“Outta Here!” The Impact of Outgroup Salience and Member Status on Sports Fans’ Evaluations of Athlete Performance

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Marketing - Consumer Behavior (College Sport)
Poster
Session: Poster Session 2

Abstract 2021-123
Mode: Synchronous
Friday June 4, 2021, 2:05 PM - 3:05 PM

Introduction and Theoretical Background

Previous research has shown that high athletic performance tends to bring about more favorable evaluations of athletes by sports fans, while low performance gives rise to harsh criticism, with biases towards ingroup athletes based on the level of team identification (Wann, 2006). According to scholarly work in social psychology, group member status, or in this context an athlete’s standing, could also influence this relationship (Pinto et al., 2010). For instance, when an “elite” athlete performs poorly and a “low-profile” athlete performs at a superior level, this incongruence may bring about cognitive dissonance among fans (Lee, Cottingham, Powers, & Maeng, 2020). In addition, group membership of the athlete may not simply be dualistic (e.g., ingroup vs. outgroup), and the frequency of intergroup contact via rivalries may also influence such phenomena (Havard & Eddy, 2013; Delia, 2015). Drawing from subjective group dynamics (SGD; Marques et al., 1988) theory, the current study intends to identify the impact of group member (athlete) status and outgroup salience. We specifically examine how athlete trait evaluations, fan identity threat, and the proclivity to share information about an athlete on social media can be impacted by athlete status, on-field performance, and group membership. Our study will add to the existing literature by pinpointing how outgroup salience and athlete status can affect sport consumer behavior.

Method and Expected Results

The present study used a 3 (group: ingroup, rival outgroup, non rival outgroup) × 2 (member status: elite, low profile) × 2 (performance: high, low) between subjects experimental design. Data were collected from 303 University of Michigan football fans (214 male, 89 female; Mage = 28.84, SDage = 10.41). We selected Ohio State University as the rival outgroup and the University of Oregon as the non-rival outgroup. Respondents completed an online survey and were randomly assigned to read fictitious articles about a recruit who had committed to one of the three universities. We manipulated the athlete’s status as “elite” (i.e., 5-star recruit) or “low-profile” (i.e., 1-star recruit). Participants were also presented statistics for the recruit and an account of the player’s performance through his last few games. High performance involved superior statistics and a win in a pivotal (championship) game, whereas low performance was signaled by poor statistics and a loss. We measured fans’ team identification, perception of rivalry between the ingroup and outgroup universities, trait evaluations, identity threat, and social media intentions. Although analyses are currently ongoing, we expect that high performance, “elite” player status, and ingroup membership will give rise to more favorable evaluations, lower identity threat, and greater intentions to share information about the athlete on social media.

Discussion

We hope to illustrate how the ingroup favoritism effect may persist even in the presence of outgroup threats via “elite” outgroup athletes. Although our study may provide some insights into such factors, we were nevertheless limited by the sole consideration of performance as a determinant of fan behavior. Future studies should consider other antecedents (e.g., off-the-field actions) in how athletes influence sports fan behavior.