also argue that an anonymous computer environment gives people the freedom to enact new identities for themselves and liberate themselves from the limitations brought on by identity, reality, expectations, and conventions (Turkle, 1996). Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998) counter this by asserting that even though a potential
for identity replacement exists, people may not always want to free themselves from these social constraints. They claim that cyberspace provides the ideal opportunity to create a new virtual society, but that this new society will quickly resemble the old one, if people actively carry over the constraints of their real-world identities. The SIDE model suggests that a deindividuating encounter in a group diverts attention from the individual level of interaction and focuses attention on the social level, which emphasizes the social boundaries of the ingroup and outgroup (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). However, when group members do not identify strongly with their group, they are less likely to respect group boundaries, thus deindividuation should not increase social influence (Spears et al., 1990).

Applying the SIDE model to two experiments, Postmes et al. (2001) looked at the effect of priming and anonymity on group behavior in computer-mediated communication. In the first study, group members were primed with a certain type of social behavior. Consistent with the model, anonymous groups displayed primed-consistent behavior in their task solutions, however identifiable groups did not. The authors suggest that the primed norm of a group happens to a greater extent in anonymous groups. The second study showed that nonprimed group members conformed to the behavior of primed members, but only when the communication was anonymous. This suggests that a primed norm can be socially transmitted from the group to new members (Postmes et al, 2001).

The ability to post comments and its impact on perceived credibility is also examined in this study, so the application of the SIDE model is useful at understanding how fan perceptions can change based on group norms. Thurman (2008) suggests that
reader contributions in online articles are important for increasing circulation, providing a source of stories, and providing content for stories. Applying the SIDE model to their study, Walther et al. (2010) examined the influence of user comments on perceptions of YouTube anti-marijuana PSAs. The results showed that supportive or negative comments affected the participant’s evaluations of the PSAs, but did not affect attitudes toward marijuana. However, the combination of user comments along with the social identification of the participants to the users affected both PSA evaluations and attitudes towards marijuana positively or negatively, depending on the tone of the comments.

Although this has not been empirically tested for sports articles, based on studies concerning the SIDE model (Postmes et al., 2001; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Lee, 2007), it is possible that sports fans can have similar reactions to the anonymous user comments at the bottom of online sports articles. Deindividuated sports fans may be more likely to reject or accept the credibility of the articles if anonymous peers speak out in favor of or against the news organization, the author, the article itself, or the team. The dearth of research on this issue and the potential of user comments to alter one’s identity and one’s perceptions of credibility make the SIDE model an important concept for analysis in this study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The level of perceived credibility attributed to online sports articles is dependent on many factors, and the present study aims to shed light on the aspects of credibility that are most important to sports fans and media consumers alike. The findings from the present study can be used by those in the media industry to create better websites and craft more profound articles that resonate with audiences. In this study, participants were exposed to the same sports article about a game recap involving the University of Florida men’s basketball team. They were also randomly assigned to one of four different sports news sources: three online sources (ESPN.com, AlligatorArmy.com, and Facebook©) and one wire service (Associated Press). At the top of the article, participants saw a large banner of the assigned sports news source that the article was said to have originated from. The post-test results from the assigned stimuli groups were used to determine the perceived credibility of the article itself, the perceived credibility of the medium, the assessments of the four sports news sources, and identification with the university. The participants were also randomly assigned to one of three scenarios for user comments: positive comments, negative comments, and no comments (control). Unless participants were assigned to the control groups, three positive or negative user comments were shown at the bottom of the article. The post-test results from these stimuli groups were used to determine the influence of user comment tone on perceived credibility, sports news source assessment, and group identity with the anonymous users.

While the main purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the medium and source on credibility, the role of identity has also been shown to have a profound impact
on perceptions of media credibility (Choi et al., 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Davis & Gandy, 1999). This study builds off of Chung, Kim, and Kim’s (2010) examination of online credibility by empirically testing the influence of specific websites on credibility and comparing a mainstream sports news source (ESPN website), an independent sports news source (sports blog), and a social networking website (Facebook©), which can be used as an index sports news source.

Many in the media industry suggest that traditional news sources and their online counterparts are subject to ethical pressures to provide readers with accurate information, but that these pressures are not expected for many online sites (Calabrese & Borchert, 1996; Newhagen & Levy, 1998; Arant & Anderson, 2001). Demographics, such as age, gender, and education, have all been recognized as variables that can dictate one’s perceived credibility (Westley & Severn, 1964). Additionally, Kiousis (2001) found that people considered newspapers to be the most credible medium, followed by online news, and finally television news. Bucy (2003) found that within age groups, adults rated Internet news to be significantly more credible than television news, while students rated television news as more credible. In Rimmer and Weaver’s (1987) study, participants perceived newspapers as having more credibility than broadcast news, but that participants spent more time watching TV news. Because there is still debate as to what the most credible medium is and because there is a dearth of research in the field of sports journalism, the following research questions were developed to examine the perceived levels of credibility among media and how it may be affected by fan identification:
**RQ1**: In sports media content, which medium is perceived as more credible: online or wire service?

**RQ2**: Do highly identified sports fans perceive the online medium to be more credible than a wire service?

**RQ3**: Do fans with low identification perceive the online medium to be more credible than a wire service?

The present study also looked at the differences among several online media formats (sports websites, blogs, and social networking websites) and tested the effects of sports fan identification and ingroup favoritism on source credibility. According to some scholars, the credibility of news sources, whether online or offline, is mediated by two factors: the established news supplier’s reputation/brand and the partisanship of the news consumers themselves on particular issues (Gunter et al., 2009). Established news brands offline that migrate online generally command greater public trust than newer online only brands (Gunter, 2006). Some studies have even found that a major news brand’s online news source was perceived as more trustworthy than its traditional news source (Ranie et al., 2003). Chung, Kim, and Kim’s (2010) found that mainstream online news sources that start as a traditional offline news source and branch out to the Internet, such as USAToday.com and ESPN.com for sports, are perceived as the most credible of all online websites. Distinct from the perceived credibility of a particular article, the perceptions of each website and the *Associated Press* as a news source for sports information were also examined. Essentially, the present study looked at the concept of established news sources to see if a connection to credibility applies to sports media and an established sport brand, such as ESPN.
Along with news brands, fan identification may also impact perceptions of credibility. Wann and Branscombe (1992) found that the emotional responses to a sports article differed based on degree of identification with a sports team. Highly identified fans experienced the most positive mood state from an article that described a victory for the ingroup and with an author who was an admitted fan of the same team. The most negative mood state was experienced when the team lost the game and the article author was a disloyal fan of the team (Wann & Branscombe, 1992). Additionally, individuals with low fan identification were not influenced by the game outcome or the author’s commitment to the team. Although no experiment has been done to test fan identification on sports article credibility, Wann and Branscombe’s (1992) study suggests that fans feel emotionally different about articles after wins and losses, so the potential relationship that may exist between perceived credibility and fan identification is worth exploring. Based on the previous literature, the following research question and four hypotheses were developed to test the relationship between perceived credibility of online and offline news source and fan identification, and the relationship between established sports brands and credibility:

RQ4: When comparing a mainstream sports website, a fan website, and a social networking website, which will be perceived as the most credible?

H1: The mainstream sports article (ESPN.com) will be viewed as more credible than the other online versions of the article by highly identified sports fans and fans with low identification.

Additionally, some scholars have found that higher levels of identification with the university’s sports program lead to more positive impressions of the school in general
(Wann & Robinson, 2002). The sample population of the present study was students from a university being asked questions about that university’s sports team. Because of this, the present study assumes that fans of the team would inherently feel like part of the ingroup—in this case, the university—thus, potentially giving the article and the sources a more favorable rating than those in the outgroup (fans with low identification). For example, student fans of Gators athletics are assumed to have a higher group identity with the university, and will presumably rate an article about a Florida Gator team as more credible than a student who is a fan with low identification. This situation occurs because fans have a stronger ingroup attachment to the university and want to perceive themselves as being part of a favorable ingroup (Marquez, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988).

**H2:** Highly identified fans will evaluate the online sources more favorably than fans with low identification.

**H3:** Highly identified fans will rate the article itself as more credible than fans with low identification.

**H4:** Highly identified fans will have a stronger group identity with their university than fans with low identification.

Using social identity theory and the SIDE model as theoretical frameworks, the present study also analyzed how attitudes towards a website and a sports article are potentially affected by anonymous user comments. According to Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998), anonymous communication lacks individuating cues, so the attention shifts away from distinctive characteristics of group members, thereby making people more susceptible to group influence. In studies using the SIDE model, deindividuated
participants exhibited stronger identification with anonymous partners than individuated participants, and deindividuated participants were also more likely to polarize their opinions in favor or against an issue (Lee, 2007). Essentially, a deindividuating encounter in a group online diverts the attention from an individual level of interaction to a social level of interaction, which emphasizes the social boundaries of ingroups and outgroups (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). Participants in the present study were exposed to either positive user comments about the team, negative user comments about the team, or no comments at all, which may alter their perceptions of the article and its credibility based on the tone of the comments. Based on the review of literature, the following four hypotheses were developed to test the impact of anonymous user comments on highly identified fans and fans with low identification:

**H5**: Highly identified fans will find the article to be more credible when coupled with the anonymous positive user comments for each source than with negative user comments or without user comments.

**H6**: The perceived credibility of the article will be influenced more significantly by the tone of the user comments for highly identified fans than for fans with low identification.

**H7**: Highly identified fans will have a stronger group identity either with or against the anonymous users than fans with low identification, based on the tone of the user comments.

**H8**: Highly identified fans will have stronger positive or negative feelings about the sports media source itself (website or AP article) than fans with low identification, based on the tone of the user comments.
Overall, this study aims to provide insight into a marginally explored research area (sports journalism), while measuring the impact of identity on an individual’s perceptions of article credibility. Because there is no clear-cut consensus on the elements that build online credibility, this study provides media professionals an outline of the elements that enhance perceived credibility, including a better understanding of the role of user comments in today’s media environment. The combination of multiple theoretical frameworks equates to findings that can be viewed from several different perspectives and applied to multiple disciplines in media.
The present study was an online experiment designed to draw conclusions about the perceived credibility of sports articles and evaluations of sports news sources. Experiments can have limitations regarding external validity, or the generalizability of the findings across settings and populations. The experiment was looking mainly at online news sources, so to reflect the natural setting of reading an online article, the experiment was administered online. A convenience sample of college students was used based on availability and accessibility to a sample population at the University of Florida, a large public academic institution in the southwestern United States. Although a convenience sample is not ideal for experiments because the findings are less generalizable, the use of a convenience sample of college students has been utilized in previous scholarly studies examining sports fans. For example, Wann and Branscombe (1992) used 227 college students in their study on fans’ emotional responses to the sports page. Wann (1995) developed a Sport Fan Motivation Scale using a sample of 272 subjects, 116 of which were college students receiving extra credit. Additionally, Pham (1992) used a sample group of 85 undergraduate students to study the effects of fan involvement and arousal on the recognition of sponsorship stimuli at a sporting event. In the present study, the students were recruited from seven undergraduate mass communication classes in the College of Journalism and Communications, and extra credit was offered as an incentive for their participation in the study.

Threats to internal validity can also impact the presumed causation between variables in an experiment (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). A randomized-groups post-test only experimental design was used to counteract many of the potential threats.
to internal validity. Random assignment controls selection as an internal validity threat (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). To address any validity issues that may have arose with the testing instrument, a pilot study of about 15 graduate students was run before conducting the experiment for data analysis. The goal of the pilot study was to fix any problems that could arise during the experiment. This involved incorrect wording for specific questions or having an inappropriate length to the experiment, which may occur if there are too many or too few questions. Appropriate adjustments were made to the study based on the outcome of the pilot study and recommendations of the participants.

