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## It's Football Time in the Bluegrass!: The Community of UK Football Athletes & Fans and Their Shared Language & Religious Practices

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2023.487>

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IT'S FOOTBALL TIME IN THE BLUEGRASS!: THE COMMUNITY OF UK  
FOOTBALL ATHLETES & FANS AND THEIR SHARED LANGUAGE &  
RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Arts and Science  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Virginia Marie Anderson

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2023

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### IT'S FOOTBALL TIME IN THE BLUEGRASS!: THE COMMUNITY OF UK FOOTBALL ATHLETES & FANS AND THEIR SHARED LANGUAGE & RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

This thesis observes how University of Kentucky fans and athletes create both a community and a religious experience surrounding the sport of football through their use of language. Fans and athletes took part in interviews that implicitly asked about religious experiences and community. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and underwent open thematic coding. Themes were gathered from the interviews and compared to determine if the fans and athletes were separate subcommunities or if they were simply part of the at-large University of Kentucky football program community. These themes also aided in determining if and how fans and athletes create a religious experience. The determined themes confirm that there is a religious experience created by the fans and athletes and that the two groups are distinct subcommunities within the at-large community.

KEYWORDS: [Football, Community, Religion, Fans, Athletes, Language Use]

Virginia Anderson

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*(Name of Student)*

11/06/2023

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Date

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FOOTBALL ATHLETES & FANS AND THEIR SHARED LANGUAGE &  
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## DEDICATION

To the fans and athletes associated with the University of Kentucky football program, I hope I did you justice. Your love and dedication to this team has been inspiring and I hope to have painted an accurate picture. I will be forever grateful to be a part of this Big Blue family.  
Go Cats!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first want to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Rasheed Flowers, Dr. Rusty Barrett, and Dr. Allison Burkette, for helping me remain calm and focused during this entire process. This work truly would have never happened without the three of you. You pushed me to be the best student and researcher I can. I want to thank my family for encouraging me during my time at UK. I also want to thank the University of Kentucky for the best 4.5 years of academia, athletics, and for the friendships that were created along the way.

To Kyle, thank you for ensuring that I ate, slept, and stay focused not only on my thesis, but on other homework as well. I am so incredibly grateful for you. To Madison and Kaitlin, thank you for the brownie nights and for checking in with me to make sure I am doing my work and am doing okay. To Madison, Kaitlin, and Kathryn, thank you for the spontaneous Cookout milkshake nights, as those sessions helped take my mind off the daunting tasks graduate school had to offer and allowed me to have fun with my friends. To Connor, thank you for letting me ask numerous questions about my thesis and vent about this to you in the office.

To my professors, thank you for being patient with me while I focused on this work, your kindness helped me not go insane. To the University of Kentucky football team and its fans, thank you for letting me into your communities and for allowing me to talk about how special you are.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The University of Kentucky has one the greatest fanbases in all of college sports. The university has transitioned from being known solely as a “basketball school” to a “football school”. Because the athletic programs at the University of Kentucky are doing well, there are many dedicated fans ready to cheer on their Wildcat athletes. Previous work in philosophy has examined fandom in professional sports through a religious lens and has created a framework on how to study sports fans (Uszynski, 2013). Although there have been many philosophical studies conducted on professional sports fandoms, there have not been many studies conducted on athletes or collegiate sports fandoms using linguistic methodology. This research fills that gap by combining the philosophical methodology with linguistic ethnographic methodology to study the creation of a religious experience and a community by collegiate sports fans and athletes using language in Lexington, Kentucky.

### 1.1 RESEARCH GOALS

The goals for this research are as followed:

- Identify the at-large community and determine if there are subcommunities within this community.
- Observe and determine if fans and athletes of the University of Kentucky football program create a religious experience around the sport and understanding how they go about doing it.
- Explain community and religion within sports and how those are related and accomplished through language use.

To achieve these goals, ethnographic interviews were conducted with fans and athletes of the University of Kentucky football program. Once these interviews were completed, the process of open thematic coding took place to determine what themes are present in the interviews had with the fans and athletes. Quotes and ideas from the interviews were used to justify the themes and then the comparison of how fans and athletes discussed the football program to determine community status and religious experiences took place.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In his dissertation written while attending Bowling Green State University, Edward Uszynski observed how the fandom surrounding Cleveland professional sports teams can be compared to a religious experience (Uszynski, 2013). Uszynski used ethnographic research techniques – interviews, questionnaires, and observation – to gain insight on how sports fans were impacted by their love for the local professional sports teams (Uszynski, 2013). A “semi-structured interview format” was used to explore the lives of fans at a local Cleveland sports bar before, during, and after a professional sporting event (Uszynski, 2013). Uszynski conducted interviews with 15 customers at the Parkview NiteClub over a span of six months (Uszynski, 2013). After the interviews were complete, Uszynski then used a “semi-structured questionnaire to explore the contours of their devotion to the Cleveland teams” (Uszynski, 2013).

In his research, Uszynski mentioned the loyalty of the fans to the teams despite many losses, a championship drought, and even the loss of Lebron James (Uszynski, 2013). The researcher observed, after the interviews and questionnaires were complete, that there happened to be a “co-mingling of civic history, existence of teams, and

personal life narrative of the fans themselves” (Uszynski, 2013). Many fans noted that their personal identity is tied to the existence and success of the professional teams that are in Cleveland (Uszynski, 2013). How the fans weave their identity with the success if a team is what relates their fandom to a religious experience (Uszynski, 2013).

Uszynski’s study shows that there is a community of practice in play and that there is a shared language within this larger professional sports community (Uszynski, 2013). This is crucial in understanding why, and even how, professional sports fans are a tightknit community and dedicated to their favorite team(s) (Uszynski, 2013).

The research conducted by Uszynski was used as the outline for this research being conducted. He completed his research in Cleveland, Ohio, where there are three professional sports teams for people to cheer for – Browns, Cavaliers, and the Guardians. This research focused on the University of Kentucky and the surrounding Lexington area. It is believed that there is a stronger community and identity connected with UK Athletics because the state of Kentucky does not have any professional sports teams. The closest professional sports teams are the Cincinnati Reds and Cincinnati Bengals located in Cincinnati, Ohio. Due to the lack of professional sports teams in Kentucky, it is understood that people latch on to the closest university team and have a great amount of pride for that team. People tend to have a stronger tie to their memorabilia in a college area and this can be one way to tackle the idea that sports fandom is related to a religious experience.

Defining what takes place for someone to claim they experienced a religious experience varies because people will use their own religion to explain the phenomenon. Taking out the biases of the world’s religions, religion can be defined as “socially shared

belief systems comprised of the words, symbols, metaphors, myths, and rituals that people use to think about their relationship with the supernatural realm and communicate their thoughts to others” (Coakley, 2021, p. 558). Even though sports fandom has been compared to a religious experience, it must be noted that it is primarily Christians making this comparison and not Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religions (Coakley, 2021). Table 1 explores several of the similarities that explain how sports has been discussed as a religious experience.

