The Agony of Defeat: Disappointment Impacts on Baseball Fans

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Relevance/Significance/Purpose

Many Chicago Cub fans blame “the curse of the Billy goat” for not winning the World Series in over 107, while the Cleveland Indians blame “the curse of Rocky Colavito” to explain their 67-year absence from being a World Series champion. While these teams have at least won a championship, Texas A&M’s baseball team has never been crowned champions of the College Baseball World Series. Due to their consistent competitiveness, Aggie fans are likely not fully content with their team’s performance. Yet, like many fans, they still watch their team, waiting and hoping. Regardless of win/loss percentages, many fans remain spectators (Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989). A great deal of research in the sport context has focused on fans’ positive emotions such as self-esteem, enjoyment, and pleasure (Jackson, 1996; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). What has received much less attention are the consequences of negative emotions for disappointed fans (Yost & Rainey, 2014).

Literature Review

Disappointment, as a very common emotional experience, has long been a research topic in psychology (e.g., Bell, 1985; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006). It has been defined as an emotion that “is primarily experienced in a situation in which something positive was expected, but did not occur” (Van Dijk, Zeelenberg, & Van der Pligt, 1999, p. 131). Such a definition was formalized by Bell (1985) whose theory has been used to explain the consequences of being disappointed when one faces uncertain circumstances. Bell (1985) posited that the more valuable or desirable outcomes, the greater disappointment.

Researchers have also investigated the relationship between team identification and fans’ emotions (Sloan, 1989). Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that sport fans with a high team identification showed significantly greater increases in negative emotions after their team lost a game than did less identified fans. Rainey, Larsen, and Yost (2009) suggested that it is likely sport fans with different levels of team identification respond differently to a disappointing game or season. That is, the level of team identification might moderate the effects of disappointment.

Within the sport literature, disappointment theory has been utilized to explain the feelings or emotions of sport fans. Yost and Rainey (2014) used a retrospective study to investigate the degree of baseball fans’ end-of-season disappointment in accordance with their dedication to the team, expectation of the teams’ performance (e.g., the number of wins expected during that season), and investment in the team (e.g., the number of home games attended). Their findings indicated the greater the dedication to, expectations of, and investment in the team performances, the greater the fans’ disappointment when the team lost a game or had a poor season.

On the foundation of an extensive literature review, this study aims to investigate how sport fans’ disappointment with their team’s performance influences their dedication to, expectation of, investment in, and consumption behavioral patterns toward the team. Specifically, the following hypotheses are put forward: 1) fan disappointment will be directly related to fan expectation of team success; 2) fan disappointment will be directly related to fan dedication to their favorite team; 3) fan disappointment will be directly related to fan investment in their favorite team (i.e., the number of game attendance); and 4) fan disappointment will be directly related to fan consumption of team products (i.e., merchandise) and team-related media.

Method and Results

A total of 225 spectators were recruited as study participants at three Texas A&M NCAA home baseball games. Baseball fans in stadium were asked to voluntarily participate in research survey. Those who agreed to participate were asked to provide their email address and complete an online questionnaire measuring fan disappointment with
a baseball team. Among 225 respondents, 146 (64.9%) were males and 79 (35.1%) were females, and on average were 29.45 years old.

The Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS: Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was employed to measure fan identification and consisted of two sections: preseason and postseason. On the preseason questionnaire, participants reported their gender and the number of years they had been Aggies’ fans as well as what their expectations were of the team, and the level of their identification with the Aggies. The postseason questionnaire also included the Regret and Disappointment Scales (RDS; Marcatto & Ferrante, 2008) with 7 items (i.e., affective reaction, disappointment counterfactual) addition to the SSIS. All items were anchored with a 7-point Likert-type scale. The efficacy of the proposed model and hypotheses were tested using SPSS 22 and Mplus 7.

To measure the validity of the model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed. The results represented an acceptable model fit to the data ($\chi^2$(df) = 62.587(48); p < .001; SRMR = .019; CFI = .956; RMSEA = .012). In order to test the proposed hypotheses, a multiple regression analysis was implemented. The multiple correlation with the predictor variables with disappointment was .72, with an $R^2 = .65$ and an adjusted $R^2 = .56$, $F(6, 54) = 6.12$, p < .001. To examine the impact of fan disappointment on investment, identification, and merchandise, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed. The repeated measures effect was significant for attendance and money spent on foods and merchandise, but no significant differences were found between pre- and post-season in terms of the number of interactions with other fans and the usage of traditional media and social media. To investigate the moderating effect of preseason level of team identification on the relationship between fan disappointment and the declines in investment, identification, and merchandise, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed. Results revealed that the usage of traditional media and social media related to the team was significant (p < .05), but the remaining variables were not significant.

Discussion/ Implications

Results of the current study suggest that postseason fan identification was significantly reduced due to fan disappointment. In other words, how the team performed truly mattered in terms of reinforcing or diminishing their fandom. The results further have implications related to the role negative emotions have on the conceptual framework of fan disappointment as well as managerial implications regarding strategic action plans geared toward sport fans’ consumption behaviors that sport marketers, team managers, or event managers could adopt. Theoretically, the present study also helps confirm and redefine the impacts of fans’ disappointment on their subsequent reactions including team support and purchasing team’s merchandise. From a practical standpoint, findings provide a direction for sport marketers to guard against disappointment as well as other distinct negative emotions like anxiety, anger, sadness, and worry. Lastly, it suggests future research directions to shed more light on sport fans’ behaviors, needs, and motivations by exploring their emotions elicited by the team’s performance.