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Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Empirical - Sport

Predicting Tendencies to Consider Illegally Assisting a Sport Team: The Influence of Team Identification and Sport Fan Dysfunction

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Abstract

Previous research (Wann et al., 2001) had investigated the willingness of sport fans to consider illegal or unethical actions to assist their team (i.e., cheating behaviors such as taking a test for a player). They found that individuals with higher levels of team identification were particularly likely to consider engaging in these acts. The current investigation extended this work by incorporating fan dysfunction into the design. Consistent with expectations, the results indicated that both persons with high levels of identification and persons with high levels of dysfunction were most likely to consider engaging in the cheating behaviors.

Keywords: Sport; Fan Behavior; Illegal Behavior; Unethical Behavior; Team Identification; Fan Dysfunction

In 2001, Wann and his colleagues published an article examining the tendencies of sport fans to admit a willingness to consider illegal and/or unethical acts designed to assist their team's chances of sporting success (i.e., to cheat for their team). Previous research investigating fans' tendencies to anonymously injure a rival player or coach had revealed that fans with higher levels of team identification (i.e., those with stronger psychological connections to the team, see Wann & James, 2019) were most likely to admit to a willingness to consider the acts of violence (Wann et al., 2003, 1999). Using this work to frame their hypotheses, Wann et al. (2001) expected a similar pattern of effects for willingness to consider illegally or unethically assisting teams and players. That is, they expected team identification to predict a willingness to consider these questionable acts of cheating. Wann and his associates (2001) found that a sizeable minority of participants admitted at least a minimal willingness to consider the acts. For example, approximately 40% of participants revealed that they would consider letting a player cheat off of them in class, and roughly one-quarter of those surveyed were willing to consider writing a paper for a player. Additionally, as expected, levels of team identification were positively correlated with degree of willingness to consider the illegal/unethical behaviors.

However, since the publication of Wann et al.'s (2001) findings, another important person variable has been identified in the sport fandom literature. Specifically, recent efforts have found that a sport fan's level of dysfunction (tendencies for fans to complain and be confrontational, see Wakefield & Wann, 2006) is also critical for understanding the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions of sport fans. Research suggests that a number of problematic behavioral patterns are associated with dysfunctional fandom. For instance, these individuals tend to be bullies (Courtney & Wann, 2010), act inappropriately at youth sporting events (Partridge & Wann, 2015), are narcissistic (DeRossett et al., in press), and feel that sport fan violence is appropriate (Castleman et al., 2020). Given these relationships, it seemed that dysfunctional fans may also be tempted to engage in the illegal and unethical actions examined by Wann and his associates. This possibility was the focus of the current investigation. Given the literature described above, we tested two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Team identification would be a positive predictor of likelihood to consider acting in an illegal or unethical manner to help a sport team and its players.

Hypothesis 2: Fan dysfunction would be a positive predictor of likelihood to consider acting in an illegal or unethical manner to help a sport team and its players.

Method

Participants

The original sample consisted of 156 university students participating for partial course or extra credit. Two individuals were dropped due to incomplete information. Thus, the final sample contained 154 persons (38 male; 114 female; 2 choosing not to answer). Participants had a mean age of 19.06 years ($SD = 1.48$).

Materials and Procedure

Following IRB approval, participants were tested in group settings in university classrooms. Upon arriving and providing their consent, participants received a questionnaire packet with five sections. The first section assessed age and gender. The next section contained the Sport Spectator Identification Scale – Revised (SSIS-R; James et al., 2019). Updating the original SSIS (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), the SSIS-R first asks participant whether or not they are a fan of a particular team. In the current investigation, subjects were asked if they were a fan of the University of Kentucky (UK) men's basketball team. Those confirming their fandom for the UK team were then asked to answer seven items assessing their level of identification with the team. Response options range from 1 (*low identification*) to 8 (*high identification*) and, thus, higher numbers indicated greater levels of identification. A sample item on the SSIS-R reads, "How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of the University of Kentucky men's basketball team?"

The third section contained the Dysfunctional Fandom Questionnaire (DFQ) developed by Wakefield and Wann (2006). The DFQ has five items assessing levels of dysfunctional sport fandom via a scale ranging from 1 (*inaccurate as a description of me*) to 10 (*accurate as a description of me*). Higher scores equate to greater levels of dysfunction. A sample item from the DFQ is, "I have had confrontations with others at sporting events when I voiced my opinion."

Next, participants completed the Sport Fandom Questionnaire (SFQ; Wann, 2002), a five-item measure assessing the extent to which the participants identified with the role of sport fan. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 8 (*strongly agree*). Thus, higher numbers corresponded with

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higher levels of fandom. A sample item from the SFQ reads, “I consider myself to be a sport fan.”

The final scale was the Sport Fan Cheating Scale (SFCS) developed by Wann and his colleagues (2001). This scale asks individuals to consider a variety of potentially illegal and/or unethical acts related to their team, and the extent to which they would consider engaging in these behaviors. Each item begins “If guaranteed you would not get caught or suffer any consequences, to what extent would be willing to...” Participants then read about various actions they could consider. For instance, one item reads, “If guaranteed you would not get caught or suffer any consequences, to what extent would be willing to let a member of the University of Kentucky men’s basketball team cheat off of you in a class to help him keep his grades to maintain eligibility?” Participants completed a total of twelve such items (see Table 2), using a scale ranging from 1 (*not willing*) to 8 (*extremely willing*). In addition to examining participants’ responses to each item, a total SFCS score was acquired by summing the twelve items.

After completing the packet, respondents were thanked for their participation, debriefed, and excused from the session (sessions lasted approximately 10 minutes).