Table 1 Similarities between sports and religions (Coakley, 2021, p. 561)

<b>BOTH HAVE</b>	<b>SPORTS HAVE</b>	<b>RELIGIONS HAVE</b>
Special sites for events & communal gatherings	Stadiums, arenas, gyms, & parks	Churches, mosques, synagogues, & temples
Disciplines quests for perfection in mind, body, & spirit	Commitment to perfection through disciplined training & competitive performances	Commitment to perfection through disciplined study of holy books & quest for moral purity
Structured organizations & a clear hierarchy of authority	Commissioners, owners/athletic directors, managers, & coaches	Prophets, popes/patriarchs/presidents, pastors, & priests
Events to celebrate & reaffirm shared values	Scheduled contests that celebrate competition, hard work & achievement	Annual holy days that celebrate moral commitment, community, & redemption
Rituals before, during, & after major events	Initiations, national anthems, pep talks, fist bumping, & marching bands	Baptisms, opening hymns, regular sermons, the joining of hands, & ceremonial processions
Heroes & stories about their accomplishments	Heroes are elected to halls of fame, & their stories are told by sports journalists, coaches, & fans	Heroes are granted sainthood, & their stories are told by religious writers, leaders, & believers
Occasions that inspire emotions & existential thoughts	Players & fans are inspired to contemplate the physical potential of human beings	Theologians & believers are inspired to contemplate the meaning of existence
A focus that distracts attention from here-and-now social, political, & economic issues	Focus on athlete-celebrities, scores, win-loss records, records of achievement, & championships	Focus on salvation & a relationship with a deity & the supernatural realm



The comparison done by Coakley (2021) is a general outline to explain what people mean when they compare sports and religion without focusing on one religion. For this research, the similarities were a guide when analyzing how fans and athletes feel about the sport and how they discuss their experiences. Do players and fans complete rituals and keep memorabilia enshrined in their homes, or do they believe the religious experience is only there when prayers or devotionals are used? Asking the fans and athletes if they have game day rituals or important memorabilia in their home was a way to observe the religious experience without explicitly asking. Coakley's findings (2021) were used in the interviews to compare a religious experience at a place of worship to a religious experience in a secular place.

Sports and religion give people a sense of community and belonging. Not looking at sports and religion, even in separate scenarios, sociologist Anthony Cohen wrote a book that is a good visual on how language creates a shared community that supersedes other communities people happen to belong to (Cohen, 1985). Cohen (1985) suggests that the general interpretation of 'community' is "the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups". He has observed how people do not necessarily ignore political, social, or racial boundaries whilst participating in the community activities, but they use them as symbols "to give substance to their values and identities" (Cohen, 1985). This is crucial to any study where a community is being observed due to there being many people with different backgrounds. Cohen demonstrates to readers that people can still get along and bond over a larger subject or

interest even if they probably would not get along outside of their shared community (Cohen, 1985).

Kentucky Athletics has many fans, all with different backgrounds. The one thing that can unite an entire city and fanbase is the love the fans and athletes have for their team. The community that the University of Kentucky football athletes have created is limited and only accessible for those who are participating or have participated in the sport at the university. The community of fans of UK football is not limited to Lexington, Kentucky, or only accessible if you are a student or alumni. The fandom can be passed down through generations of family and between friends. This understanding is based off the idea that Cohen had that community is widespread and is greater than any boundary that would possibly separate people otherwise (Cohen, 1985).

After the 2018 Winter Olympics, Jamie Shinhee Lee did a study on mob mentality and the way it is demonstrated on social media platforms (Lee, 2019). Lee wanted to explore the ‘us vs. them’ mentality that sports create, especially around a crucial time in sports, such as the Olympics (Lee, 2019). During the 2018 Winter Olympics, there was much controversy surrounding the speed skating event. Front runners in the event had been disqualified and fans were none too happy about their countrymen being disqualified for various reasons (Lee, 2019). The fans of the front runners took to social media to express their anger regarding the situation (Lee, 2019). They not only expressed their anger regarding the disqualifications, but also displayed a practice of ‘othering’ (Lee, 2019). ‘Othering’ refers to when someone “(1) makes reference to seemingly irrelevant details; (2) evokes stereotypical images of race and/or nation; and (3) utilizes overtly offensive language or transgressive language” (Lee, 2019).

The feud being observed on Instagram by Lee was primarily between Chinese and Korean fans of the speed skating event (Lee, 2019). Both countries were favored in the event and much tension could be seen between the countries prior to the disqualifications (Lee, 2019). Lee noticed that many of the fans expressed racist attitudes and a strong hatred towards the opposing country and its fanbase during the unfortunate disqualifications of the skaters (Lee, 2019). Each fanbase began blaming the other for the disqualifications when it was only the fault of the skater for being disqualified from the speed skating event (Lee, 2019). Fans across the world participate in ‘othering’ and having the ‘us vs. them’ mentality in a plethora of ways. The mentality and hatred might not always be as extreme as the incident between the Chinese and Korean speed skating fans in 2018, but it still happens today when discussing major rivalries.

Using the study conducted by Lee (2019), this research looked at how fans and athletes of the University of Kentucky football program create an ‘us vs. them’ mentality surrounding the program and its rivals. This was achieved during the interview process by mentioning the rivals and asking how they feel about the three main rivals of UK football (Florida, Louisville, and Tennessee) and how they compare to one another. Rivalries bring out an ugliness and a feeling of intense hatred that is inside of fans and athletes. Because of this, rivalries can show how fans use ‘othering’ or an ‘us vs. them’ mentality when discussing sports – in this case, the University of Kentucky football program.

Mob mentality can be seen in the Lee (2019) study but can also be seen in 1951 when Dartmouth played Princeton in football. During this rivalry game, Princeton was penalized only 25 yards while Dartmouth was penalized 70 yards (Hastorf & Cantril,

1954). The week following the game, the newspaper for each college released their take on what happened during the game (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). Princeton blamed Dartmouth for “purposefully” hurting their star player and continued to state that the players for Dartmouth were “barbaric” (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). In Dartmouth’s school newspaper, the writers argue that Princeton should not be complaining about a game that they won (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). Dartmouth accused Princeton of bribing the referees because the game was held at Princeton, giving them home field advantage (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954).

Two differing perspectives were observed, and it depended on which team a person cheered for what they believed. The same idea of mob mentality occurs today from high school to professional sports. This mentality was seen in both the athletes and the fans of the University of Kentucky football team. Fans argue about home field advantage and bribing of the referees, favoring of a team during television commentary, and even will argue about colors that are like theirs. How did fans show mob mentality when watching the game and how did they discuss the hatred for other teams because of this phenomenon?

Ilan Tamir had an interesting take on how identity and sports are intricately related. Tamir poses the idea that sports fans are rooting for the colors of a team rather than the actual team and players (Tamir, 2021). He used a quote from Jerry Seinfeld who had the best explanation for the interwovenness of sports and identity:

Loyalty to any one sports team is pretty hard to justify, because the players are always changing, the team can move to another city. You’re actually rooting for the clothes, when you get right down to it. You know what I mean? You are

standing and cheering and yelling for your clothes to beat the clothes from another city. Fans will be so in love with a player, but if he goes to another team, they boo him. This is the same human being in a different shirt; they hate him now. Boo! Different shirt! Boo! (Tamir, 2021, p. 634)

Seinfeld's quote can be proven true in most sports, especially at the collegiate level, but when professional players are being traded constantly, many people have begun to cheer for individual players rather than teams. Tamir conducted his research on soccer fans located in Israel (Tamir, 2021). He conducted interviews with 40 soccer fans asking what team they are rooting for and why they decided to root for that team (Tamir, 2021). He found that there were two key roles in determining what team a fan chose to cheer for (Tamir, 2021). Color could be seen as either an emotional or physical extension (Tamir, 2021). People would see a color that does not belong to their team and could have an emotional reaction such as, "Yellow is the color that makes me happy, lifts my spirits, it's the color that is associated with love, joy, and smiles" (Tamir, 2021, p. 640).

