How You Like Me Now? The Influence of Performance Expectations and Team Identification on the Black Sheep Effect and Sports Consumption Behavior

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Athletes serve as representations for teams and may often act as proxies for various brands. Typically, fans seek out teams and brands due to both on-field (i.e., performance-related) as well as off-field actions by athletes (e.g., moral transgressions; Lee & Kwak, 2013). As such, when athletes stray away from team norms, fans may engage in derogation tactics. In relation, extant research in social psychology and group dynamics has identified a phenomenon known as the black sheep effect, defined as the tendency for individuals to actively judge deviant in-group members more harshly than similar behaving out-group members (Marques et al., 1988). Various factors have been identified in influencing this effect, such as membership status, or saliency (Pinto et al., 2010), group identification, and member expectations (Biernat et al., 1999). In the context of sports, however, findings for the black sheep effect have been mixed. On one hand, prior research by Fink et al. (2009) provides evidence for the effect in a passive context, where fans may lower identification with the team when the team is slow to punish the criminal behavior by an athlete. In this case, however, membership (player) status did not appear to have effect on this relationship and a measure of active derogation was not present. On the other hand, earlier research by Dietz-Uhler et al. (2002) has found alternative evidence for an in-group bias effect, in which fans continue to judge in-group athletes more favorably compared to out-group athletes, regardless of criminal behavior. Nevertheless, we endorse the presence of the black sheep effect in sports fan settings through an examination using performance-related expectancy violations. In addition, we extend this literature by integrating marketing research via the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) and thus, inspect various impacts on associated brands and future intentions to purchase related sports products.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Prior work on the black sheep effect in sports has primarily employed off-the-field factors, such as criminal behaviors, in assessing fans’ derogation strategies. In the manner of Biernat et al. (1999), we seek to investigate the black sheep effect using performance-related expectancy violations in game situations. Furthermore, there may lie several issues with the methodology of past research, specifically concerning the ecological validity and manipulation of stimuli. Dietz-Uhler et al. (2002) may have provided an overtly fictitious situation of an athlete by simply having subjects imagine the player was on their favorite team or another team. Alternatively, Fink et al. (2002) did not manipulate group membership, which is one of the core features of the black sheep effect. In studying consumption, we plan to integrate the meaning transfer model, which posits that endorsers have unique sets of meanings that can be transferred to endorsed products or brands (McCracken, 1986). As such, we will incorporate an assessment of attitudes towards a target athlete and brand in appraising purchase intentions for an associated brand’s products. Therefore, based on past literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Fans will more critically evaluate deviant in-group athletes who violate performance expectations, compared to similar out-group athletes (i.e., confirmation of the black sheep effect).

H2: When exposed to performance violations, fans will have less favorable attitudes towards the athlete and the associated brands, and will display lower purchase intentions for related products (e.g., merchandise).

H3: Team identification will moderate the relationship between group membership and the black sheep effect, wherein more highly identified fans will exhibit lower evaluations, attitudes towards the athlete, the associated brand, and purchase intent.

Method

We plan to recruit fans from a Midwestern Division 1 university for our study. We will limit our sample to a more homogeneous group for an effective experimental manipulation. Our study will feature a 2 (team identification: high,
low) × 2 (expectancy: high performance, low performance) × 2 (group membership: in-group, out-group) design. According to G*Power, in order to satisfy power conditions (Faul et al., 2007), we will require approximately 360 participants. Our study will be completed online through Qualtrics Survey Software. Following subject’s consent to participate, they will complete a team identification measure. They will then read a fictitious news article selected from a credible source, as determined by pre-tests, about a five-star high school quarterback recruit who has signed with a university. Group membership will be manipulated through university commitment (in-group: respondents’ university, out-group: out of conference school). Participants will then be presented a report and box statistics of the recruit’s performance through his last few games. In manipulating expectations, participants will be exposed to information reflecting high performance (expectancy confirmation) or low performance (expectancy violation). Following this, participants will complete a measure of evaluative traits and attitudes towards the athlete (Aath). Participants will then be asked about purchase intent and attitudes towards an associated brand (Ab), controlled for by using Nike as the target brand. For data analysis, we will conduct a series of two-way ANOVAs to test for the interaction between group membership and expectancy violation. We will evaluate the moderating effect of team identification by performing a hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

Expected Results and Discussion

We expect our results to show a significant effect of group membership and expectancy violation on evaluative traits and attitudes towards deviant in-group athletes (H1). These effects will spillover to attitudes towards associated brands as well as purchase intentions of related products and services (H2). With respect to the role of team identification, we expect team identification to have a direct impact on such evaluations, attitudes, and purchase intentions (H3).

The present study contributes to the sport management literature by examining how the black sheep effect operates in a sports consumer context. We provide a stronger operationalization of the effect in this situation by encapsulating the true crux of the process by drawing from both social psychology and group dynamics research. In addition, we extend this literature by providing evidence for consumer based motives stemming from the black sheep effect. With respect to practical implications, managers may be able to determine which athletes to use in marketing their products in order to achieve sustained financial returns. From a team’s standpoint, general managers and marketing executives may be able to more effectively identify the players to use in driving fans to consume team-related products (e.g., apparel, accessories, and perpetuated ticket purchase). We hope our study can provide sound understanding in using a multi-disciplinary approach in examining simply how fans perceive situations surrounding various athletes and brands.

References