Results

Items comprising the SSIS-R, DFQ, SFQ and SFCS (total score) were combined to form indices of each. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alphas appear in Table 1.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Alphas (Cronbach).

Measure	M	SD	Alpha
Team identification	25.77	13.37	.94
Dysfunctional fandom	17.86	10.24	.89
Sport fandom	23.16	10.31	.94
Cheating behaviors	22.65	15.76	.94

Frequency distributions (i.e., percentages) of responses to the twelve cheating items appear in Table 2. An examination of this table reveals that participants were most willing to consider lettering a player cheat off of them in class (56%) and write a paper for a player (41%). However, at least some participants admitted a willingness consider each of the illegal/unethical acts, including more extreme behaviors such as helping a player acquire steroids and drugging an opposing team’s water (11% each).

Table 2
Frequency Distributions (Percentages) for Responses to the Cheating Items

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Willingness to consider:</i>								
Letting a player cheat off you in class	44	8	9	10	9	8	3	9
Writing a paper for a player	59	12	7	5	8	3	1	5
Stealing a test for a player	73	7	5	5	3	3	3	1
Taking a test for a player	68	9	5	7	5	5	0	3
Giving unearned preferential grades	61	16	5	5	5	5	1	3
Attempting to bribe referees	64	12	10	3	4	4	3	0
Stealing an opposing team’s playbook	69	10	3	5	4	4	3	2
Helping a player acquire steroids	89	4	1	1	1	1	3	0
Falsifying a player’s drug test	75	10	4	3	3	1	4	1
Contributing illegal finding for recruiting	83	7	3	1	1	3	3	0
Drugging an opposing team’s water	89	5	1	1	1	1	2	0
Lying in court to protect a player	85	5	3	1	3	2	2	0

Notes: Response options ranged from 1 (*not willing*) to 8 (*extremely willing*). Responses to each individual item may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

To test the hypotheses that team identification (H1) and fan dysfunction (H2) would be positive predictors of likelihood to consider acting in an illegal or unethical manner to help a sport team and its players, a simultaneous regression was computed in which team identification, fan dysfunction, and sport fandom were entered as predictors of likelihood to consider the cheating behaviors. Correlations among the variables appear in Table 3. Regression statistics can be found in Table 4.

Table 3
Correlations among the Variables.

	1	2	3	4
Team identification (1)	--			
Fan dysfunction (2)	.39*	--		
Sport fandom (3)	.47*	.59*	--	
Cheating behaviors (4)	.32*	.34*	.24*	--

Note: * = $p < .01$.

The regression analysis revealed that the combined effect of the predictor variables was significant, $F(3,150)=9.49$, $p<.001$. Furthermore, as hypothesized, both team identification ($t = 2.64$, $p < .01$) and fan dysfunction ($t = 2.88$, $p < .01$) were

significant positive predictors of likelihood to consider engaging in the illegal and/or unethical behaviors. Sport fandom was a not a significant predictor ($t = -0.27, p > .70$).

Table 4
Regression Equation with Team Identification, Fan Dysfunction and Sport Fandom as Predictors of Cheating Behaviors.

Predictor variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	sig.
Team identification	0.27	0.10	.23	2.64	**
Fan dysfunction	0.42	0.15	.27	2.88	**
Sport fandom	-0.04	0.15	-.03	-0.27	ns
Overall R	0.399				
Overall R ²	0.159				
Adjusted R ²	0.143				
Overall F (3, 150)	9.49***				

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$.

Discussion

The current investigation was designed to extend past research indicating that a sizeable percentage of fans report a willingness to consider engaging in illegal or unethical acts to assist their favorite team, and that team identification is a significant predictor of degree of willingness (Wann et al., 2001). In the current study, a sizeable minority again reported a willingness to consider the acts. Additionally, we found that a fair number of persons would strongly consider the actions. That is, an examination of Table 2 reveals that a number of participants responded with a 5 or greater (i.e., above the midpoint on the scale). For example, 29% of participants reported that they would strongly consider allowing a player to cheat off of them in class. In fact, at least 10% reported a strong consideration in over half of the scenarios.

With respect to the impact of fan dysfunction and team identification, as hypothesized the results indicated that both person variables were significant positive predictors of willingness to consider the acts of cheating. However, it may be that the motivations for engaging in these acts differ for these two sport fan person variables. That is, consider two motives that have been identified for acts of sport fan aggression: namely, hostile motivation and instrumental motivation (Wann et al., 2000). Hostile fan aggression involves acts intended solely to physically or psychologically harm the target. Conversely, instrumental fan aggression is a means to an end; the aggressive act is designed to lead to an additional

positive outcome (e.g., team success). Applying this to the current investigation, perhaps individuals with high levels of team identification would consider the acts of cheating for instrumental reasons while those with higher levels of fan dysfunction would be more hostile in their motives. For persons with high levels of identification with a team, the team's successes and failures are felt as their own, resulting in team performances being critical for the identity of these fans (Wann & James, 2019). As a result, they may be more likely to consider engaging in the acts of cheating in an attempt to improve their team's chances of victory (thereby increasing their own sense of self-worth). On the other hand, those with higher levels of dysfunction tend to be assertive, confrontational, and aggressive (Castle et al., 2020; Wakefield & Wann, 2006; Wann & Ostrander, 2017). Given this, their motivation for the unethical and illegal acts may simply be a desire to engage in the activity, regardless of whether or not it would actually result in improved team performance. Rather, these individuals want to engage in the actions simply for the sake of doing something that violates implicit and explicit norms and/or to inflict harm on others. Future researchers would attempt to test these possibilities, thereby furthering our understanding of the motivations involved in a willingness to consider the actions studied here.

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