An example of color as a physical extension of identity and/or community can be seen here. "I wear green things everywhere, even when I'm abroad, I wear green. It's not something you can detach yourself from. I buy my kids things that are green. It attaches them to the team, so that they won't forget what the important things are" (Tamir, 2021, p. 641). As seen in the Israeli soccer fandom, people cheered for a team based on how the color(s) made them feel physically and emotionally (Tamir, 2021). Tamir (2021) found that the reason behind a color choice is irrelevant for many fans of other sports, but the fact that a particular color represents their favorite team, the fans will adopt the color and wear it with pride (Tamir, 2021).

In collegiate sports, fans often pick the school that is closest to them, and they live and die by the color(s) of that school. For example, when picking out a blue to wear to a sporting event, Kentucky fans will avoid baby blue because of the University of North Carolina and search for a “true Kentucky Blue”. Kentucky fans argue that there is a noticeable difference between Duke Blue and Kentucky Blue, even though the two colors are almost identical. In professional sports, this take on cheering for a team because of their colors can be iffy. Unless the fandom for one team has been passed down, fans have taken to cheering for players instead of teams when watching professional sports due to how often players are traded in the MLB, NBA, NHL, and NFL.

Tamir’s research has posed an interesting question and way of observation when exploring how sports fandom is interwoven into one’s identity. This research looked at how people responded physically and emotionally when asked if Kentucky Blue and Duke Blue are the same color. If fans said they are not the same color, they were asked to elaborate on how they would explain to someone not a fan of either school how the colors differ from one another. This does not solely pertain to how the various blues are discussed in collegiate sports, but also how fans feel when the colors of their rivals are brought up.

Being a part of a community and having one’s fandom be interwoven into their identity can cause a community-specific language to emerge. An idea emerged that sports fans have a shared vocabulary and can interact with one another and not have to pause to ask for clarification (Wann et al., 1997). The researchers behind this idea coined it as “Sportugese” (Wann et al., 1997). They hypothesized that there was “a positive relationship between understanding sport terminology, extent of team identification,

strength of sport fandom, and self-proclaimed sport knowledge” (Wann et al., 1997). The study was conducted on 57 college students at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky (Wann et al., 1997). The students completed a questionnaire that had them identify their involvement with sports as a spectator, how knowledgeable they were of a sport, and how well they understood terminology used in sports articles (Wann et al., 1997). The terminology portion of the questionnaire has the students estimate how many points a team had won or lost according to the verb used in a sentence and the syntax the writer used (Wann et al., 1997). The work done by the researchers found “that frequent readers of the sports page possess a better understanding of sport verbalizations was successful as higher ratings of team identification, sport fandom, and sport knowledge were correlated with understanding of sport language” (Wann et al., 1997).

The research done at Murray State University focused on fans of the university’s men’s basketball team and their understanding of sports verbalization (Wann et al., 1997). The research being conducted focused on the University of Kentucky football team and their fanbase. Fans were asked about particular terminology (i.e., chants, cheers, songs, etc.) used when they discuss UK football and when they discuss rival teams. This shared language is not only for fans but was seen amongst athletes, too. Athletes have a stronger understanding of sports verbalization, and this was observed as they participated in interviews. The idea of a shared language plays into a fan’s and athlete’s identity because of the ability to connect people and create a community of people who speak in a way that people outside of the community do not understand (Cohen, 1985; Wann, et al., 1997).

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The methods used for gathering data in this research were based on Uszynski's study on professional sports fans in Cleveland, Ohio (Uszynski, 2013). For this study, both fans and athletes of the University of Kentucky football program were interviewed to understand how there is a shared language amongst these differing, yet similar, communities and how the game atmosphere can be compared to a religious experience. The data was analyzed using open thematic coding to categorize the data by themes presented in the interviews. This will assist in observing how there are congruent behaviors amongst the fans and athletes.

The researcher acknowledges that even though a student and devout fan of the University of Kentucky football program, the research was done in ways to ensure objectivity by asking questions and letting the athletes and fans discuss their experiences while not guiding them in a certain direction. Only data from the interviews was used in this research as to ensure no falsification by outside material. To maintain security with the data and the participants, the interviews are kept in a folder on the researcher's computer which has a passcode. The computer is always with the researcher and the only people who see the data before it is published is the researcher's thesis committee and a student in the linguistics graduate department who assisted in collecting data with the fans before the September 16<sup>th</sup> football game versus Akron University. Consent forms were sent out by the researcher and signed by participating athletes and fans then emailed to the researcher. The co-chairs of the committee received a copy of the consent forms so that if the researcher's computer was stolen or broken, there would still be records of consent.



### 3.1 ATHLETE INTERVIEWS

University of Kentucky football players were interviewed over Zoom during the months of June, July, and August as to gather data before the 2023 football season began. Players were recruited for the study by the researcher's co-chair who knew players through class and Fellowship of Christian Athletes and by the coordinator for the center of academic tutoring services. Once players voiced their willingness to participate in the study, the researcher contacted them via text message or email, depending on which mode of communication they preferred. Players were also recruited by participating players passing on the study to other players, also known as 'snowballing'.

The questions asked during the interview were crafted during meetings with the researcher's thesis committee and finalized in April 2023. The questions that were asked during the player interviews can be found in Appendix 1. The interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted between 15 and 20 minutes with the questions differing slightly depending on if, and when, they transferred from another university. Six players were interviewed, and the demographics of these players can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 University of Kentucky football athlete demographics

<b>Place of Origin</b>	<b>Year in School</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Previous Conference (if applicable)</b>
California	5 <sup>th</sup> YR	RB	SEC
South Carolina	6 <sup>th</sup> YR	K	∅
Texas	4 <sup>th</sup> YR	QB	BIG10
Kentucky	3 <sup>rd</sup> YR	WR	∅
Illinois	6 <sup>th</sup> YR	OL	MAC
Nigeria	4 <sup>th</sup> YR	DL	∅

Stating what state or state, or country, the player is from plays an important role in why the athlete chose the University of Kentucky over other universities. Instead of listing the players’ student classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), the number of years that the athlete has been in school is listed to avoid confusion. Many players are classified as ‘redshirt’, and this can cause hesitation when trying to identify student classification amongst athletes.<sup>1</sup> Listing the various positions of the players is important as they have different pregame rituals and ways to keep themselves in a

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<sup>1</sup> A redshirt year is when a player decides to sit out of playing in games for a year (Imm, 2021). The athlete has four games to decide if they are going to play that season, but they can still practice with the team and reap the benefits of scholarships and tutoring (Imm, 2021). Instead of another year of eligibility being added to the athlete’s status, they will maintain the four years of eligibility and it will be pushed back for one year while they sit out (T. Dennis, personal communication, October 4, 2023).

mentality appropriate for the game. Three out of the six athletes are transfers from other universities with only one of the transfers staying in the Southeastern Conference.

