

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Fan behavior in childhood: Age and gender differences at 10 and 14 years

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Abstract

Background: Engagement in youth sports can enhance feelings of belonging and identity, although in certain environments, it may also promote hostile behaviors. The late childhood and early adolescence stages are crucial periods when social identity dynamics and peer influences determine how fandom is demonstrated. **Objective:** To examine age- and gender-related differences in fan behaviors among Croatian primary school children. **Methods:** In a cross-sectional school survey, 222 students (101 boys, 121 girls) from fourth grade (age ~10 years) and eighth grade (~14 years) completed the Croatian version of the Fan Behavior Questionnaire (three 8-item scales; $\alpha = .78-.89$). Group differences were tested using a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (age $\times$ gender) followed by univariate tests; because the Box's M test was significant, Pillai's Trace was used. **Results:** The multivariate model showed significant effects of age and gender, as well as a significant age $\times$ gender interaction. In practical terms, boys reported stronger supportive/positive behaviors and stronger emotional reactions to matches, and they also endorsed more negative fan behaviors. Older children reported slightly higher negative behavior than younger, whereas age-related differences in positive behavior and emotionality varied by gender, with larger gender differences observed among the 10-year-olds. **Conclusions:** Boys showed stronger fan engagement across positive, emotional, and negative domains, and negative behavior was higher in early adolescence compared to late childhood. These findings suggest that late childhood and early adolescence may represent an important developmental period during which family- and school-based norms can promote supportive cheering, empathy, and self-control.

Keywords: youth sport fandom, fan behavior, social identity, gender differences

Introduction

In the twentieth century, urbanization intensified the search for new symbols of belonging, and sports teams often served as communal anchors that allowed supporters to identify with a place and people (Heere, 2005).

From this milieu emerged modern fandom, a social subculture in which individuals form emotional and cognitive bonds with teams, perform shared rituals, and build identities that strengthen their sense of belonging and self-concept (Giulianotti, 2002).

Traditionally, scholars have framed fandom as an expression of individual or social identity, with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) frequently used to explain how fans boost self-esteem by aligning with valued groups (Heere & James, 2007; Levine et al., 2005). From this perspective, social identity arises from being part of communities and gains significance when people perceive themselves as members of a social category.

More recently, Identity Work Theory has shifted attention to how fans view themselves, not only in terms of the teams they support but also as ongoing projects of the self (Hyatt & Foster, 2015).

In addition to self-definition, social identity influences behavior and choices by encouraging compliance with group norms, promoting favoritism towards one's own group, and validating collective actions that demonstrate a sense of belonging.

In football contexts, a greater sense of identification correlates with consumption intentions and loyalty (Kural & Özbek, 2023). Fandom can also shape economic decision-making in fantasy sport contexts (Kotrba, 2025), while participation in European club competitions can expand fans' perspectives and is associated with more European-oriented attitudes (Brand et al., 2024). Recent studies emphasize how football fandom can have an impact on international communication and travel behaviors across Europe (Biel, 2025), demonstrating that personal identification can shape real-life decisions. While some of the evidence is derived from adult samples, the same mechanisms may be relevant for youth, who discover when, where, and how to conform to fan norms.

Recognizing the importance of fandom is essential because being a fan is one of the most common leisure activities in modern societies (Dwyer & Drayer, 2010). Engaging in sport consumption can provide families with

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opportunities for shared time (Wann et al., 1996), enhance social connections without requiring specific skills (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), and support well-being and self-esteem through shared experiences (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 1996).

Beyond early socialization, fandom evolves throughout the life course (Delia & James, 2018). Qualitative studies with parents in the UK show that becoming a parent can both enhance and reduce attachment, while also introducing fandom socialization, which describes the way parents share fan meanings and activities with their children (Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Tinson et al., 2017).

At the same time, fandom can take more extreme forms. Within some environments, conflicts, fireworks, provocative slogans, and sporadic aggression can become integral to the performance (Dunning, 2001). The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia (2025) documented 95 incidents and over 600 violent events during the 2024–2025 SuperSport HNL season, including incidents involving minors. These numbers highlight the prominence of fan activities in public and emphasize the importance of understanding how initial connections develop and transform into actions. However, research suggests that young individuals who are followers may demonstrate greater empathic concern and enhanced social self-control than those who are not followers (Pelegri n et al., 2020).

