

Summer Research 2026: Sports Fandom and Social Connection

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Modern day America is experiencing a growing connection recession. A 2025 American Psychological Organization poll revealed that a majority of Americans experienced feelings of isolation “often or some of the time”, whilst half said they had felt “left out” or “lacking in companionship” (“Stress in America 2025”). This is a trend that appears to be growing, with the rise in use of social media technologies contributing to increased social isolation. (“Why Social Connection Is Declining | Stevenson University”). However, loneliness serves as a major indicator of overall health and recent studies show that social connection is essential not just for mental wellbeing but for our physical wellness too. (World Health Organization).

This summer I worked in Harvard Kennedy School’s Fandom and Social Connection Initiative to investigate how we can harness shared sports fandom to mitigate this connection recession. Sports is a unifying factor in American society, with more than a third of Americans identifying as “avid sports fans” (“Over One-Third of Americans Are Avid Sports Fans”). Sports fandom is a unique connector, it is not associated with partisanship and has a national presence. Though the lab is just in the beginning stages (having launched in June of this year) I worked on building and running multiple experiments, all seeking to investigate the way and extent to which shared sports fandom can connect individuals.

An inherently “social” summer

Before I began my research in June I had images of myself sitting behind the safety of a monitor, analysing data with R and churning out graphs and p-values at a high rate. My experience, as a computer science and English major, was primarily associated with writing lines and lines of code and getting pretty results on the other end. Results I could neatly paste into a computer and run chi-squared analysis, or t-tests on until I found a result promising enough to write-up. This image could not have been further from what the research process turned out to be.

Instead, as I investigated the unifying effects of sports on social connection, I engaged in an extensive level of social engagement myself. Our team took to the streets of Boston, surveying fans in world cup gear; we travelled to Worcester, Massachusetts to partner with (my new favourite minor league team) the WooSox — running surveys on their devoted fanbase. I spoke to hundreds of strangers, engaged with a whole new team, and learned from countless individuals.

Going into the research process I was reserved, and uncomfortable approaching others, I was terrified of field experiments and even more scared of the inevitable rejection that came hand in hand with asking members of the public to complete surveys. At the end of these 10 weeks, however, I consider the hundreds of interactions I had to be an unforgettable experience. I engaged with sports fans from around the world, meeting people from my hometown in Scotland, who had come to Boston to view the world cup, and local fans here to support their

home team. I not only investigated how sports fandom can help connect people, I experienced it firsthand.

A learning curve

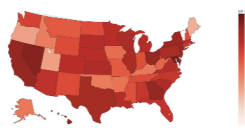
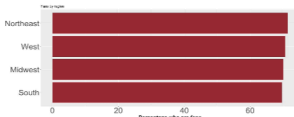
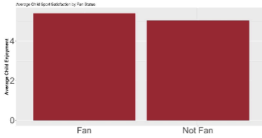
Unlike my peers in the lab I am not from the United States, and therefore did not grow up in the landscape of American sports. Baseball is not prominent in Scotland, our version of “football” is very different from what you might expect to see on a football field here, and the sports I grew up following most closely are not as popular in the US as I had expected.

In addition to the knowledge I gained about innings, strikes, and home runs I also experienced a learning curve on research methods. This summer marked my first time working in social science research and I learned many new skills such as building a survey in Qualtrics/Prolific, finding new methods of statistical analysis with R, and how to conduct human subjects research correctly and ethically. I learned how to correspond with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and helped to lead in-person experiments.

**HARVARD COLLEGE**
Office of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships

Sports Fandom and Social Connection
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HKS: The Fandom and Social Connection Initiative