Mentioning the conference that a transfer came from is important when discussing how the players think and feel about fan involvement, school traditions, and how the rivalries differ.

Using Zoom for the interviews aided in the transcribing process. Zoom will take the audio and produce a transcription of the video if saved to the cloud on the website. While having the transcription provided by Zoom was helpful, it was also inaccurate. When transcribing the interviews, the video was pulled up along with the script from the video and corrected as the video played. This process was completed six times for the athlete interviews and took roughly an hour per interview as they were 15 to 20 minutes in length. Once the transcriptions were completed, the process of open thematic coding took place. The interviews were looked at one-by-one and themes were gathered from each player. After the coding of the six interviews were completed, all themes were looked at to detect any similarities and differences amongst the players. When the process of thematic coding was complete, the themes and examples from the player interviews were reviewed by the thesis committee to ensure accuracy of the themes and their examples.

### 3.2 FAN INTERVIEWS

University of Kentucky football fans were interviewed while tailgating before the September 9<sup>th</sup> game versus Eastern Kentucky University and September 16<sup>th</sup> versus Akron University. Fans were approached at random while tailgating before the gates to the stadium opened for fans to enter. The researcher explained what the research was, that

their name would not be used while presenting the data and were told how long the interview would take. The fans approached were given the opportunity to turn down the interview if they did not want to participate. The interview questions for the fans were created during meetings with the thesis committee and finalized in April 2023. The questions asked can be found in Appendix 2. Eleven fans were interviewed, but the data of ten fans will be used for the research as one of the fans did not sign and return the consent form.

The fans were interviewed in person using a tiny microphone and were recorded using Voice Memos on the researcher's cellphone. To ensure security of the fan interviews, the interviews were transferred to the researcher's passcode locked computer and then deleted from the cellphone. The only people with access to the interviews are the researcher, the co-chairs of the thesis committee, and a fellow linguistics graduate student who assisted in the interview process on September 16<sup>th</sup>. The transcription process was like the process completed with the athlete interviews. The only added step was having to move the interviews from the Voice Memos app on the cellphone to Zoom on the computer to receive a script from Zoom. Having the script was helpful, but again, they needed corrected because it was inaccurate.

Identical to transcribing the athlete interviews, the video was pulled up along with the script from the video and corrected as the video played. This process was completed 10 times for the fan interviews and took roughly 30 minutes per interview as they were five to ten minutes in length. Once the transcriptions were completed, the process of open thematic coding took place. Interviews were looked at individually to see any themes from the data gathered. Once each fan had themes pulled from their interview, the themes

of the participating fans were then compared to discover if there were overlapping themes. Like the athlete interviews, when the process of thematic coding was complete, the themes and examples from the fan interviews were reviewed by the thesis committee to ensure accuracy of the themes and their examples.

## CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the interviews conducted with the fans and athletes underwent the process of open thematic coding. This process examined the themes present within each interview by looking at what the interviewees said during the interview. Five themes were determined for the athlete interviews and four themes were determined for the fan interviews. This chapter has been split into three sections and will split the fan and athlete interviews into separate sections and end with a discussion of the findings.

### 4.1 ATHLETES

The open thematic coding process conducted on the athlete interviews observed five themes presented consistently across six interviews. The five themes were religion, hatred, brotherhood, competitive spirit, and appreciation. Quotes and ideas were taken from each interview and placed into the proper category to justify how the theme was determined. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

#### 4.1.1 RELIGION

Religion can be defined as a “relation to that which [people] regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of special reverence” (Coakley, 2021;

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2023). People can, and will, treat sporting events and teams in such a way that it can be described as a religious experience to the fans attending or watching (Uszynski, 2013; Coakley, 2021). People will use their own religion to describe what they believe a religious experience to be like (Coakley, 2021). The theme of religion primarily focuses on memorabilia, pre-game rituals, and superstitions.

When discussing memorabilia with the athletes, they were excited to share some items they have kept over their long football career. Players keep things that have great importance and resemble a remarkable game from their career. They keep jerseys, name tags from lockers used at bowl games, game towels and balls, pictures with teammates and family members, or they collect something from a new stadium they travel to – i.e., shot glasses. The memorabilia from football games and the act of enshrining these items can create a religious experience for the athlete (Coakley, 2021). People who are members of a religious community, particularly Christianity, will hang crosses on their walls, own jewelry with crosses on them, and some will keep pictures of Jesus on their mantle as a reminder of their faith (Hanbury, 2021). The memorabilia that athletes keep have reminded them of their accomplishments and why they continue to play the game despite many hardships they may face.

When discussing pre-game rituals, all six of the players mentioned that they pray before every game during warmups and that the team has a chapel in the locker room immediately before the game to pray with the team before running on to the field. Each player listened to music while stretching and warming up during their first session on the field. The music choices ranged from rap to R&B to gospel to country to pop and even

traditional Nigerian music. The music choices slightly varied depending on the position of the player and depended on which part of their warmup they were in. The quarterback interviewed listens to gospel to stay calm before the game and mentioned that he “need[s] to be kind of surgical. [He doesn’t] need to get all pumped up.” Many of the other players interviewed also mentioned how they needed to remain in a “calm mental state” during warmups and only needed to get pumped up closer to game time which influenced their music choices. Players also mentioned things such as drinking beat juice, taking a 30 minute to an hour nap, FaceTiming trainers for encouragement and advice, and taking practice runs, which one player called “dry runs”, to be mentally and physically ready for the game. The practice runs, or “dry runs”, will help a player practice their specialty – i.e., kicking, throwing, catching, tackling – to ensure they are prepared and confident in their abilities during the game.

The final religious aspect that can be found amongst the football players interviewed was the superstitions they have. Superstitions can be defined as “a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or an event” (Google). These actions differ from those of a ritual because rituals “are repeated behaviors based on defined patterns” (Beliefs, Rituals, Superstitions, & Taboos, 2023). The players’ superstitions were primarily in the way they warmed up before the game and the need to listen to a particular type of music. One player mentioned how some of his teammates will wear the same socks for every game and only change them if they lose. Another player discussed how if he has great practices in a pair of cleats, then he will wear those cleats for the upcoming game. The superstitions that the

players had helped them to believe they would do well and potentially win the game if followed perfectly (Coakley, 2021).

#### 4.1.2 HATRED

The theme of hatred can be explicitly found within the interviews, particularly when discussing the University of Kentucky football rivals. The team is said to have three rivals that they compete against during the season. The three rivals are, in no particular order, Tennessee, Louisville, and Florida. During the interviews, players were asked about these rivalries and which one they believed to be the strongest rival of UK football. They were asked to explain why they think the way they do and how they embraced the rivalries when they transferred to the University of Kentucky, if they transferred at all.

Based on how the six athletes discussed the rivalries, the hatred of the teams can be ranked as follows:

1. Florida
2. Tennessee
3. Louisville.

Players stated that Florida is the top rival because of the evenness of the games, the history of football at the University of Florida and the traditions that surround it, and because “the hype is there.” Tennessee was second to the players because the football program for the University of Tennessee has been “stacked” recently and many players responded with “I hate orange”. Players were fascinated by the loudness of the fans and the atmosphere in Knoxville, but where Kentucky has struggled against them recently, they did not deem it the top rivalry.



