Do Three Wrongs Make a Right: Relative Influence of Spectator Dysfunctional Behaviors on Spectator Enjoyment

Zack Pedersen, Indiana University
Antonio Williams (Advisor), Indiana University
Kevin K. Byon (Advisor), Indiana University

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Incidents of spectator dysfunctional behaviors (SDB) during sporting events has become an expectation for many spectators. Certainly, this line of research has garnered scholarly attention, resulting in the identification of possible causes and effects (e.g., Wann et al., 2017). Generally, scholars found negative effects of SDB on focal spectator’s attitudes (Larkin & Fink, 2018). While negative connotations and outcomes embedded in fans’ aggressive actions, the potential bias to view all aggressive actions with a negative mindset relating to outcomes, may not always be the right approach. Critically reviewing the extant literature showed that scholars, who theorized SDB as a global measure (e.g., aggressive fandom (Wann & Geoke, 2017), aggressive acts (Hillard & Johnson, 2008), found that SDB is negatively related to spectators’ attitudes. While such view advanced knowledge concerning the theoretical link between SDB and psychological tendencies, another school of thought was recently introduced by Wann and James (2019), who conceptualized SDB as a composite measure by categorizing hostile acts into five different forms (verbal assaults, fighting, throwing missiles, disrupting play, and vandalism). Per the new thought, different types of SDB may have a varying magnitude of relationship with spectators’ attitudinal dispositions (e.g., enjoyment). Empirically testing this novel theory makes the current study unique.

As such, the purpose of the study was to examine the relative effects of SDB on spectators’ enjoyment. To this end, we used a survey experiment by collecting data of 202 MLB fans. The respondents were asked to view video clips containing the four types of SDB (verbal assaults, fighting, throwing missiles, and disrupting play) and were requested to complete a questionnaire including measures of team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and enjoyment (Jones et al., 2005), and demographics. The video clips were created by closely following the definitions of the four SDB (Wann & James, 2019). Vandalism was not used due to the infrequency.

The results showed that respondents in the disrupting play condition reported the highest score of enjoyment (M = 3.38), followed by throwing missiles (M = 3.08), verbal assault (M = 2.92), and fighting (M = 2.82). A repeated-measure ANOVA further showed that statistically significant group differences exist among the four conditions (F(3, 753) = 45.71, p < .001, \( \eta^2 = .15 \)). Specifically, there were significant group differences between disrupting play and verbal assault (p < .001), disrupting play and fighting (p < .001), and between disrupting play and throwing missiles (p < .05). Overall results indicated that respondents’ enjoyment was higher in the disrupting play condition than the three conditions.

The findings extend SDB literature by (a) empirically confirming “the composite measure” of the fan aggression and (b) testing the relative influence of SDB on enjoyment. In sum, the current research provides a strong theoretical understanding of why such perceptual differences occur by different types of SDB.