Introduction	Results	Conclusions
The loneliness epidemic is a public health crisis in modern day America. Studies show that social connection is an essential component of good mental and physical health, yet, in 2025, a majority of US adults reported feelings of isolation (American Psychological Association). Sports fandom offers a unique way through which to remedy the connection recession. Fanbases bridge common divides such as partisanship, offering a space of mutual passion centered around favourite teams. This summer the Fandom and Social Connection Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, investigated the ways in which we can harness shared sports fandom to help bridge the connection recession.  <i>(Fandom and Social Connection Initiative, n.d.)</i>	1. An analysis of fandom by US state showed the District of Columbia to have the highest concentration of fans, and Vermont to have the lowest  2. We found that across all regions in the US (Northeast, West, Midwest, South) fandom concentration was approximately evenly distributed  3. Data also showed that fans were more satisfied in their friendships and that children of fans had a greater overall enjoyment participating in sports as compared to children of non-fans 	Much of our analysis this summer helped to support our hypothesis that holding shared sports fandom can strengthen our social connections - thus making fandom a valuable tool for bridging the isolation gap that modern day America faces. Sports Gear Surveying - after multiple pilot attempts, we found that we could not meet the required number of participants necessary. We iterated the experiment multiple times with different parameters to increase n - this was a valuable experience learning how we can adapt pilots to meet requirements. All of our other experiments are still running and therefore we cannot draw tangible results from them yet.  <i>(Randox experiment running live at game)</i>
Methods 1. Sport gear surveying - This experiment involved going out into Boston and approaching fans wearing sports gear, asking them to take a short survey. A researcher then ran past and shouted support for the team their gear advertised, we then measured changes in happiness, acceptance, etc.  2. Fox sports data analysis - Our lab is partnered and funded by Fox Sports. We were given tens of thousands of data points to analyze related to sports fandom and relationships, fulfillment, happiness, etc. Analysis was conducted with R. 3. WooSox 'Greet your neighbor' experiment - We partnered with the Worcester WooSox (minor league baseball team) to administer a survey to fans via QR. This survey encouraged the treatment group to socialize then measured dependent variables such as happiness and belonging. 4. Present biased socializing - This experiment was conducted with Harvard Summer School students to measure whether people 'put off' socializing in the present.	References American Psychological Association. "APA Poll Reveals a Nation Suffering from Stress of Societal Division, Loneliness." American Psychological Association, 6 Nov. 2025. https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2025/11/nations-suffering-division-2025. Accessed 28 July 2026. Fandom and Social Connection Initiative. (n.d.). Fandom and Social Connection Initiative. https://shorensteincenter.org/research-initiative/fandom-social-connection/	Next Steps For the Lab The Sports Fandom and Connection Initiative has secured three years of funding. Current experiments such as present biased socializing, WooSox surveying, and data analysis will continue. There are also plans to continue with public engagement activities that bring people together through sports fandom and to study the effects of this on political polarization. For Me Next summer I will be taking the skills I learned from this placement and putting them into action as part of my Leadership in Action project for the Laidlaw Scholarship. This involves travelling internationally and partnering with an organization to apply my knowledge for social good. I am remain interested in social connection and hope to continue this theme in my project next summer. 
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Accepting “failure”

My impression of research before I began work with the lab this summer was idealised and linear. I thought that researchers ran an experiment, obtained many results, then analysed this data and published the findings. I never pictured the stats showing a trend opposite to our hypothesis, didn't imagine that not getting a large enough sample size to make any conclusions was a possibility, didn't realise it was normal to iterate the same experiment over and over

having to adapt it each time and try again. However, every single experiment that I helped with this summer followed this pattern.

We began in the lab running a sports gear survey. The idea behind this was to approach world cup fans who were sporting the jerseys/gear from their favourite team and ask them to take a quick survey. We measured on a Likert scale indicators such as happiness and belonging then had a few buffer questions during which a research assistant (RA) would run by and shout encouragement related to the team the fan supported, we then looked to see if this increased feelings of inclusion and connectedness.

We spent a long time on this experiment, commuting into Boston for a few weeks and trialing various iterations, but, in the end, we just couldn't reach the number of respondents needed to analyse data with confidence. It was disheartening, at first, to have spent so much time on something and not be able to use the results; however it soon became clear that this was a very standard part of the research process. My PI and other leaders in the lab reassured me that failed experiments make up a very large part of what it takes to be a researcher and, whilst disappointing in the moment, they are essential in paving the way for discoveries that do get written up and published. This process: design survey, pilot, adapt, iterate, repeat, not only enlightened me to the methodology of a real study but also developed personal resilience and a drive to not give up.

What did our work look like?

Beyond the in person surveying we also conducted a variety of other experiments and studies. For the first couple of weeks literature review was a large part of my work. I read papers that observed interactions in sports bars, conducted a review into the context behind male loneliness, and analyzed any experiments I could find that were similar to our upcoming research. The best part of this process was, however, making connections between the literature, observing how some of our hypotheses had come into effect in alternate studies and seeing similarities across seemingly disparate areas.