Louisville is considered to be the least intense rivalry amongst the three universities listed. Players stated that they have friends who attend the University of Louisville and having to share a state with the university does intensify the desire to win “for the state of Kentucky.” One transfer player decided to give an analogy on what it was like learning to hate the rivalries of UK. He said, “Your best friend hates somebody ... you just have your best friend’s back, right? So I got to Kentucky and I’m like, ‘Who do we not like?’ and everyone’s like, ‘You can’t even wear red, we hate Louisville.’ I said, ‘By God, I’m with you.’” The three transfer players mentioned that the hatred for Louisville, Tennessee, and Florida did not come naturally, and they had to be intent about hating the teams that their teammates and coaches hated.

Despite sharing a state with the University of Louisville, players did not deem it a strong rivalry as the games are not even in skill. One player went as far as to say, “Louisville doesn’t matter, they’re not good.” Other players reminded the researcher that “it’s always L’s down” when discussing the University of Louisville football team. The hatred the players have for Tennessee, Florida, and Louisville demonstrates the mob mentality of the University of Kentucky football program (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lee, 2019). Even though there are many transfer athletes, and many players have transferred within the last year, they all have embraced the rivalries and voiced their excitement to play in those big games (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Cohen, 1985; Lee, 2019).

#### 4.1.3 BROTHERHOOD

The definition of brotherhood is “an association or community of people linked by a common interest, religion, or trade” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). It can also mean “the various groups eventually fused into a single brotherhood” (Cambridge

English Dictionary, 2023). The various groups being fused together are people of different religious, political, social, and racial backgrounds (Cohen, 1985; Cambridge English Dictionary, 2023). The people in this brotherhood do not ignore their backgrounds, but instead will use them “to give substance to their values and identities” (Cohen, 1985). In the NCAA, football teams are permitted to have up to 105 active players on their roster, bringing together a plethora of people from many different backgrounds (Michelson, 2022). The players interviewed each referenced the brotherhood that the University of Kentucky football team possesses.

They stated that this brotherhood played a large factor in choosing to attend the university and play for the football team. Athletes stated that their teammates and coaches will “keep [them] on track” in their schoolwork and in the game of football. One player stated that this sense of togetherness is how and why players quickly accept the hatred of rivals. They will playfully smack talk with teammates while in practice because they know that, because of the relationship they have, they will not take it personally. Memorabilia that the players keep is not only a religious aspect of the game, but a reminder of “playing with 100 of [their] best friends”.

Transfer players have expressed gratitude for the brotherhood of UK football. One player stated, “They made me feel at home. I feel like I’ve been here for three years, but I’ve only been here six months”. This idea of a brotherhood is not exclusive to the University of Kentucky football program. One player interviewed is a recent transfer from Vanderbilt University and he stated that he was excited “seeing teammates who has been there longer [than him] getting the SEC wins”. This brotherhood shown within the

football program at UK creates a community, some players called it a family, that will last long after they have graduated from the university.

#### 4.1.4 COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

Football players understand that smack talk is a normal aspect of the game, and they know how to brush it off without it hindering their mentality for the game (Liu, 2013). Smack talk can be defined as “critical or insulting comments made to someone, especially an opponent” (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2023). During the interview process, the six athletes interviewed were asked (1) if the degree of smack talk differs between a non-rival and a rival school and (2) if they would share an example of their favorite smack talk that they have either heard or said themselves. For the first question, the players stated that when playing a smaller, non-rival, non-conference team, they will talk smack with the star player but not the entire team. When playing a smaller, non-rival school, the athletes mentioned that “small schools will jaw jack after they’ve made a good play or after they score” and “they start talking, so you start talking”.

When playing in the rival games, or even the conference games during the season, players found there to be more smack talk because there is more hype surrounding the game and the atmosphere is tense. When playing a rival school, players stated that they will talk smack to “everyone not wearing the same color as them”. The smack talk during these games can be so vulgar that if it could be heard on national television, it would need bleeped out. Scuffles occur during games when an opponent has taken his smack talk too far. When hearing smack talk during games, some players become rather angry and will target the smack talker during heated exchanges. One player said, “If you [make me mad], I’m at your head all game. I’m taking it from the first quarter to the fourth quarter

to social media”. In reference to smack talk from opponents, this same player said, “You do all this talking to get one five-second moment of glory”.

The six athletes interviewed were willing to share some examples of smack talk they heard or said during a game. The running back stated that he is constantly told he is old or that he is short. His response to these comments was to say, “We all can’t be Derrick Henry”.<sup>2</sup> The quarterback explained the scenario in which the smack talk he received occurred:

I’m warming up. I’m starting to run around and jog, and I jog by [Mississippi State’s] defense. They look at me and they’re like, ‘You’re definitely a kicker, right?’ and start making fun of me. I’m like, you know, six foot four, like 220 pounds. I like to think I’m a little bit bigger, but I just like, chuckle and nodded at them and kept jogging. ... [They] kind of got to me a little bit.

Despite giving and receiving smack talk before, during, and after games, the players acknowledge that there is a silent understanding that each team is trying to be better and win the game.

#### 4.1.5 APPRECIATION

Throughout the interview process with the athletes, they continually expressed their gratitude to the fans and to the sport itself. The players were grateful to the fans and their willingness to travel with them to away games. Because of the fans’ investment and dedication to UK football, a few of the players interviewed stated that the fans will keep

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<sup>2</sup> Derrick Henry is a running back for the Tennessee Titans (Derrick Henry Stats, news, and video - RB). Henry is 6’3 and one of the largest running backs in the sport (Derrick Henry Stats, news, and video - RB). The UK running back mentioned is 5’10.

them “in the game”. Athletes were asked about their feelings regarding catwalk and one player stated, “I think it probably, for most people, I think it gives you a kind of purpose, or like something to play for, if there’s not already another reason”. They understand that kids look up to them and have a desire to potentially be in the same position one day, and they do not take that lightly.

The players are not only grateful to the fans, but to all that the sport of football has given them. They are thankful for the relationships formed through the game and are honored to have the ability to play the game they love in front of fans who love them and the program they play for. This is a reason that players will keep memorabilia from games. They want to be reminded of what the game has done for them, and they want to remember the family that they are a part of. There is an understanding that “life is short” and “everything is bigger than football”.

## 4.2 FANS

The open thematic coding process conducted on the fan interviews observed four themes that were present across ten interviews. The four themes were religion, hatred, family, and faithfulness. Quotes and ideas were taken from each interview and placed into the proper category to justify why that theme is present in the language used by fans of the University of Kentucky football program. The questions asked during the interview process can be found in Appendix 2.

### 4.2.1 RELIGION

As mentioned before, religion shapes the way many people define what a religious experience is (Coakley, 2021). People often treat sporting events and athletic

teams in a way that is comparable to a religious experience (Uszynski, 2013; Coakley, 2021). The theme of religion primarily focuses on memorabilia, superstitions, and how fans will pass along their fandom to friends and family.

A couple of the fans interviewed either played for the University of Kentucky football team or they had family members who played for the team. When discussing memorabilia, these fans stated that jerseys and footballs from either their time with the



Figure 1 Wildcat Head made from a KY Bourbon Barrel

team or their family member's time with the team is what is important to them. Fans that are recent graduates of the university stated that they kept the numerous pompoms and towels given to them during their time in the student section. Others mentioned a signed basketball and a signed volleyball from the year the UK volleyball team won the national championship. One fan discussed a specialty cheese tray from a local distillery that has the UK logo etched under the glass. One group of fans

interviewed were ecstatic to discuss their favorite piece of memorabilia. The item is not something from the University of Kentucky athletic programs, but from a silent auction they attended. During this event, the group bid on many things, but a cat head made from a Kentucky bourbon barrel is what caught their eye. They won the auction, and the cat head can be seen in Figure 1.