Question clarity and the look of the stimuli were the primary issues that were addressed after the pilot study. Some of the questions in both the pre-test and post-test were rewritten to avoid participant confusion. Additionally, the article used as the stimulus had formatting and spacing issues that made the article difficult to read. Changes to the appearance of the article were made to make it look less congested.

Table 4-1. 3 x 4 Experimental Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ESPN.com Article</th>
<th>Sports Blog Article</th>
<th>Facebook© Note</th>
<th>Wire Service Article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive User Comments (30*)</td>
<td>Positive User</td>
<td>Positive User</td>
<td>Positive User</td>
<td>Positive User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative User Comments (32)</td>
<td>Negative User</td>
<td>Negative User</td>
<td>Negative User</td>
<td>Negative User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Comments (30)</td>
<td>No Comments (33)</td>
<td>No Comments (30)</td>
<td>No Comments (30)</td>
<td>No Comments (31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Number denotes the number of participants that completed the study in each cell

The study was a 3 x 4 experimental design and participants were randomly assigned to one of twelve groups, each receiving the same sports article (Table 4-1).

The article was taken from a previously published Associated Press article (Pells, 2012) about an Elite Eight matchup in the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament between the Florida Gators and the Louisville Cardinals (Appendix A). The article recapped a basketball game in which the Florida Gators had lost and were subsequently eliminated...
from the NCAA Tournament. Some minor changes to the article were made by the author of the present study that did not affect the accuracy or factuality of the article itself (Appendix B).

During the experiment, one group of participants received the stimuli with a large ESPN.com banner at the top of the article, as well as the website’s name beneath a fictional author’s name. The bottom of the article had three positive user comments from users who support the university’s men’s basketball team. The positive comments were aimed solely at the Florida Gator men’s basketball team, and were not directed at the article itself. The second group received the stimuli with a large AlligatorArmy.com banner (which is a popular Florida Gators sports blog) at the top of the article, as well as the website’s name beneath the fictional author’s name. The bottom of the article also had three positive user comments from supporters of the university’s team. The third group received the stimuli as a Facebook© note with the same fictional author and a large Facebook© banner at the top of the article. The note also had three positive comments at the end of the article. The large banners were all the same size and font and were designed to look nearly identical. The user comments were also identical for all three online sources.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth groups received the same initial stimuli with the same online sources as the previous three. However, these groups received a set of three negative user comments from users who support a rival university’s team (the Florida State Seminoles, the Kentucky Wildcats, and the Georgia Bulldogs) at the bottom of the article. The negative comments were targeted solely at the Florida Gator men’s basketball team, and were not disparaging of the article itself. The seventh, eighth, and
ninth groups were control groups which received the article with one of the three online sources, but without any user comments. The comments and the fictional usernames used were all written by the author of the present study. The user comments were all reviewed in the pilot study and deemed as appropriate for the experiment by the pilot study participants.

Because this experiment is focused mainly on the potential impact of social identity, the manipulations of positive and negative user comment tone were measured by how positively or negatively the participants identify with the anonymous users. The manipulations were analyzed after the experiment using an anonymous user comment scale, developed by Postmes et al. (2001). The user comments with a positive tone ($M = 3.62, SD = 1.62$) garnered a higher identification score from participants than the user comments with a negative tone ($M = 2.19, SD = 1.35$). A univariate ANOVA was conducted, and it was determined that a significant difference existed between the two user comment tones ($F(1, 250) = 57.59, p < .001$), thus, validating the manipulations. Furthermore, both fan identification groups identified significantly higher with the users who posted the positive comments than the users who posted the negative comments (Table 5-18), which suggests that the user comments were appropriately constructed for this study.

The final three groups received the stimuli as an article from a traditional wire service source, the Associated Press. The article had an Associated Press banner at the top of the article as well as typed beneath the author’s name. One group received only the article itself, while the two final groups received either positive or negative reader comments at the bottom of the page.
A proposal of the present study and a new protocol submission form were submitted to the University of Florida’s Non-Medical Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study for testing on human subjects on March 1, 2012. After receiving IRB approval and running a pilot study to fix any potential problems with the study, the data collection process began April 2, 2012 and ended April 26, 2012. To recruit participants for this study, consenting professors sent an email to the students in their undergraduate classes with a hyperlink to the study. Participants could complete the study from any computer with Internet access. Before gaining access, participants were shown an informed consent screen with an option to agree or disagree to the study, and had to agree before proceeding.

The experiment began with a pre-test that measured the participants’ level of identification as a sports fan in general as well as a fan of the University of Florida’s men’s basketball team (Appendix C). Total fan identification was measured for this study by combining Shank and Beasley’s (1998) refined sports involvement scale and Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) team identification scale. The involvement measure began with the phrase, “To me, sports are:” and included eight contradictory items for subjects to rate on a 1 – 7 bipolar scale (Shank & Beasley, 1998). Among those items were Boring/Exciting, Uninteresting/Interesting, Valuable/Worthless, Unappealing/Appealing, Useful/Useless, Needed/Not Needed, Irrelevant/Relevant, Unimportant/Important. Three questions were reverse coded to ensure that participants read the questions carefully, and those that did not were removed from the data set. The scale was shown to be very reliable for the present study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .941$).
The team identification scale consisted of seven items that addressed how participants feel about the UF men’s basketball team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The questions asked participants to rate their feelings on a 1 – 8 bipolar scale, developed in Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) study on sports fans and level of identification with their team. Although the present study used primarily 7-point scales, no revisions were made to Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) 8-point scale to maintain high reliability for their established scale. The questions were also designed to look nearly identical to questions from the other scales. The questions included: (1) “How important is it to you that the UF basketball team wins?” Not Important/Very Important; (2) “How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the UF basketball team?” Not at all a fan/Very much a fan; (3) “How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of the UF basketball team?” Not at all a fan/Very much a fan; (4) “During the season, how closely do you follow the UF basketball team via any of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) television news or a newspaper, d) online?” Never/Almost every day; (5) “How important is being a fan of the UF basketball team to you?” Not important/Very important; (6) “How much do you dislike UF basketball’s biggest rivals?” Do not dislike/Dislike very much; (7) “How often do you display the UF basketball team’s name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?” Never/Always. The team identification scale was also shown to be very reliable for the present study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .931$).

For the purposes of this study, these two scales were combined to define participants categorized as highly identified fans or fans with low identification. The average score of both the sports involvement scale and the team identification scale
were summed and a split of the summed means determined placement into a fan identification group for the present study. The mean of the combined score was determined \( M = 9.98, \ SD = 2.93 \) and participants with a total above and below that score were placed in the appropriate group. A one-way analysis of variance showed that there was a significant difference in mean scores between the two fan identification groups \( F(1, 374) = 763.701, \ p < .001 \). Nearly all the participants were at least minimally identified as sports fans, so identification level was defined as either high or low in this study.

Although not used to determine fan identification, behavioral fan involvement was also assessed using four open-ended questions: (1) “How many professional sporting events did you attend in the past year?”; (2) “How many college sporting events did you attend in the past year?”; (3) “In a typical week, about how many hours do you spend watching sports-related programming on television or online?”; and (4) “In a typical week, about how many hours do you spend reading sports-related periodicals?” These open-ended responses were used to validate assumptions that highly identified fans are more invested in sports and thus attend more sporting events and use more sports media than people who do not identify themselves as fans (Shank & Beasley, 1998).

The pre-test also included two questions about information seeking behavior of both online and offline sports media sources. Participants were asked to “Mark all that apply” to the following questions: “Among your favorite sports, where do you get your information about sports?” and “When seeking sports information online, where do you get your information?” A list of responses was provided to the participant along with a “none” option and an “other” option with the write-in response box for a participant to list
any options that did not appear on the list of possible choices. The pre-test concluded with a set of three demographic questions about participant age, gender, and field of study.

After participants completed the pre-test questionnaire, they were randomly assigned a sports article in one of the twelve groups listed earlier (Table 4-1). The online experiment was programmed to distribute the stimuli evenly. Before seeing the stimuli, participants received a set of on-screen instructions to read everything that appeared on the following screen, and that they will then be asked to answer questions regarding what they just read. The stimuli had a large banner of the online or traditional news source at the top, followed by the title of the article. Beneath the title of the article was the date, the fictional author's name, and the name of the news source again. The sports article, which was the same for every participant, appeared underneath the news source's name. Unless the participant was assigned to a control scenario, the participant also saw user comments (either positive or negative) at the bottom of the page.

After reading the article, the final aspect of the experiment was the post-test questionnaire. Certain aspects of the post-test varied based on the stimulus that the participant received. The first scale in the questionnaire measured a participant's attitude toward the website that the article was said to originate from or the Associated Press (O'Cass & Carlson, 2010). Participants were asked to rate how they feel about ESPN.com, AlligatorArmy.com, Facebook©, or the Associated Press on a 1 – 7 Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The statements in the scale were: (1) "I feel happy when I use the website," (2) "I feel cheerful when I use the website," (3) "I
feel excited when I use the website,” (4) “I am satisfied with my decision to use the website,” (5) “My choice to use the website was a wise one,” (6) “I think I did the right thing in using the website,” (7) “The website does a good job of satisfying my needs,” (8) “I will say positive things about this website to others,” and (9) “I will recommend this website to others who seek my advice.” The scale was modified slightly for the traditional news source by replacing “website” with “Associated Press.” For the present study, the O’Cass and Carlson’s (2010) website scale was shown to be extremely reliable (Cronbach’s α = .962).

For the participants that received the stimuli with user comments, the next scale examined a participant’s attitude toward the group of people who posted the user comments (Walther et al., 2010; Postmes et al., 2001). Participants were asked to identify their feelings about five statements on a 1 – 7 bipolar scale ranging from “Not at all” to “Very much.” The statements for those that were exposed to the user comments were: (1) “I feel a bond with these people,” (2) “I see myself as a member of this group,” (3) “I regard this group as important,” (4) “At this moment, I identify with this group,” and (5) “The people who posted these comments were personally identifiable to me.” The participants that were randomly selected for the control groups were not shown this set of statements. This scale was also shown to be very reliable for the present study (Cronbach’s α = .962).

The next set of post-test questions was developed from a scale that measures the perceived credibility of the article (Bucy, 2003). Participants were asked nine questions about how they feel about the article itself and provided two contradictory items along a 7 – point bipolar scale. The credibility questions and responses included: (1) “How fair
was the author in the article?” Not at all fair/Very fair; (2) “How interesting was the article?” Not at all interesting/Very interesting; (3) “How clearly written was the article?” Not at all clear/Very clear; (4) “How well did the article flow?” Poorly/Very well; (5) “How enjoyable was the article to read?” Not at all enjoyable/Very enjoyable; (6) “How accurate was the article?” Not at all accurate/Very accurate; (7) “How believable was the article?” Not at all believable/Very believable; (8) “How informative was the article?” Not at all informative/Very informative; (9) “How in-depth was the author on issues?” Not at all in-depth/Very in-depth. Additionally, the credibility scale was shown to be highly reliable for this experiment (Cronbach’s α = .89).

Because the entire sample population was made up of University of Florida undergraduate students, the final scale of the experiment was designed to measure the participant’s attitude toward the University of Florida and the university’s relationship to one’s social identity (Mael & Tetrick, 1992; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Participants were shown ten statements and asked to mark their opinions on a 7 – point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The statements used for this scale were: (1) “When someone criticizes the University of Florida, it feels like a personal insult,” (2) “I am interested in what others think about the University of Florida,” (3) “When I talk about this university, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they,’” (4) “The University of Florida’s successes are my successes,” (5) “When someone praises this university, it feels like a personal compliment,” (6) “I act like a University of Florida person to a great extent,” (7) “If a story in the media criticized UF, I would feel embarrassed,” (8) “I don’t act like a University of Florida person,” (9) “I have a number of qualities typical of UF people,” (10) “The limitations associated with UF people apply
to me also.” The eighth statement of this scale was reverse coded before data analysis began because it contradicts the other statements on this scale. This university identification scale was shown to be very reliable for the present study (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .896 \)).

