

FANS AND EMOTION: WHY EMOTION MATTERS IN STUDYING SPORT CONSUMER BEHAVIORS

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Abstract

Aim of paper

Sport provides a unique opportunity to explore how emotions operate in people. However, the prevailing sport consumer behavior research has focused on emotion as an outcome variable and little research has examined the motivational function of such transitory emotional states on subsequent behavior and cognitive processing. The purposes of this study are: (1) to explore which emotional dimensions are associated with fans when they read an article about their favorite team, and (2) to investigate the influence of stimuli-induced emotion on making irrational judgments and future predictions.

Theoretical background

Sport as an entertainment represents a unique form of experiential consumption. According to Holt (1995), consuming spectator sport involves various experiential elements of consumption behavior (e.g., accounting, evaluating, and appreciating). For instance, attending a professional sporting event at a stadium can evoke a full range of emotional responses, ranging from positive emotions such as feelings of excitement and awe to negative emotions such as anger and feelings of disappointment (Holt, 1995). In a similar vein, consumers report that they watch sport broadcasts because of the emotional rewards they receive from watching (Raney, 2006). When compared to other types of entertainment media genres (e.g., comedy, reality show, drama, animation, late night talk show) sport fans have reported more intensive emotional responses when viewing sport on television (Gantz, Wang, Paul, & Potter, 2006). The level of arousal or suspense is even greater in sport because competitive sporting events are a type of unscripted performance in which outcomes are uncertain (Deighton, 1992). Therefore, it appears evident that emotion is an essential psychological component associated with consuming spectator sport.

In the past few decades, however, sport consumer behavior research has tended to overlook the implication of emotional aspect in modeling sport consumer behavior. The large body of sport consumer behavior research has been expanded around the notion that people are rational

beings and make logical decisions. However, from fans' perspective, feelings and emotions guide their decisions and behaviors, not logical and analytical process. Cunningham (2011) contended that it is crucial for sport marketers to understand their fans' emotions and feelings that drive their behaviors. Therefore, understanding the role of emotion on fan behavior has great research potential and can expand our knowledge about sport consumers.

Methodology

In an effort to investigate the role of emotion on sport consumer behavior, three experimental studies were conducted in this research. Fictitious magazine articles (i.e., positive, negative, and neutral) about the university's athletic team were created to evoke either positive or negative feelings among participants. Study 1 (N = 280) examined the role of team affiliation on emotional response toward the article. The purpose of Study 1 was to compare the strength of emotional response as a function of group affiliation. Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses in the department of sport management from two large research universities in the United States. Controlling for team identification scores, group affiliation had a significant impact on triggering different emotional outcomes depending on the article valence. Study 2 (N = 145) was conducted to examine the effect of stimuli-induced emotion on predicting the team's future performance. Participants were asked to predict the team's upcoming season's performance after reading an article about their favorite team. Finally, Study 3 (N = 93) was conducted to explore various strategies that participants used to resist counter-attitudinal (i.e., negative) message. Using a thought listing procedure, four main strategies – feeling negative, making counterarguments, bolstering attitude, and derogating source, were identified (Tormala & Petty, 2004).

Results and Discussion

From a series of empirical studies, the findings showed that emotion plays a critical role in sport fans' cognition and decision making. First, personal relevance was found to be a significant predictor of various emotions (i.e., pleasure, arousal, dominance, pride, and shame; Study 1). In addition, the results from Study 2 and Study 3 showed that stimuli-induced emotions can function as a motivator of cognition and decision making. Emotions elicited from team-related stimuli triggered different projections about the team's future performance (Study 2), and facilitated greater resistance toward negative messages (Study 3). Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of studying emotion in sport consumer behavior research. Understanding various functions of emotion can help better understand the multifaceted and dynamic nature of fan-team relationship. In future research, it would be useful to apply neurological approaches (e.g., physiological measures, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging; fMRI, eye-trackers, etc.) to further explore the role of emotion on sport consumer behavior.

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