Another aspect of a religious experience within sports is having superstitions. Fans have superstitions they do that they believe will “help secure a win”, just like the

athletes. One set of fans interviewed stated that they listen to “Grove St. Party” by Waka Flocka Flame every Friday while driving their kids to daycare and they listen to *Kentucky Sports Radio* while driving to the game. A fan mentioned that he has a pair of lucky socks, which he forgot to wear to the game when the interview took place. A former band member stated that the bow in her hair had to be the same way every game and a different band kid said that a group of them would jump and touch the plumes on their hats to the ceiling. If the plume successfully touched the ceiling, then it would be a good game for the Wildcats.

One fan paints his face blue and wears a blue wig while another group of fans will take “touchdown shots” with Fireball. During the interviews, one fan discussed how he will read a devotion from a devotional book written specifically for fans of University of Kentucky athletics. The devotional mentioned is *Daily Devotions for Diehard Wildcat Fans* by Ed McMinn. Having someone write a devotional book specifically for University of Kentucky sports fans is an explicit way to demonstrate how religion and sports are interwoven. One final superstition explained during the interviews was one fan will get a pedicure every Florida game day. This superstition began two years ago when UK beat Florida at home in 2021. He has continued this for the 2022 and 2023 season, both had a win against the Florida Gators. This fan has expressed his determination to get pedicure every game versus Florida as he has seen the success it has brought.

The final way the fans demonstrated a religious experience in their interviews was by discussing how they pass along their fandom. Religions are often passed down generationally and to create a stronger religious experience, fans should pass down their love for a sports team to their family and potentially to their friends (Coakley, 2021;

Tamir, 2021). Fans stated that they will raise their children in a home that loves and cheers for the University of Kentucky Wildcats, hoping that they do not differ to a different school. The current fans that used to be an athlete at UK stated that “[their] child does not have a choice” when choosing which school to cheer for. One fan gifted his newborn nephew a University of Kentucky onesie while others share videos from the Catwalk and the game to their friends, family members, and coworkers, hoping to convert them as a fan.

#### 4.2.2 HATRED

Not only do the athletes have strong opinions when discussing rivals, but the fans do too. They were asked how they felt about the three UK football rivals – Tennessee, Louisville, and Florida – and were also asked a question regarding the color blue. Fans were rather passionate when discussing these topics and have visible physical reactions to the questions, primarily when asked about their feelings when people say that Duke Blue and Kentucky Blue are the same color.

When discussing the three rivals of UK football, fans were passionate about their dislike for the three teams. A possible ranking could be made from their discussions:

1. Louisville
2. Tennessee
3. Florida.

This ranking is opposite from how the players felt about the three rivals. When UK plays Florida, many fans will smoke an alligator at their tailgate, symbolizing how the team will be roasted during the game. During the interviews, this was the extent of discussion on the University of Florida. When discussing their feelings regarding the University of



Tennessee Volunteers, many cursed and became rather angry. This anger was not directed towards the team, but towards the Volunteer fanbase. There were two types of responses when it came to talking about Tennessee. One response was simply saying, “Oh yuck”, while the other response was, “We hate \*\*\*\*ing Tennessee ... they’re rude fans”. Fans also referred to their colors as “puke orange”. Many fans will reference the movie *The Blind Side* when Sandra Bullock’s character says, “I will not wear that gaudy orange!” (2016).

The discussion of Louisville is where fans had some rather strong opinions. One fan simply said, “I hate Louisville with a passion” while another could not say the city name. Instead of saying “Louisville”, this fan would refer to the city and the school as



Figure 2 University of Kentucky fan sat between two University of Louisville fans

“Loserville”. Fans would yell “L’s down” and make an upside-down L with their hand to demonstrate their hatred for the school. Figure 2 portrays how some Wildcat fans will poke fun at their family

members or friends who are Cardinal fans. Despite the strong hatred many of the fans interviewed expressed towards Louisville, one Kentucky fan believed that Tennessee is a stronger football rival while Louisville is a stronger basketball rival.

Not only did the fans have strong opinions about Florida, Tennessee, and Louisville, they became visibly upset when asked how they feel when people say that the

colors Kentucky Blue and Duke Blue are the same color. When first asked this question, one fan shuddered and said, “I don’t even like the word Duke”. Many of the fans mentioned that Kentucky Blue is a “more royal blue” while one fan said, “Kentucky Blue is just, it’s more royal ... it’s just a smoother blue. It’s not as harsh and gross”. Another fan grimaced and said, “The blue in my veins is different than the Duke fans’ veins”. When asking this question, one fan became so passionate that the two colors were indeed different and told the researcher to “check the record books”.

Record books ended up being referenced to identify how the two schools label and differentiate, if at all, their colors. The Pantone Color System (PMS) will be used as this system is used for prints (Sam, 2015). The PMS number for Kentucky Blue is 286 C and is officially known as “Wildcat Blue” (Teamcolors, 2021). The PMS number for Duke Blue is 287 U/C and is officially known as “Duke Royal Blue” (Colors, 2023). The fan was correct in stating that the two colors were differentiated in the record books, but this is an argument that might last for many years. Despite there being a difference in classification between the colors, the naked eye has difficulty with the distinction, but one fan said it best, “You can’t spell ‘Duke’ without ‘UK’”.

#### 4.2.3 FAMILY

The fans of University of Kentucky football considered themselves to be “one big family”. They demonstrated this dynamic by having the desire to pass their fandom to friends and family members. A fan said, “We are friends with the people behind us, friends with the new people here beside us, and guess what, if you can’t be a Cat fan and be family, then everyone should kiss off”. That same fan is part of a tailgate that will invite neighboring tailgates to participate in an act of remembrance of the Wildcat family

they have loved and lost. They will each take a shot of Numero One tequila thirty minutes before kickoff and say, “Go Cats!” to honor and remember their friends and family.

Despite sharing a state with the Louisville Cardinals, multiple fans expressed how “it brings [the state] together”. Two former band members stated that they are “all for community” when asked what it was like sharing the field with Louisville during pregame and at halftime. Fans not only display togetherness with people who are fans of the same team as them, but also to opposing fanbases. One tailgate mentioned how they invite opposing fans to their tailgates if the fans appear lost. This tailgate did clarify how they will invite all opposing fanbases to eat with them except for Tennessee fans.

Fans expressed a sense of pride when the song “My Old Kentucky Home, Goodnight” was played before and after a football game. These fans are proud to be from the state of Kentucky and proud to be a part of the Wildcat family. The video played in the stadium before kickoff simply states, “In Kentucky, we are one Big Blue family” (*All Roads Lead to Lexington*, 2019, 0:54). Despite political, social, and racial boundaries, fans will get together and cheer for the University of Kentucky football team with people who act like they have known each other their whole lives (Cohen, 1985). One fan put it best, “It’s not about being the person that you are, it’s about the heart that we all have”.