After answering all the questions on the post-test, the participants were shown a post-experiment debrief. The debrief provided a brief explanation of the purpose of the experiment, and explained that participants were randomly assigned to one of several conditions. Additionally, the debrief explained that while all participants read the same article, the source of that article and the comments following the article were manipulated for the purposes of this study. Finally, the participants were thanked for their time and asked to not to talk to others about the study while responses were still being collected. The findings and the implications of this study are illuminated in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER 5
RESULTS

Sample Description

The present study had a total of 376 valid participants, all of whom were undergraduate students at the University of Florida. The mean age was 20.45 years old and the large majority of participants were female ($N = 255$) (Table 5-1). The participants were all recruited from the university’s College of Journalism and Communications, so the majors that appeared most frequently in the sample population were majors in the college: Telecommunications ($N = 86$), Journalism ($N = 74$), and Advertising ($N = 58$). The only major outside the college that made up at least ten percent of the sample population was Business/Finance ($N = 44$).

Table 5-1. Profile of Sample Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Study</th>
<th>Total ($N = 376$)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>20.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>17 – 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>1.757</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Finance</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Management</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan Identification Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the pre-test questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate all the sources that they use for seeking information about sports. The participants were shown to be very reliant on the Internet for sports information ($N = 266$). Other than online, television is another source that more than half of the participants indicated using with sports TV highlight shows (such as Sportscenter on ESPN) and sports TV talk shows as their primary sources of information (Table 5-2). Newspapers were also shown to be used by a large portion of the sample population ($N = 135$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Total ($N = 376$)</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Sports Information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports TV Highlight Shows</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports TV Talk Shows</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Sports Magazines</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and Family</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Total ($N = 376$)</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Online Sports Information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Dedicated Websites</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter©</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Newspaper Websites (such as nytimes.com)</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blogs</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Sport Magazine Websites</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Percentage totals exceed 100 because participants were asked to mark all applicable responses

In a separate question, participants were asked to specify all the online sources that they seek for sports information (Table 5-2). Sports-dedicated websites, such as ESPN.com and yahoosports.com, are used by almost two-thirds of the sample population ($N = 239$), which was the most common online source by a wide margin.
Social media websites Facebook© (N = 178) and Twitter© (N = 137) were the second and third most popular online sources for sports information respectively. Interestingly, online newspaper websites (N = 114), such as nytimes.com, are more popular among the participants than sports blogs (N = 69). Although neither source is exceedingly popular among the respondents, online sport magazine websites (N = 61) were used by more people than printed sports magazines (N = 43).

For the purposes of this study, 53.7% of the participants were classified as highly identified sports fans (N = 202), while 46.3% were classified as fans with low identification (N = 174). The average score of Shank and Beasley’s (1998) refined sports involvement scale and the average score of Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) team identification scale were summed to determine a baseline score for how strongly a participant identifies him or herself as a sports fan and as a fan of a University of Florida sports team. For Shank and Beasley’s (1998) scale, only questions regarding a participant’s identification as a sports fan were used to measure fan identification in the present study. The behavioral involvement questions from Shank and Beasley’s (1998) study were only used to illustrate differences in involvement between the two identification groups. The mean of the combined score was determined (M = 9.98, SD = 2.93) and participants with a total above and below that score were placed in the appropriate group (Table 5-3). A one-way analysis of variance showed that there was a significant difference between the two fan identification groups between their mean scores on the combined scales (F(1, 374) = 763.701, p < .001).

Participants were also asked about their behavioral involvement as a sports fan. These questions pertained to the hours per week a participant spends watching sports-
related programming either on television or on the Internet and the hours per week spent reading sports-related periodicals. There was a significant difference for both responses for highly identified fans and fans with low identification (Table 5-4). Highly identified fans ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 6.79$) spent more than four times the amount of time watching sports related programming than fans with low identification ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 2.31$). Highly identified fans also spent more hours per week ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 4.38$) reading sports-related periodicals than fans with low identification ($M = .76$, $SD = 3.30$).

Table 5-3. Analysis of Variance for Fans with High and Low Identification on the Fan Identification Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>7.39</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>763.701</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>12.21</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001

Table 5-4. Analysis of Variance of Sports Behavioral Involvement for Fans with High and Low Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Involvement Category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours Watching Sports-Related Programming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>61.80</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>6.79</td>
<td>.478</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours Reading Sports-Related Periodicals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16.27</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Sporting Events Attended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.11</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>.463</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Sporting Events Attended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>52.88</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>11.46</td>
<td>10.35</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001
Yearly game attendance was also measured in this experiment and there was a significant difference for both professional ($F(1, 374) = 23.11, p < .001$) and college sporting events attended ($F(1, 374) = 52.88, p < .001$), based on identification level. Highly identified fans ($M = 4.36, SD = 6.58$) attend nearly three times more professional sporting events than fans with low identification ($M = 1.78, SD = 2.83$). Because the sample population is solely made up of college students, it was also appropriate to determine the number of college sporting events the two groups attend per year. Highly identified fans ($M = 11.46, SD = 10.35$) attend two times more live college sporting events than fans with low identification ($M = 5.05, SD = 5.72$). Ultimately, the significant differences in average scores on the identification scales and on behavioral fan involvement illuminate the stark differences between the two identification groups, and give credence to their use for data analysis purposes in the present study.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

**Research Question 1**

RQ1 sought to determine which medium is perceived as more credible: wire service or online. Table 5-5 illustrates the mean credibility scores for both media. In total, the online group had approximately three times more participants assigned to that stimuli, but the credibility mean was still slightly lower for the online medium ($M = 4.59, SD = 4.62$) than for the wire service ($M = 4.62, SD = .98$). A univariate analysis of variance was conducted to detect significant differences between means. However, no significant differences were discovered between the media ($F(1, 374) = .091, p = .763$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire Service</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 2

RQ2 also examined medium credibility for both the online medium and wire service, but looked specifically at highly identified sports fans. This research question sought to determine which medium that highly identified fans found more credible. In contrast to RQ1, the mean scores for the online medium ($M = 4.94, SD = .96$) were slightly higher than the wire service ($M = 4.85, SD = .90$). Table 5-6 illustrates the differences in means for the credibility scale as well as the results of a univariate analysis of variance, which did not suggest a significant difference between the two media ($F(1, 200) = .360, p = .549$).

Table 5-6. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Credibility Scores of Medium for Highly Identified Fans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.360</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>.549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire Service</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 3

Similar to the previous research question, RQ3 examined whether fans with low identification judge the online medium or the wire service to be more credible. Unlike highly identified sports fans, the mean scores for fans with low identification were found to be slightly higher for the wire service ($M = 4.32, SD = 1.01$) than online ($M = 4.19, SD = .94$). Table 5-7 demonstrates the differences in credibility scores for both the online medium and wire service as assessed by fans with low identification. Additionally, a univariate analysis of variance was run to determine if a difference in the means exists. However, there was no significant difference between the two media ($F(1, 172) = .583, p = .446$).
Table 5.7. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Credibility Scores of Medium for Fans with Low Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.583</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>.446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire Service</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 4**

RQ4 sought to determine which of the three online sources (ESPN, sports blog, and Facebook©) were perceived to be the most credible. Table 5-8 demonstrates the differences in means of the online sources and the results of an analysis of variance to determine if there is a significant difference among means \((F(2, 278) = 2.04, \ p = .131)\). No significant differences were found among the three sources; however, ESPN.com was found to have the highest mean score on the scale \((M = 4.71, SD = .97)\). The sports blog, alligatorarmy.com, had the second highest mean score \((M = 4.63, SD = 1.03)\), and Facebook© was rated lowest by the participants \((M = 4.42, SD = 1.04)\).

Table 5-8. Analysis of Variance of Credibility Scores for Online Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Source</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hypothesis 1**

H1 stated that the mainstream online sports article from ESPN.com would be perceived as more credible than the other online sources by both highly identified sports fans and fans with low identification. This hypothesis tested the main effects of online source and fan identification level on the credibility of the article. Table 5-9 illustrates the differences in credibility scores for the three sources based on identification level. Fans with low identification rated the ESPN article \((M = 4.50, SD = .99)\) as more credible than the sports blog \((M = 4.12, SD = .95)\) and Facebook© \((M = 3.99, SD = .83)\).
However, the sports blog \((M = 5.04, SD = .92)\) had the highest mean score from the highly identified fans, followed by ESPN \((M = 4.89, SD = .92)\) and Facebook© \((M = 4.88, SD = 1.06)\), which were almost even. Two univariate ANOVAs were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference among the online sources. As shown in Table 5-9, no significant difference among the online sources was shown for the highly identified fans \((F(2, 145) = .440, p = .648)\), so, for that identification group, H1 was not supported. However, a significant difference among the online sources was shown for the fans with low identification \((F(2, 130) = 3.66, p = .028)\), who rated the ESPN article significantly higher than the other two online sources, thus giving partial support to H1.

### Table 5-9. Univariate Analysis of Variance for Online Source Credibility Based on Identification Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Source</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.440</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>.648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Hypothesis 2

H2 stated that highly identified sports fans would rate the online websites themselves more favorably than fans with low identification in the study. This hypothesis was intended to test the main effects of fan identification level on the perceptions of a website. Table 5-10 demonstrates the differences in website evaluation scores for the three online sources based on identification level. Even though the sports blog received the highest credibility score from highly identified fans, both fan identification groups evaluated the sports blog, alligatorarmy.com, as the least
favorable website. For highly identified fans, ESPN ($M = 5.28$, $SD = .90$) had the highest mean score on the source evaluation scale, followed closely by Facebook® ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.12$), while fans with low identification rated Facebook® ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .94$) higher than ESPN ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.17$). A univariate analysis of variance was conducted to test the hypothesis, and H2 was supported.

Table 5-10. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Website Evaluation Score Based on Online Source and Identification Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>52.49</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001

As shown in Table 5-10, identification level had an impact on evaluations of a website in which every online source was rated higher by the highly identified fans, and there was a significant difference in mean scores ($F(1, 275) = 52.49$, $p < .001$). Essentially, highly identified fans found the websites ESPN.com, AlligatorArmy.com, and Facebook®.com to all be significantly more favorable websites than the fans with low identification. Additionally, using a univariate ANOVA, a significant difference for the website scores was found between the online stimuli received by the participants ($F(2, 275) = 9.26$, $p < .001$). Going further, there was also a significant difference in the interaction between the online stimuli received and identification level on the website evaluation scores ($F(2, 275) = 3.53$, $p = .031$). Ultimately, the combination of both
independent variables (online source and fan identification level) caused significant
differences in how participants rated the online sources.

Hypothesis 3

H3 stated that highly identified fans would view the sports article as more credible
than fans with low identification. This hypothesis was intended to test the main effects
of fan identification level on the perceived credibility of the article in the twelve stimuli
groups. In Table 5-11, the credibility mean scores for article credibility are shown.

Table 5-11. Means of Credibility Scores for Each Stimuli Group Separated by
Identification Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stimuli Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Positive</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Negative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Control</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Positive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Negative</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Control</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Positive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Negative</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Control</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Positive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Negative</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Control</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification Total</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Positive</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Negative</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN Control</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Positive</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Negative</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Control</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Positive</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Negative</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook© Control</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Positive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Negative</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Control</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification Total</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Highly identified fans ($M = 4.92, SD = .95$) rated the sports article as more credible on average than fans with low identification ($M = 4.22, SD = .95$). As shown in Table 5-12, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine if a significant difference in means was present for the two identification levels. There was a significant difference in credibility scores ($F(1, 352) = 44.89, p < .001$), so H3 was supported. Among the stimuli groups, the ESPN.com group with negative comments for fans with low identification ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.09$) had the highest mean score, while the Facebook© group with negative comments was found to have the lowest mean score for fans with low identification ($M = 3.96, SD = .79$). For highly identified fans, the ESPN.com positive group received the highest credibility score ($M = 5.26, SD = .80$), and, interestingly, the ESPN.com negative group received the lowest credibility score from highly identified fans ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.00$).