Schools and physical education may serve as crucial environments where group memberships are highlighted, and social norms are practiced through school sports days, peer-led cheering, and everyday talk about teams. Educational settings also influence how young people perceive their identities and associated norms, particularly through factors such as school climate and collective group dynamics (Idris et al., 2012; Reynolds, Lee, et al., 2017; Reynolds, Subasic, et al., 2017). School social context unites diverse groups of peers, which can foster supportive social cultures while also presenting chances for hostile in-group versus out-group behaviors. This conflict brings up a pedagogical question: what fan behaviors are already present by late childhood, and how do they differ by age and gender within school communities?

To explain why celebratory, emotional, or aggressive behaviors emerge, it is necessary to consider how team identification develops. Cognitive and social processes likely operate in tandem. Utilizing Piaget's stages of development, James (2001) illustrates that even young children exhibit robust preferences, but the consistency and intricacy of their commitments increase with cognitive maturity. Initial attachments are also influenced by socializing agents, especially fathers and older siblings, before peer influence intensifies in adolescence (James, 2001; McPherson, 1976). Children may form attachments to a sports team early in life, but the behavioral commitment associated with loyalty to that team usually deepens as they get older (James, 2001).

In summary, middle childhood and early adolescence appear to be critical periods for the formation of fan identity. Around age 10, children can express the reasons behind their attachments. By the age of 14, the broadening of social

environments and gender-specific socialization could affect the intensity and expression of fandom. Analyzing these two time points while accounting for gender can clarify how early identification translates into distinct behavioral patterns (positive, emotional, and negative expressions).

Therefore, this study aims to compare fan behavior at two developmental stages (ages 10 and 14) and across genders to shed light on how fan behavior develops from late childhood into the beginning of adolescence.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 222 children (101 boys, 121 girls) aged 10 and 14 years, recruited from primary schools in Croatia. Of these, 109 were fourth-grade students (age 10), and 113 were eighth-grade students (age 14). The questionnaire was administered in April 2023, during regular school hours.

Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and verbal assent was obtained from children before participation. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; students could skip any question or stop at any time without penalty. No identifying information was collected. Procedures complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and followed GDPR requirements for data protection. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb approved this study.

Instrument

The Fan Behavior Questionnaire (Capella, 2002) was applied, translated into Croatian using a double-blind procedure, and linguistically adapted for younger school-age children. The instrument consists of three scales: *Negative Behavior*, *Positive Behavior*, and *Emotionality*, each comprising eight items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*). Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the construct measured by the respective scale. *Negative Behavior* items reflect expressions of team attachment through potentially risky or uncontrolled actions; *Positive Behavior* items capture supportive but non-harmful fan activities (e.g., preparing for cheering or wearing team colors); and *Emotionality* items assess the intensity of affective reactions to matches. In the original validation study, internal consistency was acceptable, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$ (*Positive Behavior*), $.80$ (*Negative Behavior*), and $.89$ (*Emotionality*).

Statistical analysis

Cronbach's α was used to assess the internal consistency of the fan behavior scales. Group differences by age and gender were examined using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Statistical analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25; IBM), and data visualizations were created in JASP (Version 0.19.2; <https://jasp-stats.org>). The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that a sample size of approximately 200 (about 50 per cell) would be needed to detect a small effect

size ($f^2(V) = .02$) with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80. Effect sizes were reported as partial eta squared (η_p^2) and interpreted using conventional benchmarks of .01, .06, and .14 for small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Results

Internal consistency of the fan behavior scales was satisfactory: $\alpha = .79$ for Positive Behavior, $\alpha = .78$ for Emotionality, and $\alpha = .89$ for Negative Behavior. These values exceed the conventional threshold of .70 and can be considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the fan behavior scales by age and gender. As illustrated in Figure 1, the raincloud plots show considerable overlap in score distributions across groups; however, consistent trends emerged, with boys generally reporting higher scores on all three scales. At the same time, older children displayed elevated levels of Negative Behavior.

Before conducting MANOVA, the assumption of multicollinearity among dependent variables was examined using Pearson's correlations. Two of the three correlations were $r = .60$ and $r = .74$, which are below the recommended threshold of $r = .90$ for multicollinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Box's M test was significant ($M = 161.77$, $p < .001$), indicating unequal covariance matrices. Given that this test is highly sensitive to sample size and deviations from normality, and considering the relatively large and balanced sample, MANOVA was deemed appropriate. Because Box's M indicated inequality of covariance matrices, results were interpreted using Pillai's Trace, which is considered robust under such conditions.

Multivariate analysis of variance revealed significant main effects of age, Pillai's Trace = .135, $F(3, 216) = 11.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .135$, and gender, Pillai's Trace = .177, $F(3, 216) = 15.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .177$. The age $\times$ gender interaction was also significant (Figure 2), Pillai's Trace = .071, $F(3, 216) = 5.47$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .071$. According to these benchmarks, the multivariate effect of gender was large, the effect of age approached the conventional threshold for a large effect, and the age $\times$ gender interaction was medium.