#### 4.2.4 FAITHFULNESS

Fans can be described as fair-weather fans, bandwagon fans, or diehard fans. Fair-weather fans will have interest in a team when the team is winning but lose interest in that same team when they are losing (McMahon, 2023). Bandwagon fans will jump from team to team based on how trendy or successful one is (McMahon, 2023). Bleacher

Report (2017) released an article with five ways someone can know if they are a diehard fan or not. This list pertains to the National Football League and will be altered to fit the narrative of a college football fan:

- “A Die-Hard Fan Never Turns Off or Leaves a Game
  - The Status of Your Week is Solely Contingent of the Performance of Your Team
  - You’ve Got a Tattoo Hidden Somewhere of Your Team’s Logo
  - Your Dream for Life is to Play For or in Some Way be a Part of Your Team”
- (Cunningham, 2017).

The fans interviewed best fit the description for that of a diehard fan.

When asked how long they had been a fan of the University of Kentucky football team, many of the fans said they have been a fan “forever” while others were converted



Figure 3 Wildcat Fan  
Excited for the Fourth  
Quarter

when they met their spouse. The fans ensure that they arrive to the stadium before Catwalk takes place, so they are present and ready to cheer on the players as they get off the bus and walk to the locker room. Many of the fans said they will arrive to tailgate about three to four hours prior to the Catwalk but one set of fans said they arrive at the field at eight in the morning to begin their game day festivities.

Despite the ten fans interviewed being diehard fans, one fan stuck out from the rest. This fan told a story about her wedding to her now husband and how they incorporated songs associated with the UK football team into their wedding reception. She explained that the bridesmaids and groomsmen walked out to “Grove St. Party” by Waka Flocka Flame and her and her

husband walked out to the UK fight song “On, On, U of K”. One fan had his daughter take a tour of the university so he could experience the campus. No matter how early the fans arrived at the field to tailgate or how many away games they travel to, all the fans stated during that they “bleed blue”.

## 4.3 DISCUSSION

### 4.3.1 PRESENT COMMUNITIES

The first goal of this research was to identify the at-large community and determine if there are subcommunities within this larger community. After conducting interviews and thematically coding these interviews, subcommunities can be easily identified. The overarching community being examined is the people associated with the University of Kentucky football program. The two subcommunities identified while conducting this research are the football players and the fans. These two groups are associated with the football program, but their closeness to one another and dedication to the program are vastly different. Comparing the identified themes will further establish how their status as subcommunities under the umbrella that is the University of Kentucky football program community.

### 4.3.2 THEME COMPARISON

Within the interviews, there were three themes that overlapped amongst the two groups. The overlapping themes were used to represent the main community being observed. The overarching community that was present in this research was the University of Kentucky football program and the people associated with this program.

Themes that were present in both the athlete and fan interviews were religion, hatred, and a sense of family or brotherhood.

#### 4.3.2.1 RELIGION

One theme that had a strong presence in both the athlete and fan interviews was the theme of religion. The theme of religion was determined based on how the interviewees discussed memorabilia, pre-game rituals, and superstitions that they have. The six players interviewed have memorabilia from games and season that they are proud of. What was kept depended on the player but varied from game jerseys to game balls to pictures to shot glasses from every new stadium they played at. The memorabilia that fans keep is either a reminder of when their parent(s) attended the university or a way to express fandom and appreciation for the program they cheer for. Many fans have jerseys from when a family member played football for the university, or they have signed footballs and basketballs that they want to show off in their home. Memorabilia does not have to be directly from the university and its sports programs. Some fans discussed how their favorite memorabilia is something they had custom made to display their fandom to others in a way that is special to them.

Fans do not have pre-game rituals; therefore, this aspect of the religion theme will only be discussed using the athlete interviews and will not be up for comparison. Players have pre-game rituals to get them in the right mentality for the game about to happen. The intensity of the pre-game rituals depends heavily on which position the player is. The quarterback explained how he listens to gospel music while warming up and stretching to stay calm for the game where he is heavily relied on. Other players listen to music with a more upbeat tempo to get them hyped up for the game they are about to play in. Other

rituals vary from drinking beat juice to taking a nap to FaceTiming trainers for advice. Despite the complexity and the differences of their pre-game rituals, all six players stated that they pray before the game starts.

The final identification of the religion theme was if the fans or athletes had superstitions they did believing it would help solidify a win for the University of Kentucky football team. Fans had crazier superstitions than the athletes. Superstitions vary from listening to “Grove St. Party” by Waka Flocka Flame every Friday before game day to painting their entire face blue and wearing a blue wig. Fans have a pair of lucky socks while other fans needed their hair to be brushed and done a particular way. The most interesting find during the interviews was the devotional book written specifically for University of Kentucky fans. The book is entitled *Daily Devotions for Diehard Wildcat Fans* written by Ed McMinn. The fan explained that this devotional book will have a set of verses for game day and delicately weave religion into sports. The athlete superstitions ranged from a lucky pair of socks to believing one pair of cleats worn in practice will help them perform well in a game.

Coakley (2021) discussed how sports can be made into a religious experience, mainly by Christians, and compared the two by what they have in common. This comparison can be found in Table 1. Sports and religions have special places for gatherings, in this case, Kroger Field (Coakley, 2021). The athletes have pre-game rituals and both groups studied have superstitions pertaining to the game; religions have rituals such as baptisms and sports have actions such as singing the national anthem before games (Coakley, 2021). People affiliated with a religion will also hang religious pictures or sculptures in their home similar to how fans and athletes enshrine their memorabilia to

show to others (Coakley, 2021; Hanbury, 2021). A religious experience can occur in a secular setting if the people there treat it in such a way that their lives revolve around it and their identity is interwoven with it (Uszynski, 2013; Coakley, 2021). Football, and sports in general, can be a religious experience for many because they have become rather invested in a team and for the players, they have made this sport their entire lives (Uszynski, 2013; Coakley, 2021). These findings accomplish the second goal of this research, which was to determine if there was a religious experience created by the fans and athletes and how they accomplish it.

#### 4.3.2.2 HATRED

The second theme present in both sets of interviews is the theme of hatred. The disgust for the rivals brings the fanbase and the team closer to one another. Despite the differences in the level of hatred for each team from the fans and athletes, both groups display an “us vs. them” mentality, also known as mob mentality (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lee, 2019). The fans displayed mob mentality when discussing the rivalries and would not say the proper name of one of the rivals but would instead reference to it as “Loserville” (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lee, 2019). Athletes hated the same universities for similar reasons, but it was stronger due to having to play against them. Transfer players stated that it was rather easy to accept the rivals when arriving at the University of Kentucky, solidifying the presence of mob mentality (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lee, 2019; Tamir, 2021).

Fans showed disgust and anger regarding the topic of colors, whether it be the red associated with Louisville, the “puke orange” associated with Tennessee, or the comparison of Duke Blue and Kentucky Blue (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lee, 2019;



Tamir, 2021). Tamir (2021) proposed the idea that sports fans cheer for a color and have an emotion attached to the color of their sports team(s). The hatred that was visible from Kentucky fans about the blue associated with Duke confirmed this idea (Tamir, 2021). The hatred for colors was also seen with the fans and the athletes when discussing how they would not wear red or orange because of Louisville and Tennessee (Tamir, 2021). This mentality brings the two groups closer together and strengthens one's sense of belonging within this larger community (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Cohen, 1985; Lee, 2019).