Table 5-12. Univariate Analysis of Variance for Credibility Score Based on Identification Level and Stimuli Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>High Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Low Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Comment Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>44.89</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001
Aside from fan identification level, a univariate analysis of variance of the credibility scores based on the stimuli received. This did not reveal significant differences between the twelve assigned stimuli groups themselves \((F(11, 364) = 1.36, p = .191)\). Additionally, a difference in credibility scores based on sports source received and user comment tone was also analyzed using a univariate ANOVA, but a significant difference was not found in either case (Table 5-12). Essentially, fan identification level was the only factor to have a significant influence on the perceived credibility of the sports article.

**Hypothesis 4**

H4 stated that highly identified fans would have a stronger group identity with their university than fans with low identification. This hypothesis tests the main effects of fan identification level on group identity with the University of Florida. Table 5-13 illustrates that fans with low identification \((M = 4.65, SD = 1.05)\) do not identify with their university nearly as much as highly identified fans \((M = 5.60, SD = .77)\). A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean scores for the university identification scale. A significant difference was found between fans with low identification and highly identified fans on this scale \((F(1, 374) = 104.11, p < .001)\), thus giving support to H4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>104.11</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(p\)-value < .001
Hypothesis 5

H5 stated that highly identified fans would find the article to be more credible when coupled with anonymous positive user comments than with negative user comments or without comments. This hypothesis tested the main effects of user comment tone on credibility for highly identified fans. Table 5-14 shows the differences in credibility scores based on the tone of the user comments. Articles with the positive user comments garnered the highest credibility mean score ($M = 5.08, SD = .97$), followed by the control group which received no user comments ($M = 4.84, SD = .91$), and the articles with negative user comments ($M = 4.82, SD = .94$). A univariate analysis of variance was run, and found no significant difference between the means for credibility ($F(2, 299) = 1.61, p = .203$), so H5 was not supported.

Table 5-14. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Credibility Score for Highly Identified Fans Based on User Comment Tone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Comment Tone</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 6

H6 asserted that the perceived credibility of the article would change more significantly by the tone of the user comments for highly identified fans than for fans with low identification. Thus, the hypothesis tested the main effects of user comment tone on perceived credibility and compared the significant differences between the two identification levels. In H5, the impact of user comment tone on credibility for highly identified fans is outlined in Table 5-14. Conversely, Table 5-15 illustrates the differences in credibility scores based on the user comment tone for fans with low identification. For this identification level, positive user comments also garnered the
highest credibility mean score from participants ($M = 4.44, SD = .98$). However, articles with negative user comments ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.02$) received slightly higher credibility scores than articles without user comments ($M = 4.09, SD = .84$). A univariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in means for credibility ratings, but no significant difference was found ($F(2, 171) = 1.95, p = .145$). Additionally, the low identification fan group had a higher F-statistic than highly identified fans, which does not give any support to H6. However, credibility was not significantly impacted by user comment tone for either identification level.

Table 5-15. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Credibility Score for Fans with Low Identification Based on User Comment Tone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Comment Tone</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>.145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 7

H7 stated that highly identified fans would have stronger feelings either in favor or against the users than fans with low identification, based on the tone of the comments. The hypothesis tested the main effects of user comment tone on group identity with the users and compared the significant differences between the two identification levels. Table 5-16 shows the differences in means for both fan identification groups on the user group identification scale based on the tone of the comments, as well as the results of two ANOVAs. Fans with low identification ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.49$) did not identify as closely with the users who posted positive user comments than the highly identified fans ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.60$). For the users that posted negative comments, neither highly identified fans ($M = 2.25, SD = 1.41$) nor fans with low identification ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.30$) linked strongly with the users. Based on the results of two univariate analyses of
variance, highly identified fans ($F(1, 136) = 47.94, p < .001$) were shown to have a
greater difference in means between the positive and negative comments and a higher
F-statistic than the low fan identification group ($F(1, 112) = 11.92, p = .001$), which gives
support for H7.

Table 5-16. Univariate Analyses of Variance of User Identification Score Based on User
Comment Tone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Comment Tone**</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.92</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47.94</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001

**Note: Participants in the control groups were not given this scale in the post-test

As shown in Table 5-17, another univariate analysis of variance was conducted to
examine the potential impact of the three independent variables on group identification
scores with the anonymous users. The analysis showed that both fan identification
level ($F(1, 236) = 9.07, p = .003$) and the tone of the user comments ($F(2, 236) = 49.45,$
$p < .001$) had a significant influence on user identification scores. Essentially, there was
a significantly higher difference in how highly identified fans reported group identification
with the anonymous users than the fans with low identification. The tone of the user
comments also significantly impacted participant identification with the anonymous
users, with positive comments garnering a significantly higher score on the user
identification scale than negative comments. Additionally, the interaction between
identification level and user comment tone also garnered a statistically significant
difference in user identification scores ($F(1, 236) = 5.26, p = .023$). The combination of
these two variables had a significant influence on how participants rated their group
identification level with the users. For example, highly identified fans who received the article with positive comments had significantly higher user identification scores than fans with low identification who received the article with negative comments. However, the sports source received did not cause a significant difference in participant identification ratings of the anonymous users ($F(2, 352) = 2.43, p = .090$).

Table 5-17. Univariate Analysis of Variance of User Identification Score Based on Fan Identification Level and Stimuli Received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>High Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Low Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level</td>
<td>9.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>236</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>.783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook®</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Comment Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49.45</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level X UserComment Tone Tone Interaction</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td><strong>.271</strong></td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td><strong>.276</strong></td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001
**Note: Standard Error

**Hypothesis 8**

H8 stated that highly identified fans would have stronger positive or negative feelings about the media source itself (website or AP article) than fans with low identification based on the tone of the user comments. Therefore, the hypothesis tested the main effects of user comment tone on source evaluation score and compared the significant differences between the two identification levels. Table 5-18 shows the differences in means for both identification groups on the website evaluation scale.
based on the tone of the comments, and the results of two ANOVAs. For fans with low identification, positive user comments ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.02$) garnered the highest evaluation score of the website, followed by negative user comments ($M = 4.05, SD = 1.34$), and no comments trailed both scenarios ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.02$). Similarly, highly identified fans rated the website highest when presented with positive user comments ($M = 4.93, SD = .92$), which was followed by negative user comments ($M = 4.68, SD = .94$) and no comments ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.06$). Neither identification level had a significant difference in means on the website evaluation scale, which does not support H8. The ANOVA for highly identified fans ($F(2, 199) = 1.93, p = .148$) did result in a higher F-statistic than fans with low identification ($F(2, 171) = .95, p = .388$); however, the results were not significant enough to fully support the hypothesis.

Table 5-18. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Source Evaluation Score for Fans with Low and High Identification Based on Tone of User Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Comment Tone</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, Table 5-19 outlines a univariate analysis of variance that was conducted to examine the potential influence of all three independent variables on the evaluation scores of a sports news source. A significant difference in the source evaluation scores was shown between the two identification groups ($F(1, 352) = 45.25, p < .001$) as well as the sports source received ($F(3, 352) = 10.95, p < .001$). The interaction between identification level and sports source also garnered a statistically
significant difference in sports source evaluation scores ($F(1, 352) = 3.36, p = .019$).

Ultimately, the combination of the two factors influenced participant evaluations of the sports sources. For example, highly identified fans who received the ESPN.com or Facebook© source, which were the two highest rated sources, had significantly higher evaluations than fans with low identification who received the Associated Press source, which was the lowest rated sports source. User comment tone did not, however, cause a significant difference in source evaluation scores for the participants ($F(2, 352) = 2.43, p = .090$).

Table 5-19. Univariate Analysis of Variance of Source Evaluation Score Based on Fan Identification Level and Stimuli Received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>High Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Low Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Identification</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>45.25</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Identification</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.95</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPN</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Blog</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook©</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Comment Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Level X Sports Source Interaction</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>.144**</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.159**</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001

**Note: Standard Error

**Gender**

Although the present study was not focused on gender, the large majority of participants were female (67.8%), so data analyses that examined potential differences
between the two genders were conducted. As outlined in Table 5-20, five univariate ANOVAs were conducted to determine if a significant difference existed between male and female participants for any of the variables being studied. The scores on the fan identification scale were not significantly different between the genders \((F(1, 374) = 1.74, p = .190)\). Among the experiment’s dependent variables, only perceived credibility had a significant difference based on gender \((F(1, 374) = 14.85, p < .001)\). Males \((M = 4.88, SD = 1.01)\) rated the article as significantly more credible than females \((M = 4.46, SD = .98)\). However, no significant differences were found between the ratings of the sports sources \((F(1, 374) = 2.39, p = .123)\), participant identification with the University of Florida \((F(1, 374) = 2.38, p = .124)\), and group identification with the anonymous users \((F(1, 250) = .82, p = .367)\).

Table 5-20. Univariate Analyses of Variance for the Participant Scales Based on Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Scale</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fan Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>9.84</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.85</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p-value < .001
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

The global popularity of sport continues to reach new heights as online newspapers and sports-dedicated websites allow fans 24-hour access to their favorite sports and teams, making sport media consumerism a multi-billion dollar industry (Raney & Bryant, 2006). This instant access to statistics and scores may not, however, have impacted credibility in a positive way. Some websites often lack proper editorial review, analysis of content, and factual verification (Chung, Kim & Kim, 2010), and the pressure to post articles online immediately after an event may substitute speed for quality (Gunter et al., 2009; Bucy, 2003). Because the landscape of sports journalism is constantly changing, the present study was designed to examine how medium, article source, fan identification, and user comment tone can all influence the credibility of the sports article or one’s attitude towards a sports source.

An online experiment was developed, and participants \((N = 376)\) were randomly assigned a sports article in one of twelve stimuli groups. The article source was indicated to have appeared on a mainstream sports website, a sports blog, a social networking site, or a wire service. Participants also received the stimuli with either positive user comments, negative user comments, or without comments. Prior to receiving the stimuli, participants completed a pre-test with questions regarding fan and team identification, sports behavioral involvement, and demographic information. Participants also completed a post-test with questions designed to measure article credibility, evaluations of a sports source, group identification with anonymous users, and identification with their university.
Overall, fan identification level was shown to be the most important factor in the ratings of perceived credibility for sports articles. There was no statistical difference in the credibility scores between the wire service and online medium, and both were rated as only slightly credible. Highly identified fans found the sports article to be significantly more credible than the fans with low identification as a whole and nearly every stimuli group. Highly identified fans also evaluated all three websites significantly more favorably than fans with low identification. There was a clear ratings disparity for the online sources as highly identified fans rated all the websites favorably and fans with low identification rated them all slightly negatively, except for Facebook©. For both fan identification groups, Facebook© was the only website that received a positive score from both groups, while blogs were rated as the least favorable online source by both groups. Additionally, highly identified fans and fans with low identification had a significantly higher group identity with users who posted positive comments than users who posted negative comments. However, user comment tone did not influence credibility ratings or evaluation scores of the sports news sources. Each finding will be addressed individually as well as addressed in the larger context of the entire study, sports journalism, and media research. The findings will also be compared to previous research on credibility, social identity theory, fan identification, and the SIDE model, and juxtaposed with comparisons to the current state of news journalism and sports fan culture.

