

## 2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

### Destined for Success? Team Identification and the Attributional Bias of NFL Fans

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**Marketing**

**Friday, May 31, 2013**

**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)  
(Room 406)**

**Abstract 2013-100**

**9:20 AM**

Being a fan in today's media saturated sport marketplace can be an emotional roller coaster. At the conclusion of the season, this experience can be most maddening. From front office firings, coaching changes, and player upheaval to victory parades, ring ceremonies, and White House visits, media commentators and pundits have several sources from which to overact. From a fan's perspective, making sense of a successful or unsuccessful season not only influences one's relationship with the team, but also impacts one's self- and social-identity. Previous research in this area has recognized internal and external attribution and team identification (team\*ID) as important factors within a sports fan's affective, cognitive, and behavioral response to team success and failure (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Schrader, 2000). However, these studies have been limited to single game outcomes and have not examined the impact of attributable factors for an entire season. As a result, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the moderating impact of team\*ID on the attributional bias of sport team fans that experienced opposite seasonal outcomes (success/failure).

Team\*ID is a psychological construct that has been a focus of research in various sport-related fields, including sport psychology and sport marketing. Team\*ID has been defined as a fan's psychological connection to a team and involves the extent to which the fan views the team as an extension of themselves (Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011). For highly identified fans, being a team follower is a central component of their social identity, so the performance of their favorite team is linked to their feelings of self-worth (Tajfel, 1981; Wann & Schrader, 2000). Identification with a team has been found to be a strong predictor of numerous spectator affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions (Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wann, 2006). Further, identification can fuel intergroup bias, which occurs when group members maintain positive distinctiveness by making comparisons that favor the in-group (such as the team of choice) over the out-group (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005).

The theoretical context that has been used to further explain biases and differences in perception is attribution theory. Attribution theory is a concept in social psychology that addresses the processes by which people explain the causes of events (Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 2005; Wann, 1997). Attribution theory is a common framework for investigation in sport psychology, where the goal is generally to determine how participants explain performances (Rees et al., 2005). A particular area of interest is that of the team-serving attribution bias, or the tendency for team members to attribute positive outcomes to factors within the team, and negative outcomes to factors outside of the team's control (Allen, Coffee, & Greenlees, 2012).

Investigation of these biases through attribution theory has also been extended to include sport fans. It has been found that highly identified fans demonstrate a success/failure attributional bias, similar to the team-serving bias, in that they form internal attributions following success (crediting the efforts of the favorite team's players, coaches, and fans) and external attributions following defeat (blaming the opponents players, referees, or fate/luck) (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Schrader, 2000). Interestingly, lowly identified fans do not tend to exhibit the same self-serving attributional pattern, and appear to be less bothered with explaining or justifying defeat (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Wann & Schrader, 2000). Highly identified individuals will also tend to manipulate attributions after a loss in an attempt to protect their self-esteem, as these fans will show increases in negative emotions following a loss, compared to fans with lower levels of identification (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, 1994).

As mentioned above, much of the literature involving attribution theory in explaining fan perceptions has been limited to single game applications. Hence, the authors believed it would be beneficial to extend this research to an entire season of professional football where more is at stake. To examine an entire professional league season within the context of attribution theory, the team outcomes must closely resemble a win and a loss. As a result, the New York Giants and Jets were selected as the teams for this investigation. Despite extremely high expectations for the

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2011-12 NFL season, the Jets finished 8-8 and did not qualify for the playoffs. The Giants, however, had more modest expectations, yet won the Super Bowl. Thus, based on the previous attribution/ identification work, it was predicted Giants fans would score higher on internal attributes, while Jets fan would score higher on external attributes. In addition, it was predicted that team\*ID would moderate the attributional bias of these groups of fans.

Undergraduate students from a large urban university in the New York City area were surveyed at the conclusion of the 2011-12 NFL season. Of the 225 surveyed, 194 fully completed the questionnaire with 56% of the respondents identifying the Giants as their preferred team over the Jets. Seven different types of attributions were assessed based on the work of Wann and Dolan (1994) and pilot data: four internal (players, fans, front office management, & coaches) and three external (opponent performance, referees, & fate). Each attribute was measured on a seven point Likert-type scale (disagree-agree). Team identification was measured using the team factor of Robinson and Trail's (2005) Point of Attachment Index. Two 2 (high or low identification) X 2 (Season success or failure) between-subjects multiple factorial analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted, one for each group of attributions.

The findings related to the internal attributions suggest team\*ID and season success/failure were influential main effect factors as the omnibus results for each variable were statistically significant  $F(4,185) = 6.136, p < .001$  and  $F(4,185) = 10.617, p < .001$ , respectively. The univariate results, in particular, indicated the attributional factors of team performance and front office were significantly higher for high team\*ID fans, while team performance, the coaching staff, and fans were more influential attributes for Giants fans than Jets fans. The interaction effect between the two variables, however, was not significant. In other words, a fan's level of team\*ID did not strengthen or lessen the internal attributes of explaining a successful or unsuccessful season.

The omnibus external attributions results also suggested season success/failure was an influential main effect factor  $F(3,181) = 6.674, p < .001$ , while team\*ID was not found to be an influential factor. Interestingly, while the univariate results related to opponent performance were higher for Jets fans than Giants fans, the attributable impact of the referees and fate was higher for Giants fans than Jets fans. In addition, team\*ID was a statistically significant moderator of team success/failure as it related to external attributions. The univariate results, however, only suggest that the influence of the referees was moderated by team\*ID, as low identified Jets fans scored much lower than low identified Giants fans.

In all, the results both confirmed and contradicted previous success/failure attributional bias research with respect to team\*ID. In particular, the internal attribution results appear to parallel the work of Wann and Dolan (1994) and Wann et al. (1994) with respect to the impact of team success and failure. The external attribution findings, however, refute the notion that fans attribute failure to external sources (fate and referees) at a rate higher than fans experiencing team success. In addition, the moderating effect of team\*ID was only significant for external attribution which disputes previous research related to the influential interaction of team\*ID and attributional bias. This presentation will discuss additional theoretical and practical implications of these findings as well as the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.