Follow-up univariate analyses showed that age had a significant effect only on Negative Behavior, $F(1, 218) = 4.04$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .019$ with older children reporting higher levels. Gender differences were significant on all three scales: Positive Behavior, $F(1, 218) = 21.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .084$; Emotionality, $F(1, 218) = 21.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$; and Negative Behavior, $F(1, 218) = 40.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .143$, with boys scoring higher. Significant age $\times$ gender interactions were found for Positive Behavior, $F(1, 218) = 10.47$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .039$ and Emotionality, $F(1, 218) = 4.30$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$, indicating that gender differences varied across age groups.

Overall, the typical boy in this sample reported more frequent fan-related behaviors of all kinds, including supportive behaviors (e.g., preparing for cheering) and stronger emotions about match outcomes. At the same time, boys also more often endorsed negative expressions. The only clear age difference was that 14-year-olds reported slightly more negative behavior than 10-year-olds. Finally, gender gaps in positive behavior and emotionality were larger among 10-year-olds, suggesting that these differences may narrow somewhat by early adolescence.

Discussion

This study investigated age and gender differences in children's fan behavior. Overall, boys scored higher than girls on all three scales, older children reported more negative behavior, and gender gaps in positive behavior and emotionality were most pronounced among the younger group.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of fan behavior scales by age and gender

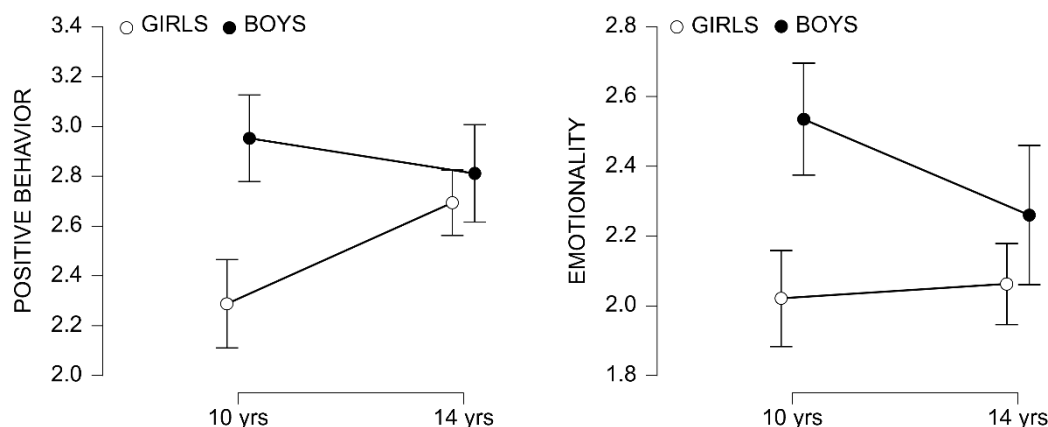
Gender	<i>n</i>	Positive Behavior	Emotionality	Negative Behavior
Age 10 years				
Girls	59	2.29 $\pm$ 0.68	2.02 $\pm$ 0.53	1.22 $\pm$ 0.31
Boys	50	2.95 $\pm$ 0.61	2.54 $\pm$ 0.56	1.67 $\pm$ 0.74
Age 14 years				
Girls	62	2.69 $\pm$ 0.52	2.06 $\pm$ 0.46	1.31 $\pm$ 0.37
Boys	51	2.81 $\pm$ 0.69	2.26 $\pm$ 0.71	1.91 $\pm$ 0.89

Figure 1 Raincloud plots of fan behavior scales by age and gender



Note. Raincloud plots showing distributions of Positive Behavior, Emotionality, and Negative Behavior scores categorized by age (10 vs. 14 years) and gender (girls vs. boys). Dots represent individual observations, boxplots display the medians and interquartile ranges, and half-violins indicate kernel density estimates.

Figure 2 Interaction plots for Positive Behavior and Emotionality by age and gender



Note. Interaction plots for Positive Behavior and Emotionality categorized by age and gender. The lines illustrate mean scores, highlighting that gender differences were more pronounced among younger participants.

These patterns align with previous studies showing that fandom may develop early and is shaped by both cognitive growth and socialization (James, 2001; Wann et al., 1996). Stronger engagement among boys reflects evidence that watching sports and fan identity in childhood are more male-typed, often via paternal influence and wider links between sport and masculinity (James, 2001; McPherson, 1976). Other work suggests boys' fandom is often more active and expressive, whereas girls more often describe relational or encouraging forms of support (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010).