**Findings**

The Internet news cycle has been continually evolving with advancements in technology, and the credibility of news, particularly online news, has recently come into question (Gunter et al., 2009). New (and often unreliable) websites sprout up
frequently, and people are, perhaps, more wary of news than at any time in history
(Gunter et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2010). Online journalism is often subject to
the same credibility standards of traditional media, but the round-the-clock nature of the
Internet has altered the news landscape and the way it is reported (Arant & Anderson,
2001). Because news credibility has taken a hit with the public, there is reason to
believe that this phenomenon has impacted perceptions of media coverage outside of
traditional news. This lack of credibility for news may have also translated to the sports
world, and the present study was designed to examine the factors that may contribute to
the perceived credibility of sports articles as well as the factors that can impact attitudes
toward a particular news or sports source.

Some scholars argue that online news stories may remain at the same high quality
of traditional news, however, the perceptions of credibility have changed with new forms
of sourcing and storytelling methods available to online journalists (Choi et al., 2006).
Sports journalism, both online and offline, is built on the same principles as traditional
journalism and oftentimes can be subject to the same ethical guidelines and standards
(Oates & Pauly, 2007). Because a number of factors can impact one’s perception of a
sports article, the present study looked at how article source, medium, fan identification,
and user comment tone can all impact the credibility of the sports article or a news
source itself.

As evidenced in earlier studies (Hu & Tang, 2010; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998;
Wann, 2006), a fan’s consumption habits and his or her perception of sports and media
can be highly dependent on fan identification, or the personal commitment or emotional
involvement a person has with a sport or sport organization. Fan identification has been
shown to predict fan consumption behavior through attending live sporting events and sport media usage (Milne & McDonald, 1999). Highly identified fans have also been shown to be more likely to watch games in person or through media (Laverie & Arnett, 2000), pay more for sporting event tickets, and stay loyal to a poorly performing team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). In the present study, fan identification level was shown to have a significant impact on behavioral fan involvement. Highly identified fans spent more than four times the amount of time watching sports-related programming per week than fans with low identification, as well as spent approximately three times as many hours per week reading sports-related periodicals. Additionally, highly identified fans attend nearly three times more professional sporting events than fans with low identification and attend two times as many college sporting events. This discrepancy in sports consumption helps to illuminate the difference between the two groups and is consistent with the previous research. Highly identified fans are likely more interested in sports and their favorite teams, so they are willing to devote more time and spend more money on sports. Interestingly, this identification distinction not only showed a profound difference in sports behavioral involvement, but also had as large of an impact on the way that participants viewed the credibility of the article.

Because article medium has been shown to impact credibility in the past (Graziano & McGrath, 1986; Sundar & Nass, 2001; Bucy, 2003), the present study sought to determine how the medium may impact the credibility of a sports article. Looking specifically at wire service and online media, there was no significant difference in credibility scores between the two media, as both were seen as slightly credible. This lack of significance contradicts Kiousis’s (2001) study on medium credibility, where print...
was seen as significantly more credible than other types of news media, including online and television, although none of the media were seen as overly credible. When looking at credibility in the two identification groups in the present study, highly identified fans were minimally affected by medium when judging the credibility of the article. Similarly, there was no significant difference in the credibility scores between the two media for fans with low identification.

The results of the present study may signify a distinction between sports and news coverage, and a difference in the modern interests of sports and news media consumers. In this study, the credibility of the online medium for sports media consumers may now rival traditional media based on the dedication of established news organizations to provide users with up-to-the-minute sports updates. People have become accustomed to cell phone and online sports access literally at their fingertips. Traditional media, such as a wire service, may have maintained a level of public trust over the years with fact-checking procedures that may not exist for less-established websites, but there is an aspect of instant gratification that is severely lacking in traditional media. The speed with which the Internet can provide information may also have been offset by the amount of false information that can spread quickly throughout the Internet. Recently, NBC had come under fire for broadcasting the major competitions at the 2012 London Olympics on tape delay (Levy, 2012). The absence of live coverage for many of the Olympics’ major events caused a social media uproar and the Twitter© hashtag, #NBCFail, from people who were getting the competition results ruined for them online (Levy, 2012). Although the television medium was not tested in the present study, this illuminates the instant gratification that people desire from the
online medium that has been noticeably absent from all other media. Even NBC, which had the capability to offer viewers live coverage of every Olympic event, chose to broadcast many events in primetime to garner a larger audience and higher advertising revenue. Traditional media is at an even larger disadvantage because there is an even longer delay for sports articles and event results, and this does not resonate with readers who want immediate updates. Essentially, neither medium was seen as exceedingly credible, but the seemingly limitless nature of the Internet for broadcasting and reporting sports is an issue for sports journalists and news organizations to consider when attempting to raise the credibility of their brand.

Despite research to the contrary (Gunter, 2006; Metzger, Flanagan & Medders, 2010; Chung, Kim & Kim, 2010), the credibility ratings of the three online sources were not significantly different, which reflects the present study’s earlier findings about medium credibility. Among the three online sources, the article appearing on the ESPN website was seen as slightly more credible than on the sports blog and even more so for Facebook©. ESPN.com may have received slightly higher ratings on the credibility scores because it is an established sports news website and is a mainstay in the culture of sports media (Gunter et al., 2009). The overall similarity in credibility scores among the three sources may have occurred because the participants in the study all received the same article, which was originally published by the Associated Press. Essentially, the article covered a real-life sporting event that may have been fresh in the participants’ minds and was factually accurate, so it seems logical that participants would rate the article as moderately credible.
The article also covered a sporting event in which the sample population’s identified team lost. Wann and McGeorge (1994) found that highly identified fans reported a greater increase in positive emotions after a win and a greater increase in negative emotions after a loss than minimally identified fans. Highly identified fans have also been shown to enhance their well-being after a win and protect it after a loss by using biased descriptions about the game outcome (Wann et al. 2002). While the scales used to determine fan identification level appeared before the article in the experiment, the outcome of the game may have impacted participant responses to the credibility and sports source scales. In the present study, both fan identification groups may have been trying to placate the negative emotions of a team loss by rating the article as less credible than they would a team win, and this scenario may have had a more profound impact on the highly identified fans. Although game outcome and the disparity between wins and losses for fans have been shown to affect a person’s emotional state (Wann & McGeorge, 1994; Wann et al., 2002), highly identified fans may become so accustomed to reading both positive and negative game outcomes throughout a given season that the effect on perceptions of article credibility is minimal. Sports blogs and team-dedicated websites may use biased descriptions to soften the impact of a loss in their online articles, and this may positively impact the perceived credibility of the article to highly identified fans.

The present study also examined the impact that branding can have on credibility assessments for each identification level. Based on the previous literature on news branding (Ranie et al., 2003; Gunter et al., 2009), it was hypothesized that both highly identified fans and fans with low identification would rate the ESPN article as more
credible than the same article on the sports blog or on Facebook© because ESPN has an established reputation in sports journalism that the other two do not. There was no significant difference in the credibility scores for highly identified fans, although the credibility means were slightly higher on the blog than on ESPN or Facebook©. However, fans with low identification, who also reported reading significantly fewer sports periodicals than highly identified fans, rated the ESPN article as significantly more credible than the other two sources, providing some validation for the hypothesis.

Gunter (2006) found that established offline news brands that migrate online command more public trust than more contemporary online only brands. This may have occurred because even fans with low identification are at least somewhat familiar with ESPN as a sports news source, but are not as familiar with AlligatorArmy.com as a sports blog or Facebook© as more than simply a social networking website for connecting with peers. Highly identified fans, however, are seemingly more aware of sports blogs and are more likely to perceive an article on a sports blog as credible. Modern blogging is unlike conventional reporting in that it incorporates elements of speculation and first-person narration that is absent in mainstream news (Robinson, 2006). These aspects may be what drive highly identified sports fans to read sports blogs over established sports news brands.

Attitudes towards the websites themselves were also examined, and it was hypothesized that highly identified fans would rate the online websites more favorably than fans with low identification. Using O’Cass and Carlson’s (2010) website evaluation scale, highly identified fans rated all three websites significantly higher than fans with low identification, and there was a clear disparity in the ratings as highly identified fans
rated all the online sources favorably and low identification fans rated all the websites slightly negatively except for Facebook©. Fans with low identification rated Facebook© as their favorite website of the three options, but the sports articles appearing on Facebook© were rated as the least credible. Social networking websites serve many purposes and, as evidenced by these results, are popular among college students. However, the popularity of Facebook© does not seem to translate to sports article credibility, especially for fans with low identification in this study.

Additionally, the biggest disparity in the evaluation scores between the two identification groups was their assessments of the ESPN.com website. Highly identified fans rated the website 1.3 points higher (out of 7) than fans with low identification and rated it as the most favorable website among the three. These findings are not shocking because highly identified fans are much more behaviorally involved and are more avid sports consumers, so they should be more likely to rate a sports-dedicated website more favorably than fans with low identification. ESPN also established itself as a sports brand on television before making an online transition, so it has appeal for sports fans across media. It is somewhat surprising that all three websites were rated more favorably by the highly identified fans, even though Facebook© is generally unaffiliated with sports. This could have occurred because the website assessment scale appeared after reading the article, and fans with low identification may have evaluated the website more negatively after reading an article that did not interest them.

Although not tested, highly identified fans may also be more likely to have friends who are highly identified fans. Friends who share this common interest may use Twitter© or Facebook© to share sports information with each other and links to other
websites. Social identity theory asserts that memberships in important social groups will result in the enhancement of a person’s social identity, which results in a more positive self-concept for that individual (Tajfel, 1981). The major distinction between social networking websites and other websites is that the information is being shared through friends, so there may be heightened level of value to the information and a more favorable attitude toward Facebook©. Highly identified fans may also be more comfortable using all aspects of online media because sports have become reliant on the Internet. Highly identified sports fans have probably used at least one, if not all, of these websites to look up game scores or gain insight about a team. Advancements in technology have also given Internet users more and quicker access to information. Sports fans, particularly, have reaped the benefits of recent technological advancements, where many sports media companies are adopting a “TV Everywhere model” (Albanesius, 2012). For the 2012 Olympic Games in London, NBC created two smartphone apps that allowed for more than 3,500 hours of live streaming Olympic content and in-depth details about athletes and the Games (Albanesius, 2012). Attendance at live sporting events is even being threatened by new technologies. The commissioner of the National Football League instituted an initiative to make Wi-Fi available in all 31 of the league’s stadiums to compete with the ever-improving quality of viewing football at home with a high-definition television or laptop (Davis, 2012). Because sports fans are becoming more exposed to new media and more familiar with new technology, there is greater potential for more positive feelings about all websites. Interestingly, the website evaluation scores were also significantly different for the three online sources, regardless of identification level. Both fans with low identification
and highly identified fans rated the blogs as the least favorable online source, and Facebook was the only website that received a positive score from both identification groups. There was also a significant difference in the interaction between online source and identification level, so both factors were shown to contribute to how an individual evaluates a website. These findings, ultimately, suggest that there is an empirical link between both fan identification and online sources themselves, when one is evaluating satisfaction with a website. Wann (2006) found that team identification and social-psychological health are positively related because fan identification leads to social connections which can enhance well-being. Wann and Weaver (2009) also found that identification with a local team was positively related to social well-being, but not for fans of distant teams. This social-psychological phenomenon may also be at play in the present study, where participants are all locally connected to the team being studied, whether they are a fan of the team or not. If the highly identified fans are happier after reading an article about their team than low identification fans, then this may have manifested in the way the two groups rated the website.

