Sport Consumer Responses to Rival Team Athlete’s Scandal: Focusing on Emotional and Cognitive Approaches

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Marketing - Fan Identification (College Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Team Identification II

Abstract 2020-187

Previous studies have found that sport fans show more positive perception to in-group members (e.g., favorite teams) and display negatively biased reactions (e.g., celebrating a rival team’s loses or misfortunes) to out-group members (e.g., rival teams; Hoogland et al., 2014). However, to date, from the moral judgment perspective, the literature has yet provided empirical evidence on the psychological underlying mechanism of such skewed fan behaviors about a rival team athlete’s misconduct. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how such biased behaviors are evoked and its subsequent impact on fans’ intent to punish.

This study especially considers two different variables such as envy (emotional factor) and importance of winning (cognitive factor; IWIN) as key mediators within the relationship between team identification (ID) and schadenfreude. Envy can be defined as a negatively valenced emotion of hostility toward others who have/had achieved superior qualities or achievements in a self-relevant domain (Smith & Kim, 2007). Such malicious envy is known to trigger a denigration of or hostility toward the target (Van de Ven et al., 2012). As another unique phenomenon in the rivalry context, the literature has focused on the notion of Schadenfreude, the pleasure that one party tends to experiences at the misfortune of an opposite party within an antagonistic relationship. Schadenfreude is a type of appraisal-based joy evoked when someone is pleased about an event that is undesirable for others (Heider, 1958). For instance, schadenfreude can be elicited when a rival team suffers a setback such as player injuries or scandals. Dalakas and Melancon (2012) also uncovered the mediating role of IWIN between fan ID on schadenfreude. Regarding the moral judgment toward a rival team athlete’s scandal, we posit that schadenfreude will have positive impact on intent to punish through three different moral reasoning strategies: moral coupling (MC; combining performance and morality judgment resulting in negative reaction to a scandalized athlete), moral decoupling (MD; separating performance and morality judgment resulting in support to a scandalized athlete), moral rationalization (MR; justifying the misbehavior resulting in support to a scandalized athlete) (Lee & Kwak, 2016). Thus, we propose that:

H1-a. There will be a positive relationship between fan ID and envy toward a rival team.
H1-b. There will be a positive relationship between fan ID and IWIN.
H2. Envy and IWIN will mediate the relationship between fan ID and Schadenfreude.
H3. Schadenfreude will have a positive (negative) impact on punish intent toward a rival team athlete through MC (MD and MR).

An experimental study (n = 200) will be conducted by collecting two different universities in the US. Participants will first read a fictitious scenario depicting a university athlete scandal. They will then answer a questionnaire that included independent and dependent variables, and mediators. Structural equation modeling will be performed to test the hypotheses. The findings will further expand the literature by understanding how fans react to the failures of a rival team. More theoretical and practical implications will be discussed at the conference.