I Follow an Underdog because I Have Hope: The Role of Hope in Consumers’ BIRFing (Basking in Reflected Failure) Behavior

Daehwan Kim, Seoul National University
Jihyeon Oh, Seoul National University
Yukyoum Kim (Advisor), Seoul National University

Marketing - Consumer Behavior (Elite Sport) Thursday, May 30, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 8:05 AM
Abstract 2019-008 Room: Oakley

It is a common conception that individuals tend to associate themselves with a successful team (Basking in Reflected Glory; BIRGing) whereas they distant themselves from an unsuccessful team (Cutting off Reflected Failure; CORFing) (Cialdini et al., 1976). Sometimes, however, sport fans engage in a less common behavior such as Basking in spite of Reflected Failure (BIRFing: Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004). The existent sport management literature has suggested that BIRFing behavior stems from fan loyalty (e.g., fans reveling in fanship). Then, why do they support or follow an unsuccessful team? (Why) Do less loyal fans engage in BIRFing? To answer these questions, the current study suggests the concept of ‘hope’ to explain the underlying mechanism of BIRFing behavior. Specifically, the purpose of the current study is to explore the effect of hope on consumers’ BIRFing behavior and its conditional effect depending on the level of team identification.

According to appraisal theory, hope is defined as a positive emotion that is elicited by situations that are goal-congruent (e.g., team success) as well as uncertain but possible (MacInnis & De Mello, 2005). Hope is a powerful coping strategy when dealing with a wide range of frustrating situations (e.g., team losses) (Wong et al., 2008). This implies that team failures are likely to elicit hope as a coping strategy to deal with any negative psychological effects (e.g., damaged self-concept) related to being a fan of an unsuccessful team (H1-b). As a result, once hope is activated, it can function as a “bumper” to prevent individuals from engaging in CORFing behavior (H1-c). Therefore, despite the general pattern of CORFing behavior against an unsuccessful team (H1-a), the concept of hope would lead sport consumers to BIRFing behavior for the team (H1).

Meanwhile, past studies have suggested that loyal fans (i.e., high team identification) have diverse coping strategies when engaging in BIRFing behavior including camaraderie (Campbell et al., 2004), individuality (Lynn & Harris, 1997), or image management (Sirgy, 1982). In contrast, individuals who are less identified with an unsuccessful team tend to have little choice in such coping strategies. This implies that the positive effect of hope on BIRFing behavior would be stronger for those who are less identified with the unsuccessful team than for highly identified fans who can benefit from other coping strategies (H2). Taken together, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1: Disappointing team performance has a positive indirect effect on BIRFing behavior via hope.
H1-a: Disappointing team performance negatively influences consumers’ BIRFing behavior.
H1-b: Disappointing team performance positively influences consumers’ hope.
H1-c: Consumers’ hope positively influences their BIRFing behavior.

H2: The impact of hope on BIRFing behavior is stronger for those who are less identified with the team.

To test the hypotheses, we conduct a survey study targeting sport consumers who attend a game between unsuccessful baseball teams in South Korea. The collected data is analyzed with conditional PROCESS macro using Hayes Model 7 (Hayes, 2012). Detailed results as well as theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the presentation.