Although the research on the perceived credibility of sports articles is severely lacking, Wann and Branscombe (1992) determined that emotional responses to a sports article differed based on the degree of identification with a sports team, so the present study hypothesized that a relationship may exist between perceived credibility and fan identification. This hypothesis was supported as there was a significant difference in the overall credibility score of the article between the two fan identification groups. Highly identified fans found the article to be more credible as a whole and also in eleven out of twelve stimuli groups (all except the ESPN negative group). The fans of a
particular sport and team find the article about that team significantly more credible, and this may be due to a familiarity with the topic. People may be more inclined to judge an article as credible if they are familiar with the subject being covered (Henkel & Mattson, 2011). According to Henkel and Mattson (2011), familiarity may create an “illusion of truth” for statements when people lack cues regarding the reliability of a source. Highly identified fans in the present study are presumably much more familiar with the topic and the sources providing the information, so it is not surprising that they would rate the article as more credible than fans with low identification. Along with topic familiarity, highly identified fans also have a stronger level of attachment to the topic being covered. While the article was not specifically targeted at fans of either team, highly identified Florida Gator fans may have assumed that the article was tailored more toward their own fan base, and, thus, rated the article as more credible than fans with low identification. Ultimately, different levels of attachment to the team and familiarity with the topic may have caused differing levels of attachment to the article, which resulted in a significant disparity of perceived credibility.

The significant differences in credibility scores may also be attributed to the questions that were used to judge credibility. On the credibility scale (Bucy, 2003), for example, participants were asked questions regarding the fairness and flow of the article, but also regarding how enjoyable and how interesting it was. A fan with low identification may rate the article as very fair and having a nice flow, but also may not find the article enjoyable or interesting to read. Because all of these factors impact credibility, all of them must be taken into account when assessing it. Nonetheless, highly identified fans found the article to be significantly more credible than fans with low
identification, which is something for those in the sports media field to consider. Because highly identified fans already find the articles as moderately credible, sports news sites may try to adapt their websites to the needs of fans with low identification to appeal to a wider audience and gain more readership.

The stimuli groups that garnered the highest credibility scores from each identification group were also noteworthy. The stimuli group that was rated highest by low identification fans was the ESPN.com group with negative user comments, and for highly identified fans, it was the ESPN.com group with positive user comments. Predictably, the stimuli group that would presumably score the highest from highly identified fans was rated highest by that group. ESPN is an established news brand, and the comments may strike a chord with those participants in the study. Conversely, the fans with low identification chose the ESPN article with negative user comments as the most credible. Fans with low identification were either unaffected by the comments or the lack of connection to the team made the article seem more genuine with comments that did not reflect the common opinion of a Florida Gator sports fan. In Wann and Branscombe’s (1992) study, highly identified fans experienced the most positive mood state from an article that described a victory for their favorite team and whose author was an admitted loyal fan of the same team. Also, individuals with very low fan identification were not significantly influenced by the game outcome, group membership of the author, or the author’s commitment to the team. In a related social identity study, Wann et al. (2001) found that ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias are most likely when individuals are highly identified with their team and have been threatened. The negative comments can be viewed as a threat to social identity for
highly identified fans, which may have caused them to rate those articles more harshly. The present study's findings reflect the notion that high fan identification can significantly influence how one views an article and views ingroup/outgroup members, and that low identification has a much milder effect.

There were also score disparities between the two identification groups for the articles with the least credibility. Fans with low identification found the Facebook© article with negative comments to be the least credible article. Non-sports fans in a college environment still utilize Facebook©, which has over 900 million members worldwide (Kallas, 2012), but probably not for sports information. Because the primary use of Facebook© is not for sports, it is somewhat predictable that fans with low identification would rate the article as least credible. For the highly identified fans, the least credible article was the ESPN.com group with negative comments. These findings give mild support to the SIDE model, which asserts that anonymous computer mediation obscures the interpersonal differences in group identification, so people will move toward a more extreme position in the direction already favored by the group (Lea & Spears, 1991; Spears & Lea, 1992). Essentially, anonymous communication lacks individuating cues, so the attention is shifted from distinctive characteristics of group members and people may act more strongly in favor or against the anonymous communication (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). In this situation, highly identified Florida Gator fans reacted more strongly against the comments than they would in a situation that lacks anonymity (ex. hearing the same comments at a live football game from an opposing fan), and rated the article as the least credible in this instance. A die-hard Gator fan would presumably want to hear positive things about his or her favorite
team, which could potentially enhance perceived credibility. However, negative user comments did not always garner a lower credibility rating for highly identified fans in each stimuli group. While anonymous comments that contradict a fan’s feelings have the potential to cause a negative emotional response in the fan, their influence on credibility may not be as profound.

Scholars have also found that higher levels of identification with a university’s sports program lead to more positive impressions of the university itself (Wann & Robinson, 2002; Clopton, 2007). Highly identified fans in the present study scored nearly a full point higher (out of 7) on the university identification scale than low identification fans. This significant difference between the two groups suggests that a connection to the university’s athletics department correlates with a connection to the entire university. In a previous study, current students at a university were shown to equate a university’s basketball program as part of their social identity and as being a part of the larger community (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). The impact of a sports program is perhaps more profound at a large university where athletics are a large part of the student culture, like the University of Florida. Students who are satisfied with and identify with the university will presumably do better in school and donate more to the university after graduation. This provides validation for the importance of sports on college campuses where many lessons can be learned outside the classroom. Additionally, the connection to a university’s sports team can also go beyond graduation, so the potential for alumni to contribute as sports consumers is extremely high.
Conversely, prominent university sports programs, where fans generally identify highly with the team, have also been shown to have a potentially dangerous effect on the culture of a university and town, as evidenced by the shocking incidents involving Penn State University. Wolken (2012) blamed the culture of Penn State for allowing a sexual predator (Jerry Sandusky) to remain a part of its football program for over ten years after his first molestation incident on campus. Speaking about the football program and head coach Joe Paterno, the author writes that “when you combine that unbridled thirst with the money it generates and the power it fuels, anything can happen, even a football coach protecting someone as sick as Jerry Sandusky” (para. 10). Those in power at Penn State knew about several molestation incidents that occurred on campus, and chose to conceal facts from law enforcement “all to protect some idea of what Penn State football was supposed to be” (Wolken, 2012, para. 14).

The fact that a football coach can ascend to such power at a university illuminates the impact that sports has on a university and how it relates to social identity. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there are students on the Penn State campus who believe that Joe Paterno is innocent of all wrongdoing, and it may be a social strategy from fans to cope with being members of a negatively distinctive ingroup (Jackson et al., 1996). As evidenced in the present study, highly identified fans of the school’s teams feel more connected to the university overall than fans with low identification. In the case of Penn State, fans choose to believe Joe Paterno’s own statements over the statements in an independent report to alleviate the negative impact it has on their own social identity. Although sports may not be as important as
academics, sports can play a prominent and potentially harmful role on university campuses both in and outside the classroom.

Additionally, data collection for the present study occurred during a time in which the integrity of college athletics was being questioned by some. Along with the Penn State tragedy, the Ohio State University football team was facing sanctions for trying to cover up student-athletes receiving improper benefits (Brooks, 2011). The head coach of the Arkansas Razorbacks football team had also recently been fired for unfairly hiring his mistress and intentionally misleading his boss about their relationship (Schad, 2012). These incidents and others in the college athletics landscape may have been fresh in the minds of the experiment participants and may have influenced the results of the study to a degree. While the article used as the study stimulus was a game recap and did not address any sports scandals, the current state of collegiate athletics may have negatively impacted how participants rated themselves as sports fans and fans of the university’s men’s basketball team. Real world events may have lowered the overall fan identification levels of the participants, and, in turn, potentially lowered the credibility ratings of the article for both identification groups.

User comments have become ubiquitous throughout online media and continue to evolve with new Internet advancements (Gsell, 2009). Although the impact of anonymous comments on credibility have not been thoroughly researched, anonymous online interactions, as developed in the SIDE model, have been shown to polarize a person’s opinions either in favor or against an issue (Lee, 2007). In the present study, the tone of the user comments was hypothesized to impact a highly identified fan’s perception of credibility. However, there was no significant difference between the
credibility scores based the tone of the user comments. User comments have been a staple of online news and sports articles for several years, and perhaps, online news readers have become desensitized to user comments over time. Highly identified fans read more sports articles, so it is possible that they would have been more attentive to the user comments. However, the impact of the user comments could have been reduced because highly identified fans may have grown to block out both positive and negative user comments, especially if they do not post regularly in the comments section. The lack of influence on credibility may also have resulted from the intended message of the comments. The anonymous user comments were directed at the participants’ identified team, either praising or disparaging the team and their recent season. The comments did not, however, praise or disparage the article itself, which may explain why the credibility ratings were not significantly different for either fan identification group.

Because highly identified fans have a connection to the University of Florida men’s basketball team, it was also hypothesized that the perceived credibility of the article will change more significantly by the tone of the user comments for highly identified fans than for low identification fans. In both scenarios, credibility was not significantly impacted by the tone of the user comments. For the fans with low identification, articles with positive user comments garnered the highest credibility scores from participants. However, unlike the highly identified fans, articles with negative comments were rated as slightly more credible than articles without comments. The similarity in credibility scores for both identification groups based on the user comments gives further credence to the assumption that people have come to ignore or block out the user
comments. For newspaper websites, Gsell (2009) argued that the initial creation of user comments for online articles was an obvious choice with the open culture of the Internet, but “that was before anonymous commenting attracted spam, profanity, harassment, and unpaid advertising onto the site, creating for staff the arduous daily duty of deleting off-color comments” (p. 16). The sheer amount of irrelevant, and often disrespectful, user comments that can be posted on a single article have changed the way online news consumers view user comments. Political news or coverage of more controversial topics may garner a more profound response from readers who see user comments that greatly support or vehemently oppose their viewpoints, but most sports articles rarely elicit such a response. Even if the presence of user comments has a small impact on news articles, the results of the present study suggest that user comments do not impact the credibility of sports articles, especially as off-color and irrelevant comments become more prevalent.

Aside from credibility, the effect of user comment tone on identification with the anonymous users was also examined. It was hypothesized that highly identified fans would have stronger feelings either in favor or against the users, based on the positive or negative tone of the comments. The results showed that the scores on the user identification scale (Walther et al., 2010; Postmes et al., 2001) were significantly higher for the positive comments than for the negative comments for both identification groups, and the differences were more significant for the highly identified fans. Fans with low identification identified more closely with the positive users than the negative users by almost a full-point on the scale (out of 7) and the highly identified fans identified almost two full-points higher with the positive users than the negative users. Data analysis that
combined all independent variables (fan identification level, sports source received, and user comment tone) also showed that two of the variables had a significant influence on group identification scores with the anonymous users. Fan identification level and the tone of the user comments were both shown to influence user group identification, and the interaction between identification level and user comment tone was also found to significantly influence user identification. In the present study, highly identified fans who received the article with positive comments identified more strongly with the anonymous users than low identification fans who received the article with either positive or negative comments. This provides further evidence for the assumption that user comments can impact social identity and a reader’s group identification with the anonymous users, but, as evidenced earlier, may not have an impact on the perceived credibility of the article.

Even though level of fan identification had a significant impact on credibility, the tone of the user comments only influenced one’s identification with those users. These findings are noteworthy because they contradict most of the earlier research on anonymous peers and the SIDE model, such as Walther et al.’s (2010) study in which supportive or negative comments significantly affected the participants’ evaluations of YouTube PSAs positively or negatively. Scholars who have used the SIDE model claim that the lack of individuation information in anonymous online communication fosters group identification (Lee, 2007, Postmes et al., 2001), but high levels of identification with the users was noticeably absent in the present study. Surprisingly, both identification groups in the present study identified mostly negatively to the users. Fans with low identification and highly identified fans both had very low scores for the users who posted negative comments, and highly identified fans were the only group that
even had a moderate connection to the users who posted positive user comments. Although highly identified fans identify strongly with the team that is being praised by the users, this did not translate to a strong connection with the users who were also on their side. User comments may be a pervasive, necessary aspect of modern journalism, but their impact on sports readers and credibility appears to be minimal in this case.