The age-related rise in negative behavior corresponds with developmental and social-identity perspectives. As social environments broaden during early adolescence, in-group versus out-group dynamics can intensify, and collective performances guided by peers (chants, symbols, provocation) may become more prominent (Dunning, 2001; Giulianotti, 2002; Spaaij, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ethnographic work also indicates that severe football violence is concentrated in small, tightly knit groups, while most supporters engage mainly in symbolic, ritualized display (Dunning, 2001; Spaaij, 2006). In this light, the age-linked rise in negative behavior in our sample may reflect stronger in-group signaling and peer-norm performance rather than a general drift toward severe aggression.

In our data, negative behavior was the only domain that increased from age 10 to age 14. This trend suggests that, as peer influence rises, the visible demonstration of group boundaries may become more pronounced, increasing the likelihood of hostile or dangerous behaviors unless moderated by positive social norms. In this context, previous research is enlightening: Pelegrín et al. (2020) discovered that there was no prosocial benefit for sports participants compared to those who did not participate, indicating that merely being involved in sports is not enough. Instead, the social climate created by coaches, parents, and peers likely determines whether identification is expressed cooperatively or antagonistically (see also Boardley et al., 2008). This viewpoint helps us understand our age-related findings as a societal shift toward more excitement and competition-focused peer behaviors, which can be mitigated by

clear prosocial signals (such as prompts for empathy, rituals promoting fairness, and steady support from adults).

Taken together, our results suggest a dual pathway: team identification can enhance positive and emotional expressions, but, depending on specific social circumstances, it may also incite hostile behavior. Programs that incorporate empathy and self-regulation into supporter initiatives may sustain vibrant fandom while minimizing negative actions.

Implications

The findings may have practical implications for both families and educational institutions. At home, parents and caregivers can influence initial fan behaviors by demonstrating encouraging cheering and helping children understand the intense feelings that come with both victory and defeat. Children consistently prefer parents who are supportive and calm, who encourage effort and fair play, and who intervene only for safety reasons rather than acting as sideline coaches or confrontational fans (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011). Simple ways to strengthen these values include cheering for one's team while respecting competitors, praising effort, and discussing feelings shortly after games. Watching games together can also provide chances to demonstrate respectful competition and self-discipline.

Schools can enhance family socialization by incorporating fan behavior into the broader school environment related to sports. Brief activities in physical education or homeroom can elucidate fundamental in-group/out-group dynamics in ways that are suitable for various age groups, practice inclusive cheers, and highlight the importance of empathy towards opponents. Student leaders can use scripts that promote respectful support, and schools might provide parents with brief instructions before athletic events. Due to the increased negative behavior observed at age 14, implementing peer-led norm-setting, brief reflections after events, and restorative measures for incidents could be particularly beneficial. Focusing on mastery and sportsmanship, and publicly acknowledging fair play from both teams, can redirect intense identification into positive emotional expressions rather than hostile behaviors.

Limitations and future directions

This study is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported data from children; therefore, causal claims and generalizability are limited. Responses may be affected by social desirability and by variations in how children understand the items in questionnaires, particularly across age groups. Although internal consistency was acceptable, future studies should examine measurement invariance across age and gender. They may incorporate multi-informant designs that include reports from parents or teachers, as well as observational measures (e.g., behavior during school sporting events). Furthermore, our sample was taken from a single country; expanding our sampling to include various regions and, optimally, conducting cross-national comparisons within Europe would enhance our understanding of how national fan cultures and local school environments influence youth fan behavior. Qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups involving children, parents, and PE teachers may provide insights into why some behaviors are considered normal or acceptable, as well as how peer groups support them. Longitudinal studies tracking children from late childhood into adolescence, while incorporating assessments of fan intensity and the context of exposure (live events vs. media viewing), would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and developmental trajectories.

Conclusions

This study explored variations in children's fan behavior by age and gender at two developmental stages (ages 10 and 14). Three patterns emerged: boys showed higher levels of positive and negative behavior than girls; older participants showed an increase in negative behavior; and the gender differences in positive behavior and emotional responses were more pronounced in the younger group. Overall, the findings indicate that middle childhood and early adolescence are crucial periods for influencing fan behavior. As the influence of peer norms increases, expressive forms of fandom may grow stronger in both prosocial (enthusiasm, shared rituals) and negative directions. In practical terms, early, low-cost supports in families and schools that demonstrate positive encouragement while highlighting empathy and self-regulation may help guide identification towards inclusive, managed expressions of fandom.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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