We also combed through approximately thirty thousand data points provided to the lab by Fox Sports, analysing a variety of topics such as how sports fandom can affect relationships, emotions, and the geographic distribution of fandom in the US. This is where a bulk of our findings came from this summer. We discovered that sports fandom is very evenly distributed across the Northeast, West, Midwest, and Southern United States (at approximately 70% in each) and that sports fans were more likely to be satisfied in their friendships than non-fans.

However, we soon switched to field work, an area of research that was far from combing through papers and conducting data analysis. Our lab partnered with the Worcester Red Sox (WooSox), a minor league affiliate of the Boston Red Sox and our research took a quick turn, with a normal day starting at our office in Cambridge and ending at Polar Park. We spent most of the day designing and altering variations of a survey that we would trial at the match that night attending every homestand that the team had. I watched the beginning of countless

games, staying long enough to observe interactions as our survey ran during the second inning break, then leaving the ballpark as quickly as possible to catch the last train back to Boston.



(Our survey running at a “WooSox” game)

In the second half of the summer I was also invited to help with another in person experiment which focused on present-biased socialising among college students. After running online surveys our lab had found that people are more likely to “postpone” social interaction and this iteration of the study tested this effect in person among students taking classes at Harvard summer school. With permission from professors we used the last 10-15 minutes of classes and asked students if they would rather socialise for 10 minutes or spend time undertaking an individual activity. This protocol was repeated twice with each group and the students were “debriefed” about the study afterwards in a third session. Helping to lead this was the first time in the research process where I was conducting in-person experiments alone, I was nervous, initially, with the responsibility of ensuring that my group was correctly completing the activity, however this fear quickly changed into pride that I was able to undertake this role and it increased my confidence and leadership abilities by measurable amounts.

Harnessing interdisciplinary powers

As someone with no background in the social sciences, going into a behavioural science lab was extremely daunting for me. I have always been passionate about social connection, and knew that I was deeply interested in the work but I was worried that my limited background in this field would render me unhelpful or behind.

I soon realised, however, that categorizing research into one field or label is impossible. A widespread variety of skills, people, and perspectives are essential to a lab like this one and I was proud to make helpful contributions that aligned with my expertise whilst simultaneously learning extensively from the knowledge of my PI and other members of the lab team.

My background in computer science came in handy for things such as data analysis with Python and even developing the website for our lab. Similarly, my English knowledge was helpful in conducting high level literature reviews and drafting our own communications. But the bulk of my learning this summer stemmed from applying these skills in differing contexts - the transferable qualities harnessed throughout my time in college and experience in tech became more and more useful in a social science background. I picked up R quicker knowing the syntax of other languages, operated Qualtrics having dealt with years of application flowcharts, and came to grips with experimental design that differed less than I thought from my lab experiences in high school chemistry and biology.

Not only did I gain experience in applying these transferable skills but my work this summer really got me thinking about further extensions of these fields, specifically regarding my Leadership in Action project which I will undertake next year. It helped me realise that I am still passionate about technology, but that I want to apply this with an angle of social connection and humanity.

Conclusions and reflections

During the last week of my placement in August I stood in the common area of the office where we have a large TV always streaming a sports game. I stood with my colleague in this area and had a conversation about the match that was playing out before our eyes, nothing about this felt extraordinary, in fact this type of interaction had become a very normal part of my routine, but standing back and thinking about this moment now makes me realise how transformative this summer really was.

Going into my research I would have been terrified to make small talk, I would have severely lacked the knowledge for this conversation to center around sports, and I would have been short of the confidence needed to analyse the score or plays (for fear that I got something wrong). However, undergoing rounds of rejection whilst administering surveys in Boston Common, conversing with countless baseball and soccer fans in public, iterating through tens of surveys before we found the **right** version to finalise, this entire process improved my skills as a researcher, a leader, and as a person.

I am lucky enough to continue as a research assistant in my lab over the course of this academic year. This extension in time will allow me to see through projects that are nowhere near completed and work on new initiatives which we hope to launch as the lab continues to grow. I am excited to continue my work and keep learning along the way.

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