Impact of the Fundamental Attribution Error on Moral Judgment on Favorite Team Athlete’s Misconduct: Focusing on Team Identification Level

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Marketing - Fan ID (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2019-021

In the past few decades, highly identified sport fans’ biased perceptions and behaviors have been investigated by many researchers (Wann et al., 1994; Dimmock & Gucciardi, 2007). Most findings regarding the skewed consumer behaviors have commonly indicated that highly identified fans are predisposed to show positive intention and behaviors even in negative situations (e.g., showing steadfast support toward their favorite team even while the team performance is poor) (Roumenstan, 1998; Chien et al., 2016). Thus, by employing the fundamental attribution error (FAE) as a theoretical framework, this study aims to investigate how the level of team identification (TID) can affect the attribution error in responding to an athlete transgression. Furthermore, we examine the relationships between FAE and moral reasoning (i.e., moral decoupling and rationalization).

Researchers have found that highly identified fans can more easily get engaged in self-serving attribution compared to less identified fans (Wann & Dolan, 1994). The FAE has suggested that people tend to exploit different attribution types (i.e., external vs. internal) in a biased way that they can still support their favorite in-group members. Thus, we posit that the level of team identification may have accounted for the occurrence of the fundamental attribution error in responding to athlete transgression. As a psychological mechanism explaining sport fans supportive responses to scandalized athletes, the literature has provided two moral disengagement strategies such as moral decoupling and rationalization (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016). Thus, we posit that FAE would trigger both moral decoupling and rationalization. Moreover, fans taking moral disengagement strategies have been known to maintain a positive attitude toward wrongdoers, so it is plausible that those highly identified fans could be more willing to forgive troubled athletes. Thus, we propose as below:

H1: The level of team identification will have a positive (negative) impact on external (internal) attribution to the favorite team athlete’s scandal.

H2: The external (internal) attribution will have positive (negative) impact on moral decoupling and rationalization.

H3: Moral decoupling and rationalization will have a positive impact on willingness to forgive.

We will conduct an experimental study (n = 200) collecting data, following Lee & others’ (2016) data collection method, from two different universities in the US. A fictitious scenario about a university athlete scandal will be developed and utilized. Participants will then answer a survey asking team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), external and internal attribution (Yen et al., 2004), moral reasoning strategies (Lee & Kwak, 2016), and willingness to forgive (Xie & Peng, 2009). To test hypotheses, we will perform a structural equation modeling. The findings of this study are expected to bring new insights to sport marketers, clubs, and athletes on the fan’s responses to athlete transgression. The findings would initiate researchers to expand upon the literature with team identification. Moreover, it will raise awareness of the dangers of passive reactions on athlete’s transgression, and at the same time, such a sport fandom will set an inspiring example. More implications will be discussing during the presentation.