Mixing Sport and Politics: Investigating the Effects of Star Player Political Engagement on Sport Consumer Revenge and Avoidance

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Issues such as abortion, climate change, civil rights, immigration, taxes, and war can flare emotions and lead to heated political debates. Even so, the potential divisiveness of political issues has not stopped sport figures from infusing their opinions on such issues into the realm of professional sports. The Miami Marlins (of Major League Baseball), for example, suspended team manager Ozzie Gillen five games in 2012 for his comments praising Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Specifically, Ozzie told Time magazine he loved and respected Castro. His comments were met with outrage by Miami's Cuban population, many of whom escaped Castro and his communist regime to take refuge in Miami (White, 2012). More recently, several of the National Football League's (NFL) Washington Redskins players held their hands up as they came on the field in display of solidarity with Michael Brown during a 2014 preseason game. Brown, a black teenager, was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

Taking these examples as well as the numerous other incidents of politics and sports into account, the present study seeks to better understand how the political activities by sport personnel may influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of sport consumers. Accordingly, explored is this initial investigation of the mixing of politics and sport is a model that includes the mediating effects of avoidance and revenge desire on the relationships between positive/negative emotional responses (to a hypothetical sport-politics scenario) and patronage reduction and negative word-of-mouth (WOM) intentions. The conceptual model draws largely from the Appraisal Theory of Emotions (Lazarus, 1991) in order to explain how sport consumers' perceptions/evaluations of political engagement by a star player may influence their attitudinal and behavioral responses. The model includes a total of six research hypotheses:

H1: Perceived anger will have a significant positive relationship with avoidance desire.
H2: Perceived anger will have a significant positive relationship with revenge desire.
H3: Perceived positive emotion will have a non-significant relationship with avoidance desire.
H4: Perceived positive emotion will have a non-significant relationship with revenge desire.
H5: Avoidance desire will have a significant positive relationship with patronage reduction.
H6: Revenge desire will have a significant positive relationship with negative WOM.

Data for the investigation were collected from three different academic institutions in the Midwestern and Southeastern United States. The sample was drawn by convenience. The researchers obtained usable questionnaires from 259 of 280 undergraduate and graduate sport management students and instructors for a response rate of 92.5%. The sample was comprised of 57% male (N=148) and 43% of female (N=111). Of the respondents, 72% were Caucasian, followed by African American (12%), Hispanic (10%), Multiracial (3%), Asian (2%), and Native American (1%).

The present study represents a quasi-experimental, scenario-based experiment. A paragraph length sport and politics scenario was created. The scenario requires the participant to imagine that the star play of a team he/she identifies with and actively follows openly expresses his/her strong support of a sensitive political issue that runs contrary to the participant's personal position on the issue. Then, to assess negative and positive emotions induced by the scenario respectively, four items were adapted from Shaver et al.'s (1987) anticipated anger response scale (e.g., "I would feel angry.") and five items were used to assess anticipated positive emotion response (e.g., "I would feel proud."). Next, nine items were adapted from McCullough and colleagues desire for avoidance and revenge scales (McCullough et al., 1998, 2001). The measure for anticipated behavioral responses was based on nine items from Gregoire and Fisher's (2006) measures of behavioral intentions assessing two different types of behavioral outcomes.
Patronage reduction (e.g., “I would spend less money with the professional team.”) and Negative WOM (e.g., “I would not speak favorably of the professional sport team to others.”) were assessed with four and five items respectively. All survey items were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale. Further, to account for the impact of avoidance desire and revenge desire on behavioral intentions, we controlled for each participant’s fandom level using seven items from Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to validate the postulated relations of the observed variables and the underlying constructs in the measurement model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the hypothesized relationship between latent constructs using M-plus 6.1 (Muthén, & Muthén, 2010). To adjust nonnormality, Satorra-Bentler (S-B $\chi^2$, 1994) scaling method was used for correcting the maximum likelihood chi-square variate and the standard errors of parameter estimates (Kline, 2005). After conducting the initial CFA, one item of anger, two items of positive emotion, two items of revenge desire, and one team ID item were removed due to low factor loading. The overall fit indices for the initial CFA met commonly accepted standards [S-B $\chi^2$ (df) = 600.59 (327), S-B $\chi^2$/df = 1.84, p < .001; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .94; SRMR = .05]. The ratio of chi-square to degree of freedom indicated good fit (S-B $\chi^2$/df < 3). The hypothesized measurement model exceeded the more stringent cut-off value for a well-fitting model (McDonald & Ho, 2002), indicating that the hypothesized measurement model adequately accounted for the covariance matrices of the data from the sample. Convergent validity was supported because all loadings were significant (p < .01) and AVE values exceeded .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The internal consistency of the measures also was adequate because all of Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were greater than the recommended cutoff point .70 (Hair et al, 2005; Nunnally, 1978) and construct reliability coefficients were all above .70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All scales demonstrated good reliabilities.

The resulting overall fit measures indicate that the proposed model is a plausible representation of the structures underlying the empirical data [S-B $\chi^2$ (df) = 651.69 (335), S-B $\chi^2$/df = 1.95, p < .001; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .93; SRMR = .08]. All six hypotheses were supported, with parameter estimates significant at least at the 1% error level and in the expected direction. H1 predicted anger would significantly influence avoidance desire ($\gamma_1 = .33$, p < .01). H2 predicted anger would positively influence revenge desire ($\gamma_2 = .40$, p < .01). H3 and H4 were supported because positive emotions did not influence avoidance desire ($\gamma_3 = .04$, n.s) and revenge desire ($\gamma_4 = .13$, n.s). Lastly, as H5 and H6 predicted, avoidance desire had a significant positive effect on patronage reduction ($\gamma_5 = .89$, p < .01), and revenge desire had a significant positive effect on negative WOM ($\gamma_6 = .68$, p < .01).

In closing, inadequate attention has been paid by scholars as to whether or not political engagement by sport figures has any bearing on sport consumer consumption behaviors even though professional sport teams seek to attract the widest audience possible and politics, having strong potential to be very polarizing, could greatly reduce the appeal of the sport product to sport consumers. Though much more research needs to be conducted in this area, the present study does offer initial evidence that political engagement by sport figures could anger certain fans which then might give rise to patronage reduction and negative WOM. While professional teams are rather limited in their abilities to censor and restrict the speech of their players, they are less restricted in their capabilities to respond to the political engagement of their athletes and, if necessary, engage in damage control. These findings should reinforce to sport marketing and public relations personnel that it is important to have a strategic plan of action for dealing with the potentially negative effects of their professional team’s star players’ political activities.