

Highly Identified Sport Fans and the Peculiar Habit of Wagering Against their Favorite Team

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Socio-cultural

Friday, May 31, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 412)**

Abstract 2013-103

9:20 AM

Individuals are understood to identify with products and brands, such as cars, computers, and sport teams. Those who are more highly identified are more likely to champion the company to others (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bettencourt, 1997), are more resistant to negative information about the organization (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), and report higher levels of brand loyalty (McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003; Oliver, 1999; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). Among sport fans in particular, highly identified fans watch games with greater frequency (Pease & Zhang, 1996), spend more on team-related apparel (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), are more likely to purchase sponsors' products (Madrigal, 2000), and are less sensitive to price changes or declines in team performance (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Our existing understanding of social identity theory would suggest that a highly identified fan would not wager a bet that his or her favorite team would lose a game, yet the current research provides empirical evidence to the contrary. The purpose of this exploratory research is to document the phenomenon of highly identified sports fans betting against their favorite teams, investigate the conditions where it is most likely to occur, and explore fans' reasons for this behavior.

Highly identified fans are understood to view the team as an extension of themselves, internalizing team success as personal success and team failure as personal failure (Cialdini et al., 1976). The importance that highly identified fans place on their favorite teams leads to affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes that can be quite extreme because fans view a loss as a reflection of themselves (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). A loss by a favorite team can lead to decreased self-esteem (Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992; Mahony & Moorman, 1999), decreased mood (Mahony & Moorman, 1999), and decreased public image (Hirt et al., 1992). In fact, work on social identity and sports fans has shown that the most highly identified fans are unable or unwilling to reduce their association with a poor performing team (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Hirt et al., 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Because social identity theory explains group identification as a method of self-esteem enhancement, fans are reluctant to criticize their own team because part of their own self-esteem and identity are contingent upon team success (Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2000). From this point of view, betting against one's favorite team is akin to self-criticism and, theoretically, is an activity in which a highly identified fan would not engage.

Despite this a priori expectation, we discovered evidence to the contrary. To empirically document the phenomenon and explore the reasons why it occurs, a web-based survey was conducted. Respondents were asked to choose their most favorite sport team and then completed the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) in reference to that team. Of 106 valid responses, 95 were considered highly identified using Wann et al.'s (2001) definition that a score of 35 or higher reflects a highly identified fan. Within the 95 highly identified fans, 53% (n=50) had bet on one or more sporting events. Of those 50 highly identified fans who were known to have previously bet on sporting events, 20% (n=10) had placed a wager that their favorite team would lose and 80% (n=40) had never done so. There was no statistically significant difference in identification scores between highly identified sports bettors who had wagered their favorite team would lose (average=48.76) and highly identified sports bettors who had never wagered their favorite team would lose (average=48.85).

Highly identified fans who had never placed a wager that their team would lose provided explanations that were in line with existing social identity theory. For example, these fans reported that such behavior is incompatible with being a "true fan," it ruins the purity of the game, it is disloyal, it results in bad karma/jinxing, and it is a form of admitting defeat before a game even starts. More important to this research, those highly identified fans who placed wagers that their favorite team would lose reported doing so for two main reasons.

First, these fans claimed to know their teams extremely well. They felt they knew the team's strengths and weaknesses better than others, which gave them the ability to "know" when their team would lose. Though the

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

wagering behavior may be surprising, respondents' reasoning is consistent with what we know about highly identified fans. Prior work has reported that highly identified fans feel that they have more objective knowledge about their teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1995).

The second major reason reported by highly identified fans who placed wagers that their favorite team would lose centered around monetary gains, especially in big games. For example, one respondent wrote, "I've done it in pivotal games. It turns into a win-win situation. If my favorite team wins, I can celebrate the victory. And if they lose, at least i'm [sic] not coming out of it empty handed." This perspective is unique to our understanding of highly identified fans.

Despite what might be concluded based on existing social identity theory, highly identified fans do place wagers that their favorite team will lose. This exploratory research documents the existence of this phenomenon and begins to understand why it occurs. Further, it lays the foundation for elucidation of this seemingly peculiar behavior in future research. The results have poignant implications for research on social identity theory, gambling, and utility arbitrage.