#### 4.3.2.3 BROTHERHOOD & FAMILY

The final theme has the potential to overlap between the groups but also shows some differences. The themes are known as brotherhood and family. These terms can be easily confused as they both are representative of tightknit groups brought together by one common goal (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). The major difference is that, in a family, one is usually born into it or influenced by family members or friends to participate (Tinson, et al., 2017). In a brotherhood, one is often sought out and welcomed into an exclusive group that includes people of many different political, social, and racial backgrounds (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2023). Players chose to attend this university because they saw the unification created by the players and coaches. Fans were raised in the fandom by parents and will act as if they have known a stranger their entire life simply because they are both fans of UK football (Cohen, 1985). The slight difference in these two terms begins to separate the two groups into subcommunities of the University of Kentucky football program community.

### 4.3.3 THEME DIFFERENTIATION

The final themes were what truly defines the separation of the groups and solidifies the idea of University of Kentucky subcommunities. The athletes had two more themes to be examined while the fans have one more theme. The themes left in the athlete interviews were competitive spirit and appreciation. The theme remaining in the fan interviews was faithfulness.

#### 4.3.3.1 COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

Smack talk is a normal part of football, it comes with the territory (Liu, 2013). All players know this and have learned to use it to their advantage. The use of smack talk demonstrates the mentality of “us vs. them” (Lee, 2019). Lee (2019) examined how fans will talk about their country and hate on another, simply because it is “our team versus their team”. Fans will demonstrate this mentality when cheering on their team, but not to the same level of the players. The intensity between teams on the field can often lead to scuffles and can get players thrown out of the game. The competitive spirit used to get in the heads of the other team is what separates the players from the fans. Fans can be loud and have synchronized cheers and chants to help throw off the pace of the opposing team; players are in a close enough vicinity of other players that they can talk smack to throw off one player at a time. The level of competition displayed by the athletes is what begins to explicitly separate the subcommunities of fans and athletes at the University of Kentucky.

#### 4.3.3.2 FAITHFULNESS

Diehard fans are faithful to their team through the highs and the lows happening during a season (Cunningham, 2017). Some fans will paint their face and wear wigs to show their dedication to the team. Other fans will arrive at the field in the early hours of the morning to start tailgating and hyping themselves up for the game. Fans have synchronized chants and cheers and saying they have that distinguish them from other fanbases. This shared language amongst the fans displays how a community of people can develop a language to separate them from surrounding communities (Wann, et al., 1997). This exclusive language brings people together as they have a shared understanding of the lexicon presented (Wann, et al., 1997). Examples of this terminology are “Go Big Blue”, the chant where one side of the stadium yells “White” and the other side yells “Blue”, “Cats by 90”, “It’s football time in the bluegrass”, and many more. Wann, et al. (1997) found that sport fanbases have a shared language that separates them from other fanbases; they coined the term “Sportugese”. Both the fans and athletes have knowledge of the basic terminology used within the UK football program, there are some differences, though, and that is what further separates the groups within this larger community.

#### 4.3.3.3 APPRECIATION

Because of their faithfulness to the program, the athletes expressed their gratitude for them throughout their interviews. Not only did they express gratitude to the fans, but to the game itself. The players understand that they are primarily known for what they have done and will do on the field. They know that they are role models to young children and do not take that lightly. The players expressed appreciation for the relationships formed, opportunities given, and the ability to play the game they love for

such a long time. The appreciation from the players is the final example from the interviews and themes that divide the fans and athletes into separate subcommunities. The players work hard day in and day out to play the game of football while the fans cheer them on. The blood, sweat, and possible tears defines which subcommunity one belongs to.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

The research done at the University of Kentucky expands upon Uszynski's (2013) research that sports fans tie their identity to a sport. Uszynski also proposed the idea of a religious experience within sports that the fans themselves create (Uszynski, 2013). This research was designed and completed in a way to observe the religious experience but determine if it could be put into words. The goals for this research were based on this idea with an addition of goals for community.

The goals for this research were to identify an at-large community, determine if there are subcommunities within it, and to also observe if fans and athletes create a religious experience around the University of Kentucky football program. All of this was to be explained through one's use of language. To test this, six University of Kentucky football players were interviewed over Zoom and eleven fans were interviewed in person while tailgating before games. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were thematically coded, and quotes were used as justification for the themes.

The themes were used to show how the fan and athlete groups are similar enough to be a part of the same community while being different enough to be placed into separate subcommunities. The themes were also used to show how fans and athletes treat the game of football like a religious experience. This was achieved by examining how

fans and athletes discuss superstitions, pre-game rituals, and memorabilia. The goals for this research were accomplished as it was evident that a religious experience was created by both the fans and athletes and that these two groups were differing subcommunities within the University of Kentucky community.

Future research could expand upon this idea of a religious experience and community within collegiate sports by studying other athletic programs at a university – i.e., basketball, tennis, golf, etc. A comparison could also be done between fanbases and athletes of men’s and women’s sports. This comparison could also be conducted between universities in the same conference and between universities in different conferences. This could possibly determine which sport has the strongest fanbase and produce a ranking for fanbases within college sports.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: UK ATHLETE INTERVIEWS

#### **UK ATHLETES:**

1. Are there any fan cheers/chants that hype you up during a game?
  - a. What are some examples?
2. How do you feel about the Catwalk?
3. Is there a difference in the way you discuss a rival versus a non-rival opposing team?
4. Which rivalry do you think is stronger: UK vs Louisville, Tennessee, or Florida?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Which rivalry game do you enjoy playing in the most?
5. Does smack talk differ between rivals and non-rivals?
  - a. What is an example of smack talk that you have either heard or said?
6. What is your favorite collegiate game that you have played in?
7. Do you keep anything from games that have a significant meaning to you?
  - a. What is an example of something you have kept and why?
8. What are some superstitions that you have before, during, and after the game?
9. Can you walk me through your pre-game rituals?

#### **Transfer Athletes:**

10. How does the intensity of UK fans compare to your former university?
11. How did you embrace the rivalries of UK when you transferred?
  - a. **For newer transfers:** How have you heard teammates talk about rivalries such as Tennessee, Louisville, and Florida?

- i. Which rivalry do you think will be your favorite?
- b. What are you most excited for this upcoming season?

## APPENDIX 2: UK FAN INTERVIEWS

### UK FANS:

1. How did you become a fan of the football team at the University of Kentucky?
  - a. How will/Will you pass on the fandom to your children/family members/friends?
2. Do you have any memorabilia from UK football that is special to you?
  - a. What is the story behind its importance?
3. What does your day look like when there is a nighttime game?
  - a. Does your game day routine differ when it is a rivalry game versus non-conference or non-rival game?
  - b. Does your game day differ depending on the time of day the game is?
4. Do you have any superstitions?
5. Which rivalry do you think is stronger: UK vs Louisville, Tennessee, or Florida?
  - a. How do you feel about opposing fans?
6. How do you feel when people say that Duke Blue and Kentucky Blue are the same color?
  - a. Do you agree they are the same color?
    - i. **If no:** How do you explain to people that the colors are different?
7. How do you feel when you see the stadium?
  - a. How do you feel about the name change from Commonwealth Stadium to Kroger Field?
8. What are some rituals that you have prior to the game?



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