Finally, the role of user comments in evaluating a news source was also examined, where it was hypothesized that highly identified fans will have stronger positive or negative feelings about the media source itself (website or AP article) than fans with low identification. The evaluation scores of all four news sources were not, however, significantly impacted by the tone of the user comments. Conversely, data analysis of the influence of all three independent variables on sports source evaluation scores showed a significant influence for two of the variables. Fan identification level and sports source received were separately shown to significantly influence source evaluation scores. The interaction of a participant’s identification level and randomly assigned sports source also significantly influenced how favorably that source was rated. Essentially, highly identified fans rated each source significantly higher than low identification fans who received the same source, but this was not impacted by positive or negative user comments. For both identification groups, positive user comments garnered the highest evaluation scores of the websites or the Associated Press, followed by negative user comments, which was trailed by the control group with no comments. These particular findings reflect the other findings of this study in which user comments had no significant impact on multiple evaluation scales. Perhaps user comments had no effect on article credibility and the evaluation of a news source
because people can now separate the opinions of anonymous users from the facts provided by journalists and news organizations. News readers are presumably blocking out the user comments or internally separating opinions from facts, so, ultimately, the impact on the readers is negated. Because user comments have become a place where spam and profanity can be as prevalent as the viewpoint of a concerned citizen (Gsell, 2009), they have turned into an aspect of news that can be glossed over or even completely ignored by readers.

Although not initially incorporated into the design of the present study, the impact of gender on perceived credibility was also examined. Demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and education, have been recognized as variables that can dictate one’s perceived credibility (Westley & Severn, 1964). Robinson and Kohut (1988) also found that gender is an important factor in attitudes toward the press, with women consistently being more willing to believe the news media. Conversely, Whitney (1986) determined that attitudes towards the media credibility are only weakly correlated with demographic variables. In a contemporary study in online news credibility, no demographic variables (gender, age, education, race, and political views) were shown to exert a significant influence on perceptions of online credibility (Cassidy, 2007). The sample population shared many of the same demographic characteristics overall, particularly age and education (all of the participants were college students at the same university). However, participant gender was unbalanced as about two-thirds of the sample population was female.

The results showed that men and women had similar scores in nearly every scale used. Both genders had statistically similar scores on the fan identification scale, which
was the basis for determining whether a participant was classified as a highly identified fan or a fan with low identification. Identification scores with the university and with the anonymous users were also close between the two genders. Additionally, males and females had similar evaluation ratings of the sports news sources. A gender difference did exist, however, for perceived credibility with males rating the article as significantly more credible than females. This correlates with some of the previous research on credibility (Westley & Severn, 1964; Robinson & Kohut, 1988), but the influence on all other variables was not significant. Although both genders identified fairly equally as fans, men viewed the sports article as more credible. This may have occurred because the article was about a men’s sport at the university, and women may be more interested in sports featuring athletes of their own gender. A sports article covering a women’s sport may have garnered different credibility scores between the genders. The fictional article author also had a male’s name, so that may also have influenced how both genders rated the article.

Although a consensus about the influence of gender on credibility has not been reached, these findings suggest that there may be a discrepancy in how men and women perceive the credibility of sports articles, despite having similar levels of fandom. Ultimately, the sample population had twice as many women, but it reflected that of a more evenly distributed sample population. Even though article credibility was significantly different, fan identification scores were similar between men and women, and other potential factors, such as author gender, may have attributed to the differences.
Future Research

Because the research in this field is severely lacking, future studies in sports journalism can examine ways that article credibility in sports is different from article credibility in other fields. Similar to the present study, another study can be designed to measure the factors that contribute most to sports credibility, and juxtapose those results with the factors that contribute most to the credibility of hard news, entertainment, politics, and business. Online news organizations would benefit from such a study because today's modern websites, such as the Huffington Post, have a mix of all of these genres on the front page. Websites want to attract new users and maintain those users for more advertising revenue, and understanding the factors that enhance their credibility and reader perceptions could help achieve this goal.

To expand on the present study, the study can be redesigned so that participants all read the same article but are not all looking at the same background. The stimuli would look more natural if participants see a replica of the actual websites being studied. For example, one article can be photoshopped so that the article appears on a screen of a real ESPN.com background or a Facebook© background. By doing this, participants who are not familiar with the website may rate it differently if they judge the website layout more favorably or negatively. The study could also be expanded to recruit from a population in a different demographic that is more reflective of sports fans outside of a college environment. The present study could be also be revisited at different schools, especially schools in different regions and with different athletic cultures. The University of Florida is known for its excellence in athletics and its stellar fan support, so it would be interesting to re-create this study at a university with a Division II athletics program, where the fans are much less involved and identified with
the university teams. In an expanded study, the anonymous user comments could be rewritten to represent positive or negative comments about the article itself not the identified team in the study to examine how this may impact credibility. The study could also be revisited using an article in which the sample population’s sports team won the game as opposed to this scenario involving a team loss. A win for a participant’s identified team could potentially elevate ratings of perceived credibility or evaluations of a sports news source.

Additionally, a study that looks at specific website genres could also provide insight into the ways that credibility can differ for different audiences. Looking at blogs, for example, a salacious Tiger Woods article appearing on a gossip blog may be perceived as less credible than the same article on a sports blog. Both blogs attract a different audience, so it would be interesting to see how different readers respond to the articles. Another study that examines the credibility of different types of sports articles could also benefit the academic community. A study could be done, for example, comparing the perceived credibility of an article listed as a long feature and an article listed as an opinion-editorial on a website. Scholars could also look at how different types of articles affect social identity and fan identification, such as a study comparing the influence of reading a game recap, a player profile, or a column on team identification.

Limitations

The largest limitation of the present study is the sample population. Although commonly used in other studies (Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Pham, 1992; Wann, 1995), the use of a convenient sample limits the generalizability of the findings and hinders external validity. All of the participants were undergraduate students at the
university of interest, so the findings are less applicable to non-students or to undergraduate students at a university without a prominent athletics department. Additionally, most of the participants were students in the College of Journalism and Communications, and are seemingly more adept at answering questions about credibility than the average individual. The sample population also had nearly twice as many female participants as male participants, so a gender bias may have also shifted the findings. Also, the cell sizes ranged from 29 to 33 participants, so the data analysis may have garnered some artificially high significance levels and perhaps gave unwarranted support for some hypotheses. As a result, the findings should be generalized with caution.

The study was also limited by the inherent artificiality of an online experiment. Although participants all received the same article to read as well as the same pre- and post-test questions, participants were not closely monitored as would have been the case in a controlled experimental setting. Participants were not allowed to leave the experiment webpage at any time during the experiment, but they were not given a time-limit to complete it, so some may have been more judicious than others when reading the stimuli and answering the questions. Additionally, participants who received the wire service stimuli read the article on a computer instead of a more traditional media format (such as print), which also increased the artificiality of the experiment for the participants assigned to that group. The design of the article page may also have heightened experiment artificiality because participants were all shown the same white background when reading the article, which does not reflect the actual design of the websites. Participants not familiar with the design of each website may have rated it
differently if they had been shown the articles on exact webpage replicas. Ultimately, issues with the experimental instrument and the sample population may have slightly altered the results.

Conclusions

Overall, this study examined the key factors that can impact the credibility of a sports article and perceptions of a news source. Using fan identification as the primary theoretical framework, the effect of the medium and source on the credibility of sports articles for both highly identified and low identification sports fans was tested. Additionally, the study analyzed how attitudes towards a website and a sports article can be affected by positive and negative user comments.

Unlike previous findings on credibility (Kiousis, 2001; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Sunder & Nass, 2001), medium had little impact on the perceived credibility of the article in this study. The results suggest that credibility of all media has seemingly evened out in the last decade, where all types (print, radio, television, and online) have similar credibility perceptions from news consumers, but none are rated as overly credible. Online news has, perhaps, come the furthest in the last decade to a point where people are comfortable using it, but still do not fully trust the information they receive. The onus falls on media organizations to have high ethical standards and fact-checking procedures because, with so many options available, the medium is becoming a small factor in how the public views credibility. Journalism scholars, both in and out of the sports world, can use these findings as a way to educate new journalists on the importance of solid reporting. The news industry is constantly changing across all media, and news professionals must find new and innovative ways to adapt to this new landscape and the modern news consumer.
While there was no major difference in the credibility ratings of the online sources overall, there was a large disparity in the credibility scores between the two identification groups. Other studies have found similar reactions from highly identified fans regarding their favorite teams, although in different research areas (Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Wann & Robinson, 2002; Fink et al., 2009). Highly identified fans in almost every stimuli group found the article to be more credible than fans with low identification, which is beneficial for sports media organizations who are trying to maintain the fans that already visit their website or read their newspaper. However, this large credibility gap can also become a burden for media organizations who are trying to attract new users or readers. Because highly identified fans have a generally positive view of sports media, the pressure is now on sports media professionals to deviate from the status quo and experiment with new tactics to draw in the less identified fans, such as utilizing a new webpage layout or new storytelling techniques with their articles.

Fan identification was also shown to have a profound impact on evaluations of the online news sources. Highly identified fans had a higher opinion of the websites overall, while fans with low identification rated all the websites slightly negatively, except Facebook©. Predictably, highly identified fans rated the sports websites more favorably than low identification fans, but even Facebook© received higher evaluations from the highly identified fans, which may suggest that highly identified fans are more exposed to and more comfortable using media than low identification fans. Sports fans can now watch live games from their computer, cell phone, or tablet, and this level of accessibility may make sports fans more technologically dependent than most people. Sports media organizations have opportunities for expansion as technologies develop,
and these organizations should look for ways to utilize the technology by not simply adopting the new tech craze before a competitor. This involves staying ahead of the competition in all facets of journalism from reporting to presentation in order to increase fan satisfaction and the trustworthiness of their brand. Although it has been studied more extensively in traditional journalism (Gunter et al. 2009; Gunter, 2006), sports journalism scholars should examine brand establishment and brand growth in the sports field to better understand the companies in this multi-billion dollar industry and better educate aspiring journalists in the field.

Contradicting much of the earlier research on anonymous computer-mediated communication (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Lee, 2007; Walther et al., 2010), user comments were shown to have little impact on credibility or evaluations of a news source. The comments only significantly influenced the extent to which the participants identified with the users themselves. Although user comments have become a universal aspect of online journalism and blogging, these findings suggest that their overall role in sports journalism has been diminished. Whether readers avoid the comments or choose to ignore their message, user comments have lost their power with readers and do not significantly impact credibility. In many ways, this is better for news organizations because people can now internally separate the anonymous users from the website, and the organizations are not perceived as responsible for the unwelcome comments that some people post. Although it may not affect credibility, social identity scholars can expand on the findings in this study and design other studies that examine the role of user comments on social identity, ingroup favoritism, and outgroup bias.
In today’s media environment, sports journalists are facing new challenges as they work to appease fans, who now have credibility concerns and unlimited access to coverage of their favorite teams from a multitude of sources. Sports fans, and news consumers in general, are looking for information that is both current and credible, and modern sports journalists must look for ways to write up-to-the-minute stories without sacrificing credibility. Ultimately, this study’s findings suggest that medium, source, and user comments matter less to fans when making credibility assessments than fan identification with their favorite team. This puts the onus on sports journalists to create stories that are not generic, exude creativity, and manage to resonate with every fan, from the most casual to the most extreme. Not only will the fans benefit, but sports journalism as a whole will benefit.
Louisville in Final 4 with 72-68 win over Florida

BYLINE: By EDDIE PELLS, AP National Writer

SECTION: SPORTS NEWS

DATELINE: PHOENIX

Hated to do that to ya, kid.

