“Winners Have to Absorb Losses” Sports Fans’ Reactions to Sponsor Advertisements Following Crucial Losses by Their Favorite Teams

Sean Pradhan, Menlo College

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Introduction and Theoretical Background

At the conclusion of the 2020 Major League Baseball (MLB) season, the Los Angeles Dodgers were crowned World Series champions. Naturally, many sponsors featured advertisements to celebrate the team’s success. However, the losing teams of such high-stakes events, such as the Tampa Bay Rays in this case, along with their sponsors face various challenges in formulating advertisement messages. In relation, previous research in sports sponsorship has explored the impact of the “spillover effect”, noting that poor team performance can lead to adverse consumer attitudes toward a sponsor (Pope, Voges, & Brown, 2009; Yuan, Huo, & Malik, 2019). Recently, across a series of experiments in the context of college football, Kwak and Pradhan (2020) report that when an advertisement features a losing team, more highly identified fans offer more favorable evaluations toward a sponsor compared to lower identified individuals. However, research examining advertisement messages showcasing losing teams is relatively scant. Thus, the current study contributes to the existing literature by attempting to replicate and extend the work of Kwak and Pradhan (2020) to the milieu of post-season professional baseball.

Method and Expected Results

Following pivotal losses in MLB playoff games, we conducted two separate, online experiments on fans of the Chicago Cubs and New York Yankees respectively. In our first study, we primed participants with video highlights of the actual loss by the Chicago Cubs or showed a neutral (control) video detailing the history of Wrigley Field. During our second study, we implemented actual tweets from various media outlets that primed participants with either negative material following the New York Yankees’ loss or positive outlooks displaying messages that detailed record-setting performance by the team and a recollection of the past season. We then manipulated the message content and various features of sponsor advertisements. Participants were randomly exposed to advertisements that either acknowledged the loss, did not acknowledge the loss, or disassociated from the team. We assessed fans’ perceived identity threat, emotional reactions (e.g., pride, shame, pleasance, anger), social media intentions, and attitudes toward the sponsor. Statistical analyses are currently ongoing. We predict that fans will provide higher attitude ratings toward advertisements that acknowledged the loss compared to those with complete disassociation or no acknowledgement of the loss. We also expect to find differences in identity threat, emotional reactions, and social media intentions based on team identification, preceding prime, and type of advertisement.

Discussion

Currently, the social sciences, among other fields, are marred with a reproducibility crisis of sorts, with calls to replicate and extend research by many scholars in various fields (Laraway, Snyerski, Pradhan, & Huitema, 2019). Prospective results from the current study would provide further evidence to support a receptivity of certain advertisement messages by different types of fans. Findings may also be able to tease out inter-sport differences between previously studied college football fans and professional baseball fans in the current context. Future research should consider other types of advertisement messages in various sports settings to evaluate their effectiveness for teams and their sponsors alike.