The Effect of Athletes' Off-Field Immoral Behaviors on Fans' Emotions and Team Identification

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Introduction

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). There are various factors that compose team identification such as team attachment, vicarious achievement, player attachment, and community pride (Mahony et al., 2002). As one of the biggest factors composing team identification, athletes' off-field immoral behaviors are the center of attention to 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). This 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 explained that athletes' negative image resulting from their off-field immoral behaviors directly affects their fans’ team identification (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

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). 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 reported 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 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). A mixed emotion of anger and disgust will be evoked as a particular response to specific socio-immoral behaviors (Nabi, 2002; Marzillier & Davey, 2004).

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, disgust, and anger-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.

The purpose of current research is exploring how negative emotions (i.e., anger, disgust, and anger-disgust) evoked by athletes’ immoral behaviors influence fans’ team identification

Hypothesis

1. Athletes’ off-field immoral behaviors will affect fans’ emotions.
2. Each different kind of athlete’s off-field immoral behavior affect fans’ emotion differently
2-1. “DISGUST” have higher negative influence on fans’ team identification compared to “ANGER”
2-2. “ANGER-DISGUST” will have higher negative influence on fans’ team identification compared to “DISGUST”
Method
A total of 180 undergraduate students at a large Northwestern university will participate in the experiment. The participants will be divided into 6 groups. There will be one control and five experimental groups. Every group will receive the same survey except for the control group, which will not read the fictitious articles. This is to ensure that researchers are able to assess the validity of the fictitious articles, whether they are effective in evoking negative emotions in participants. Each of the five experimental groups will be assigned different immoral behaviors (i.e., violence, DUI, drug use, rape, child rape) to compare the effect of each different kind of immoral behavior in fans. In order to assess the change in team identification, there will be two surveys. These surveys will be single-blind experiments in which the participants will not be informed of the intent of the surveys. The first survey consists of questions that assess pre-team identification (target questions). Other questions will be added to mask these target questions (i.e., satisfaction with school facilities). After two weeks, the participants will be given the athletes’ off-field immoral behaviors fictitious articles to read. Then, the second survey will ask participants what emotions they felt while reading the articles (i.e., anger, disgust, and anger-disgust). The survey will also consist of the same questions in the first survey to help assess team identification after asking about participant’s emotions. After the participants complete the experiment, the researcher will debrief them and reveal that the newspaper story was made up and that the content was not true.

Data Analysis
To examine hypothesis 1-1, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to address each different kind of athlete’s off-field immoral behavior will be independent variables for this analysis, while fan’s team identification will be considered as the dependent variable.

To examine hypothesis 2-1, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to address disgust, and anger will be the independent variables for this analysis, while fan’s team identification will be served as the dependent variable.

To examine hypothesis 2-2, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to address anger-disgust, and disgust will be the independent variables for this analysis, while fan’s team identification will be considered as the dependent variable.

Expected Outcome and Implication
The first expected outcome of this study is that team identification will change according to 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’ immoral behaviors. The current study will able to create a connection between personal emotional responses to predicting fan behavior. Finally, the result could advise the sport team 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 and team identification.

*The current study will be finished by the end of the Fall 2016 semester. The researcher will provide results, discussion, and implication at the presentation based on the results of the experiment.