Rick Pitino nearly came unhinged and his point guard watched the end of the game from the bench. When it was over, though, it was Pitino and Louisville making plans for the Final Four and his protege, Billy Donovan, and the Florida Gators wondering what the heck happened.

Freshman forward Chane Behanan made the go-ahead basket with 1:06 left Saturday and the fourth-seeded Cardinals finished the game on a 23-8 run for a 72-68 victory over Donovan's stunned Florida team in the West Regional final.

Russ Smith, who finished with 19 points, followed Behanan's bucket with a pair of free throws and then Florida freshman Bradley Beal and teammate Kenny Boynton each missed chances to tie in the final seconds.

Louisville made one more free throw to seal the game and reach its ninth Final Four, the second under Pitino, despite playing the final 3:58 without point guard Peyton Siva, who fouled out.

"What happens is, you can't lose confidence," Pitino said. "I kept telling the guys, 'We're going to the Final Four. Win the Big East tournament, you're going to the Final Four,' and they did."

The Big East tournament champions are now going for the NCAA title, too. They're on an eight-game winning streak, with a trip to New Orleans on the itinerary and a possible matchup with Pitino's old school, Kentucky, which will have to get by Baylor on Sunday to set up a grudge match to end them all.

This game had a much more warm-and-fuzzy story line: Pitino, the young coach who saw something special in Donovan, the undersized guard, and developed a partnership that took Providence on an unexpected trip to the 1987 Final Four. Pitino also gave Donovan his first coaching job and both men conceded theirs was more of a father-son relationship than anything else.
"I'm so proud of Billy Donovan, the way he coached this team," Pitino said. "He was brilliant. He took us out of the zone. But only one team could play aggressive and come back like this."

Seventh-seeded Florida (26-11) went out in the regional final for the second straight year, with Donovan falling to 0-7 lifetime against the man who hired him as an assistant at Kentucky and felt as proud as a papa when he watched Donovan win his two national titles in 2006 and 2007.

But make no mistake. This was no heartwarmer.

Donovan got under Pitino's skin early in the second half during a timeout when he worked over the officials, who promptly called a foul against the Cardinals (30-9) when play resumed.

"He called that," Pitino shouted. "Why don't you just give him a whistle?"

Pitino couldn't get a break for a while after that and when Siva picked up his fourth foul, the coach stomped onto the court and got hit with a technical. Erving Walker made four straight free throws and the Gators led by 11, setting the stage for what could've been Donovan's fourth trip to the Final Four.

But the team that went 8 for 11 from 3-point range in the first half went cold — really cold — not hitting any of nine attempts from beyond the arc in the second.

The Gators missed seven shots and committed one turnover over the last 2:30. They didn't score after Boynton's layup gave them a 68-66 lead with 2:39 left.

The game's best freshman? That was Behanan, who was far less heralded than Beal coming out of high school, but outplayed him down the stretch when the trip to New Orleans was on the line.

The freshman from Cincinnati scored 13 of his 17 points in the second half, including nine over the last 8:02 and Louisville's last two field goals — both after Siva had fouled out with nine points and eight assists.

Beal, meanwhile, matched Erik Murphy with a team-high 14 points and controlled this game for the first 37 minutes.

But over the last 3, he tried twice to take the ball to the hoop, only to get denied by 6-foot-10 center Gorgui Dieng. Beal missed the desperation 3 in the waning seconds and also got called for traveling after stealing a wild pass from Smith while Louisville was nursing a one-point lead with 18 seconds left.

In the first half, Donovan looked like the better coach, though anyone would look good when his team is shooting that way. The Gators went 8 for 11 from 3, 6 for 10 from inside the arc and constantly harassed Louisville en route to a 41-33 lead.
But Pitino didn't become the first coach to take three programs to the Final Four for nothing. He scrapped the zone defense, had his players get up in the face of Florida's players and it worked — though the Cardinals paid the price in foul trouble.

Behanan and Kyle Kuric each finished the game with four fouls. When Siva got his fourth and Pitino got his 'T,' the coach tried to settle things down, stepping up to Siva and saying, "It was a foul. Stop saying it wasn't."

Whether he believed it or not, who knows?

As for whether he thought a comeback was possible, especially playing the final 4 minutes without Siva on the floor? Well, Pitino did say in the lead-up to this game that the 1987 trip to the Final Four made him believe anything's possible.

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March 25, 2012

*Brad Seal*
*ESPN.com*

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*Note: Differences between the two articles are italicized.
**Note: The words in parenthesis were omitted from the article.
APPENDIX C
EXPERIMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Pre-test Questionnaire

*To me, sports are:

1. Boring  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Exciting
2. Uninteresting  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Interesting
3. Valuable  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Worthless
4. Unappealing  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Appealing
5. Useful  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Useless
6. Needed  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Not Needed
7. Irrelevant  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Relevant
8. Unimportant  1 2 3 4 5 6 7  Important

9. In a typical week, how many hours on average do you spend watching sports-related programming on television or online?

____________

10. How many professional sporting events did you attend in the past year?

____________

11. How many college sporting events did you attend in the past year?

____________

12. In a typical week, how many hours on average do you spend reading sports-related periodicals?

____________

13. Among your favorite sports, where do you get your information about sports? (Mark all that apply)

1 – Sports TV talk shows

2 – Sports TV highlight shows (such as Sportscenter on ESPN)
3 – Newspapers
4 – Printed sports magazines (such as *Sports Illustrated*)
5 – Online
6 – Other ________________
7 – None

14. When seeking sports information online, where do you get your information? (Mark all that apply)

1 – Sports blogs
2 – Sports dedicated websites (such as ESPN.com or yahoosports.com)
3 – Online newspaper websites (such as nytimes.com)
4 – Online sport magazine websites (such as sportsillustrated.cnn.com)
5 – Twitter
6 – Facebook
7 – Other ________________
8 – None

*For each question, please select the response that best indicates how you feel about the University of Florida men’s basketball team.

15. How important is it to you that the UF basketball team wins?
Not Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very Important

16. How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the UF basketball team?
Not at all a fan 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very Much a Fan

17. How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of the UF basketball team?
Not at all a fan 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very Much a Fan
18. During the season, how closely do you follow the UF basketball team via any of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) television news or a newspaper, d) online?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Almost Every Day

19. How important is being a fan of the UF basketball team to you?

Not Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Very Important

20. How much do you dislike UF basketball’s biggest rivals?

Do Not Dislike 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Dislike Very Much

21. How often do you display the UF basketball team's name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Always

22. What is your gender?

1 – Male 2 – Female

23. What was your age on your last birthday?

_______

24. What is your field of study?

1 – Telecommunications

2 – Journalism

3 – Public Relations

4 – Advertising

5 – Sport Management

6 - Other _____________

*Note: Responses to questions 1 – 8 and 15 – 21 were combined to make the sport fan identification scale of the present study, and the questions were derived from Shank and Beasley’s (1998) refined sports involvement scale and Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) team identification scale respectively.
On the following page, you will be shown a sports article. Please read everything you see on the following page. You will then be asked to answer questions regarding what you just read. Please answer those questions openly and honestly.

Sample Article

*Louisville Defeats Florida to Reach Final Four*

March 25, 2012

*Brad Seal*

*ESPN.com*

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Comments

Positive comments

1. Congrats Gators on a great year! Too bad we couldn't go all the way.
   By JoeGator

2. With all the talent on the roster, it’s a shame the Gators couldn’t get the win. All the other teams in the country need to watch out for us next year. Go Gators!
   By BillyD_4_Prez

3. Get ready for big things from this team next season. Final Four here we come!
   By Gator4Life

Negative Comments

1. The Gators choked in the tournament like they always do.
   By Noles_fan_87

2. Kentucky still has the best team in the SEC and the best in the country. Go Wildcats!
   By Kentucky_Blue

3. UF got lucky with those two national championships they won, and they haven’t done anything since. They’ll fall back to mediocrity soon enough.
   By BulldogPride
Post-Test Questionnaire

Questions 1 – 9 were used as the source evaluation scale and were derived from O’Cass and Carlson’s (2010) study.

For each question, please select the response that best indicates how you feel about the ESPN.com. (Gatorblog.com, Facebook.com, or the Associated Press)*

1. I feel happy when I use the website. (…when I read the Associated Press.)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
2. I feel cheerful when I use the website. (…when I read the Associated Press.)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
3. I feel excited when I use the website. (…when I read the Associated Press.)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
4. I am satisfied with my decision to use the website. (…to read the Associated Press.)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
5. My choice to use the website was a wise one. (…to read the Associated Press…)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
6. I think I did the right thing in using the website. (…to read the Associated Press.)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
7. The website does a good job of satisfying my needs. (The Associated Press…)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
8. I will say positive things about this website to others. (The Associated Press…)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
9. I will recommend this website to others who seek my advice. (The Associated Press…)
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
Questions 10 – 14 were used as the user comment identification scale for the present study and were derived from Postmes et al.’s (2001) study.

**The following set of questions are all regarding the user comments at the end of the article. After reading the user comments,**

10. I feel a bond with these people.
Not at all  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

11. I see myself as a member of this group.
Not at all  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

12. I regard this group as important.
Not at all  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

13. At this moment, I identify with this group.
Not at all  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

14. The people who posted these comments were personally identifiable to me.
Not at all  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

Questions 15 – 23 were used as the perceived credibility scale for the present study and were derived from Bucy’s (2003) study.

For each question, please select the response that best indicates how you feel about the article itself.

15. How fair was the author in the article?
Not at all fair  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very fair

16. How interesting was the article?
Not at all interesting  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very interesting

17. How clearly written was the article?
Not at all clear  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very clear

18. How well did the article flow?
Poorly  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very well
19. How enjoyable was the article to read?
Not at all enjoyable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very enjoyable
20. How accurate was the article?
Not at all accurate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very accurate
21. How believable was the article?
Not at all believable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very believable
22. How informative was the article?
Not at all informative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very informative
23. How in-depth was the author on issues?
Not at all in-depth 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very in-depth

Questions 24 – 33 were used as the university identification scale for the present study and were derived from Mael and Tetrick’s (1992) study.

The following questions address your thoughts about the University of Florida.

24. When someone criticizes the University of Florida, it feels like a personal insult.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
25. I am interested in what others think about the University of Florida.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
26. When I talk about this university, I usually say “we” rather than “they.”
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
27. University of Florida’s successes are my successes.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
28. When someone praises this university, it feels like a personal compliment.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree
29. I act like a University of Florida person to a great extent.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

30. If a story in the media criticized UF, I would feel embarrassed.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

31. I don’t act like a University of Florida person.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

32. I have a number of qualities typical of UF people.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

33. The limitations associated with UF people apply to me also.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

*Note: The listed online source was changed to coincide with the appropriate website or the Associated Press.

**Note: Participants in the control group did not receive this set of questions
LIST OF REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sean Sadri is a northern California native who is extremely passionate about teaching and research in the field of journalism, and has been fortunate enough to gain valuable experience doing both at the University of Florida. He completed a Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication at the university’s College of Journalism and Communications. He also received a Master’s Degree in Broadcast Journalism from the Newhouse School at Syracuse University and a Bachelor’s Degree in both English and Communication at the University of California, Davis.

His passion for journalism began in high school where he started writing sports articles for his high school newspaper. This enthusiasm for journalism carried over to the UC Davis, where he started covering campus news, and eventually the arts, for the university’s student newspaper. Additionally, while pursuing his M.S., he worked in the sports department of two local television stations in Upstate New York. These experiences aided in his development and implementation of an undergraduate Sports Reporting course at the University of Florida. The course, which he taught for two semesters, was designed to develop skills in reading, writing, gathering information, and generating ideas in sports journalism.