Are You Angry? Are You Disgusted? Yet You are Still a Fan? The Effect of Athletes’ Off-Field Immoral Behaviors on Fans’ Emotion and Team Identification

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As public figures, athletes’ immoral behaviors are often highlighted in the media (Dickirson, & Grantz, 2002; Lee, 2015; Uhler, End, & Demakakos, 2001). With the advancement of Social Media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.) athletes’ off-field immoral behaviors are broadcasted through social media instantaneously to numerous sport fans. ESPN reported that 13.6% of football and basketball players from major universities were involved in criminal incidents during the past five years (ESPN, 2015). The situation is not much better in professional sport. As evidence, more than 805 NFL players were arrested from 2011 to 2015 (USA Today, 2015). Previous research reported that athletes’ negative images created by engaging in off-field immoral behaviors directly affect fans’ team identification (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Team identification can be defined as a specific form of social identification that reflects a fan’s psychological connection and attachment to a team (Wann, 1997). Wann & Branscombe (1993) explained that fans high in identification support their favorite team regardless of team’s performance while fans with low levels of team identification change their relationship with a team depending on its performance. Based on the previous research, team identification is one of the most important factors to sports teams’ success (Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). Thus, there has been a growing interest in understanding the relationship of athletes’ off-field immoral behaviors and team identification.

Although there have been some efforts to understand the relationship between the off-field immoral behavior of athlete and team identification, limited research has examined the relationship of fans’ emotions that are evoked by athletes off-field immoral behaviors and team identification. Emotion represents a necessary factor in human behaviors and has a significant effect on thought and action. Emotion also influences decision-making such as evaluation, intention and choice (Leone, Perugini & Bagozzi, 2005). Emotion also can act as information that influences the decision-making process. According to Damasio (1994), when an individual gets stimulus accompanied by negative feelings, emotion act as information by sounding an alarm that warns away from that choice.

Previous research explained that there are various negative emotions such as anger, fear, disgust, and contempt (Ekman, 1992; Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Schwarz, 2000). Among those negative emotions, anger and disgust are the most basic emotions of human beings that are evoked by immoral behaviors (Jones & Fitness, 2008). Anger and disgust are also some of the most significant moral emotions accompanied by human being’s moral judgment (Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1977). Anger was associated with perceived harm to others, and when an act was committed intentionally (Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007). Disgust was elicited by purity violations, which are acts that can be deemed as polluting the body or soul (Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007). Disgust was also associated by people who cheat or callously injure others by moral transgressors that use deception and abuse their power (Jones & Fitness 2008).

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that emotions influence human being’s motivation, behavior and decision making (Ariely & Lowenstein, 2006; Caruso & Shafir, 2006; Frijida, 1986; Kwak, Kim & Hirt, 2011; Lazarus, 1991; Peters, Lipkus, & Diefenbach, 2006). Exploring how negative emotions (i.e., anger and disgust) that evoked by athletes’ immoral behaviors influence fans’ subsequent behaviors and information processing would provide further insights into the dynamic nature of fan and team relationships. Specifically, we address the above issue in an experimental setting to effectively manipulate an emotional state and investigate what kinds of athletes’ off-field immoral behaviors evoke anger and disgust to fans, and how those emotions affect fans’ team identification.

The purpose of current research is twofold; first, to examine if the different kind of off-field immoral behaviors creates different negative emotions. Second, to examine if certain negative emotion has more negative influence on fans’ team identification?
Method
A total of 200 combined undergraduate and graduate students from a Sport Management program at a large Northwestern university will participate in the experiment. The researcher will develop four fictitious articles, and each one will be about a different immoral behavior that will evoke anger and disgust.

To assess the change of team identification, a before and after experimental design will be conducted. These surveys will be single-blind experiments that the participants will not be informed of the intent of the experiment. The first part of the experiment will involve masked baseline questions, some of which will help assess participants’ team identification toward their sport team (7 items; Greenwood, 2001). After two weeks, the participants will be given four athletes’ off-field immoral behavior fictitious articles to read (e.g., use of violence, use of performance enhancing drugs, academic integrity, and child involved sexual assault). Then, the second part of the instrument will ask the participants what emotions they felt while reading the articles (i.e., anger or disgust). Also, the instrument will contain the team identification questionnaire to assess the change in participants’ level of team identification. For emotion measures, face task and word task (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999) will be used to determine the participants’ emotional response to the given article. In this study, paired t-test and multiple regression will be used to assess the change in participants’ team identification and the change of team identification based on the participants’ emotional response toward the articles given to them.

Expected Outcome and Implication
The first proposition of this study is that team identification will change depending on the type of immoral behavior committed by the athlete. The second proposition of this study is that team identification will change depending on the fans’ emotions towards the athletes’ crimes. The current study will able to create a link between personal emotional responses to predicting fan behavior. Also, the previous results suggested that negative feeling influences the decision-making (Damasio, 1994; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Therefore, we could assume that an athlete’s off-field immoral behavior that evokes disgust will yield a higher negative influence on fans’ team identification than anger. Finally, the result could advise the sport governing organization on dealing with athletes involved in off-field immoral behaviors. The organization will need to understand the act itself and what kind of consequences the act has on fans’ emotional responses.