BIRGing 40 Years Later: A Replication of Cialdini’s Seminal Study

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One of the most cited studies in sport consumer behavior began, appropriately enough, inside a football stadium. Forty years ago, Dr. Robert Cialdini was serving as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology at The Ohio State University. Coincidentally, Cialdini’s office was inside Ohio Stadium. As Cialdini explains, he was working in his office on the Saturday morning of a football game on a study related to persuasion. The young researcher was struggling to determine a way in which he could increase an effect from marginal to statistical significance.

He checked his watch, and realized it was time to head to his seat to watch the football game. “As I was making my way to my seat, the football team ran out onto the field. That’s all,” explained Cialdini (personal communication, June 26, 2013). “And the place went crazy. The place went berserk.”

According to Cialdini, he quickly realized that the reaction of the fans was out of proportion for the event he had just witnessed. “I remember saying to myself, ‘Cialdini, you’re studying the wrong thing!’” he explained. “Here is the power, the power of the sports environment, the sports context, to cause fans to go slightly fanatic. It stuck with me…That recognition that there was potency here that needed to be understood” (personal communication, June 26, 2013).

Third-ranked Ohio State defeated its opponent, Texas Christian, 37-3 that day. On his way to his office the next week, Cialdini noticed something unusual on campus. Nearly everyone he encountered was wearing a red Ohio State windbreaker. He opened the school paper and realized the reason for the unusual apparel choice. Ohio State had jumped to No.1 in the Associated Press poll.

Cialdini decided to investigate the phenomenon further. He reached out to several friends who also worked at major football-playing universities, asking them to record the percentage of students wearing school-affiliated apparel during Monday classes.

Cialdini’s seminal study, “Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies,” marked the first field investigation of the phenomenon of “basking in reflecting glory” (BIRGing). It is arguably the most important study in the field of sport consumer behavior, and has been cited more than 1,400 times (Google Scholar, 2013). Cialdini, now Regents’ Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, has gone on to become one of the most cited scholars in the fields of Psychology and Marketing, as well as a best-selling author (his 1984 book, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, has sold more than two million copies; Hesayne, 2013).

On the 40th anniversary of the data collection for the study, the authors propose to replicate this seminal work by authoring a study intended to advance the investigation of sport fan consumer behavior by examining how expectations impact behavior. This study builds upon the original in its utilization of more advanced statistical techniques not yet available 40 years ago to investigate how sport fan behavior is impacted not only on the outcome of games, but also on consumers’ expectations of the outcomes. Specifically, the study seeks to empirically investigate whether the proposed phenomenon of the confirmation and disconfirmation of expectancies influences BIRGing fan behavior (James & Trail, 2012). Though prior research based on identity and satisfaction theory (Harrolle & Trail, 2006; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005; Trail et al., 2012) has utilized self-reported surveys to ascertain whether consumers believe these factors will influence their behavior, this study extends this prior research by ascertaining whether these factors predict the actual behavior of sport consumers.

For example, does a positive disconfirmation of expectancy (winning when one expects to lose) have a greater impact on self-esteem behaviors than a positive confirmation of expectancy? Similarly, might a negative
disconfirmation of expectancy (losing when one expects to win) influence behavior greater than a negative confirmation of expectancy (losing when expected to lose)? It is the authors’ contention that this study will not only replicate the original seminal work, but also build upon the burgeoning literature on sport consumer behavior by advancing a further understanding of how expectations influence behavior.

Similar to the original work, the study involves monitoring the amount of licensed merchandise worn by students at Ohio State and six other campuses during the 2013 college football season. Methods involve having instructors code whether each student is wearing school-affiliated apparel (1 = YES, 0 = NO), during the first class following each institution’s game. Similar to the original study, a total of seven different universities are collaborating on the study. Among the universities assisting in data collection for the study are four institutions that were ranked among the top 15 in the pre-season Associated Press poll: Ohio State (No. 2), Louisville (No. 9), Florida State (No. 11), and Louisiana State (No. 12), as well as Indiana University, the University of Minnesota, and Syracuse University.

Preliminary results based on an analysis of data collected over the first six weeks of the 2013 college football season indicated that an average of 25.6% of students (N = 1372) wore apparel to the first class following the games (compared to just 8.4% in the original study), providing further empirical evidence of the growth of collegiate licensed apparel. Among institutions participating in the study, apparel was most prominent at Louisville (37.7%), Louisiana State (28.5%) and Ohio State (28.4%), who won a combined 16 of 17 games the first six weeks of the season.

Logistic regression was utilized to analyze the data, with a non-significant result in the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test (p = .932) indicating good model fit. Consistent with the original BIRGing study, an institution’s win in a game was a significant predictor of a student’s propensity to wear school-affiliated apparel (p < .001), with a win making the odds of a student wearing apparel 35.8% greater (Exp(B) = .358). Gender also emerged as a significant predictor of apparel wearing (p = .002), with the odds of wearing apparel more than 150% greater for males than females (Exp(B) = 1.531). In addition to the potential influence of expectancies, other factors to be investigated include the location of the game, whether the team covered/beat the spread, number of points scored and score differential.

This research is expected to unearth important insights that may lead to a better understanding of sport fan behavior and sport consumers’ responses to various event outcomes, as well as their expectations prior to the event. In addition, this study has vast practical implications given the increasing importance of the collegiate licensed athletic apparel industry, which has evolved into a $4.6 billion annual business for manufacturers and institutions of higher learning (Rovell, 2013). For example, online retailers may be better able to anticipate consumer demand for apparel of certain teams based on the results of their contests. Other results of the study and additional implications will also be discussed, along with other potential future research examining the BIRGing phenomenon.