

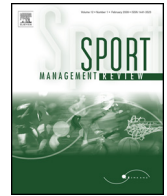


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An investigation of highly identified fans who bet against their favorite teams

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ABSTRACT

Using a mixed-method exploratory approach we describe and explain the seemingly non-normative behaviors of highly identified fans who Bet Against their Favorite Teams (BAFT). Axial coding of qualitative data from 190 survey respondents and two focus groups indicates the emergence of common themes allowing a typology to unfold that explains the motives for and against BAFTing. Results reveal that Gamblers BAFT for reasons un-related to fandom. Hedgers, on the other hand, BAFT precisely because they are fans; they offset a perceived impending emotional loss with a financial gain, a behavior we identify as Hedging Against Future Failure (HAFFing). This research expands the theoretical knowledge of indirect tactics of image management and introduces HAFFing as a transactional, proactive, and private coping mechanism utilized by highly identified fans to regulate their psychological health. Beyond the implications for researchers of self-image management, these results are applicable to global sport managers adapting to the rising prominence and societal acceptance of sport gambling.

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1. Introduction

Through the lens of social identity and self-categorization theory, we understand that individuals define themselves in part by the groups with which they identify (Hogg, 2003; Turner, 1982). Given that social identity (or the “collective self”) is a key part of one’s self-concept (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), it follows that alignment with social groups can be used as a mechanism to maintain or enhance one’s self-concept (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In the case of identification with sport teams, a fan is an individual with a psychological connection to a team (Funk & James, 2001). A fan’s psychological well-being is derived from processes such as the sense of belonging experienced when associating with others and the self-esteem gains garnered when a favored team wins (Wann, 2006). It is, therefore, logical for a fan to desire team wins and engage in normative fan behavior that helps associate the fan with others in the group, keeping in mind that normative group behaviors are not explicitly documented and vary across cultures (Hogg, 2003). Given these expectations, imagine our surprise when a passionate sports fan and alumnus of the University of Michigan recounted

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a time in which he bet that Michigan would lose against The Ohio State University in their annual football rivalry; in other words, he placed a financial wager that Ohio State would win. This action runs counter to North American-based conceptualizations of normative fan behavior, appears to advocate for a team loss, and, to many, is an inconceivable act of betrayal. Some colleagues shared our disbelief, suggesting that this “highly identified fan” must instead have been a “normal fan” prone to such folly, while other colleagues outside of North America seemed less bothered by the wager. The reality is that highly identified fans do bet against their favorite teams (BAFT) even though current academic models of highly identified fans do not seem to support or acknowledge that BAFTing could be possible, in any cultural context. This research aims to bridge the chasm between academic expectations and the realities of this peculiar fan behavior while also underscoring the potential impacts of BAFTing for sport organizations.

Professional sport teams’ financial success is bolstered by highly identified fans’ attendance and consumption behaviors (McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Given that direct revenue generation derives from a stable fan identity, Trail et al. (2012) argue that “the knowledge of team identification should be a cornerstone of customer-relationship management” (p. 352). From this perspective, Doyle, Lock, Filo, Funk, and McDonald (2016) call for more research on the myriad identity maintenance strategies of sports fans, especially in cases where that identity may be threatened. Research on BAFTing helps answer this call as we identify more complex mechanisms by which fans maintain their identity. Research on BAFTing may be even more prescient with experts predicting that the U.S. could legalize sports gambling within the next five years (Cohn, 2015). Despite the popularity of sport wagering within other countries and the need for managers to strategize around fans’ construction of their social identities, remarkably little is known about the ways in which highly identified fans use gambling to regulate their self-image.

From a scholarly perspective, the idea that a fan might wager against their favorite team has been mentioned in both the psychology (Massey, Simmons, & Armor, 2011) and economics literatures (Bosman & van Winden, 2002) in the context of decision making under uncertainty. In proposing future research, Massey et al. (2011) hypothesized BAFTing behavior might occur as a type of “strategic hedge against the emotional pain associated with a favorite team’s loss” (p. 280) but did not test the proposition. To explain the outcomes of lab experiments on the influence of emotions on behavior, Bosman and van Winden (2002) called the same behavior “emotional hedging” (p. 160). Thus, while it has been proposed that BAFTing could explain experimental results from emotional decision making, suggesting the behavior is possible is very different than studying it in practice. Our understanding of BAFTing remains at the incipient stage of development and we find this lack of deep research of the phenomenon to be a significant gap in the literature. This paper explores, describes, and explains the peculiar phenomenon of highly identified fans placing financial wagers that their favorite team will lose. In doing so we provide evidence to answer a series of important questions:

- Do highly identified fans really bet against their favorite teams?
- Where, how, and how often does this behavior occur?
- What are fans’ motivations for this BAFTing behavior?
- How does BAFTing align with theories of fan behavior and fan identity?

The paper begins by discussing the theories that explain normative fan behaviors. We then use surveys and focus groups in an exploratory approach to describe the characteristics of BAFTing in terms of where, how, and how often it occurs. Next, axial coding of qualitative data in alignment with gambling motives, social identity theory (SIT), and other known behavioral measures of group association indicates the emergence of common motivational themes that allow a typology of BAFTers and non-BAFTers to unfold. An unintended outcome of this exploratory research is the identification of a new behavioral measure of group association that adds to our theoretical understanding of indirect image management (Wann, 2006). The paper concludes by offering suggestions for practitioners and future research directions.

2. Existing understanding of fan identification and norms

Before trying to understand BAFTers’ motives, we must first examine why the prevalent view, particularly in North America, is that a highly identified fan would not BAFT. Fans are understood to internalize team success as personal success, basking in the reflective glory (BIRGing) of their teams’ triumphs (Cialdini et al., 1976), and to internalize team failures as personal failures (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Disposition theory suggests that the strongest reactions come from the most highly identified fans (cf. Sapolsky, 1980) who have a variety of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to loss in order to return to a state of positive psychological well-being. Reactive behaviors are expected to adhere to group norms and do not include self-criticism. Thus, we begin by examining some of the existing knowledge on prototypical behavior, reluctance to self-criticism, and known responses to losing. We follow with known motives for gambling.

2.1. Normative fan behaviors and prototypes

Two main benefits of self-categorization and its associated social identity processes are self-esteem benefits and reduction in social uncertainty (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1982). To reduce social uncertainty, highly identified individuals learn appropriate social behavior through the norms of their social groups. Further, individuals’ adherence to group attitudes, feelings, and behaviors can result in greater social standing within the group

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