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Off-Field Behavior of Athletes and Team Identification: Using Social Identity Theory and Balance Theory to Explain Fan Reactions

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In the current article, we extend the literature on fan identification and social identity theory by examining the effects of unscrupulous off-field behaviors of athletes. In doing so, we drew from both social identity theory and Heider's balance theory to hypothesize a significant interaction between fan identification level and leadership response on fans' subsequent levels of identification. An experimental study was performed and a 2 (high, low identification) × 2 (weak, strong leadership response) ANOVA was conducted with the pre to post difference score in team identification as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction effect ($F_{(2, 80)} = 23.71$, $p < .001$) which explained 23% of the variance in the difference between prepost test scores. The results provide evidence that unscrupulous acts by athletes off the field of play can impact levels of team identification, particularly for highly identified fans exposed to a weak leadership response. The results are discussed relative to appropriate theory. Practical implications and suggestions for future research are also forwarded.

Team identification has captured the attention of sport researchers for a number of years and relative to a variety of topics. Research regarding team identification has uncovered a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2000; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Research has shown fans with high levels

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of team identification are more likely to attend games, pay more for tickets, buy team sponsors' products, and purchase more team merchandise (Madrigal, 1995; Wakefield, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Wann and Branscombe (1993) reported that fans higher in identification had higher expectations for team performance while Madrigal (1995) found that fans higher in identification derived more satisfaction from positive game outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, fans high in identification are more likely to stay loyal to the team even when it is performing poorly while less identified fans tend to engage in self-distancing tactics (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Most of these studies, however, have dealt with fans' reactions to on-field occurrences, that is, the play of the team. How athletes' off-field behavior impacts fan identification is an under-studied area. At any given time of the year, allegations of unscrupulous off-field offenses by athletes are quite common. A recent sampling includes professional baseball players accused of and admitting to steroid use (Fainaru-Wada & Williams, 2003; Fox News, 2004); a professional football team with nine players arrested in nine months (USA Today, 2007); and college football players accepting money from boosters (Dodd, 2006). These are just a few examples which demonstrate that athletes are not immune from scandalous acts. Thus, the question is posed, does this unscrupulous behavior impact fans' identification with the team?

In the current article, we extend the literature on fan identification and social identity theory by examining the effects of unscrupulous off-field behaviors of athletes. In doing so, we draw from both social identity theory and Heider's balance theory to propose a specific hypothesis. We then test this hypothesis via an experimental manipulation. Below we present the theoretical background supporting the study's hypothesis.

Conceptual Background and Hypothesis

Social Identity and Team Identification

Team identification stems from social identity theory. Social identity theory suggests that individuals have both a personal identity and a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While the personal identity consists of distinctive attributes, such as abilities and interests, social identity consists of significant group categories that can be based on demographic classifications (e.g., sex, race) or organizational membership (e.g., religious, educational, social institutions; Turner, 1982). When a person identifies with an organization, he or she observes, "a oneness with or belongingness to the organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Individuals are more likely to become identified with an organization (or team) when it represents the attributes they assign to their own self-concepts.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals are driven by a need for high self-esteem and this self-esteem is established, in part, by being members of social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People in groups make social comparisons in an effort to enhance their self-esteem; they have favorable attitudes toward their own group (in-group) and categorize other groups (outgroups) as inferior (Hogg &

Journal of Sport Management, 2009, 23, 142-155

Abrams, 1999). Certainly this is true of sports fans. Highly identified fans are more likely to show favoritism toward other fans of their team and criticize fans of opposing teams (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Wann & Grieve, 2005). They see "their" team as an extension of themselves (Wann, Melnkick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

When presented with any sort of negative information regarding the group, highly identified group members react differently than those with lower levels of identification (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Highly identified members typically reaffirm their group membership, while those with lower levels of identification tend to distance themselves (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). Such behaviors are apparent in sport fans. Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that highly identified fans are less likely to distance themselves from the team when the team lost than those who were less identified. Further, highly identified fans exhibit biased attribution processing favoring their team (Wann & Dolan, 1994). That is, facing a win, highly identified fans ascribe the victory to internal factors such as the skill of the team, or the coaching, and sometimes even fan support. However, upon a loss, rather than conceding another team's superiority, they blame the loss on more external factors such as fate or poor refereeing. Thus, highly identified sports fans seem to undergo some sort of biased attributional processes when dealing with a loss.

Team Identification and the Effects of Off-field Behavior: In Group Bias and the Black Sheep Effect

However, losing on the field of play is a natural aspect of sport. One team must win, and one must lose. While not pleasant, sport fans must accept the fact that sometimes their teams will lose. An athlete engaging in an unscrupulous act is entirely different. These acts are not natural consequences of competition. Thus, when a member of a team (i.e., an in-group member) engages in some sort of immoral behavior, the fan must reconcile the positive feelings about the team with the poor behavior of the athlete. This reconciliation may be different than when facing a team loss. Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, and Grantz (2002) suggested that fans could react to these unscrupulous athletes in one of two ways, either by exhibiting an in-group bias effect, or by exhibiting the "black sheep" effect.

An in-group bias effect refers to the fact that group members often maintain allegiance to the group, even when provided information that a group member has failed (Dietz-Uhler, 1999). The failure of a group member is a threat to the group's identity, however, groups have numerous coping methods for reconciling the action of the player with their views of the group. For example, fans might question or degrade the reliability of the unflattering information (e.g., the media is "picking on" our team, the witnesses are not believable; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Deitz-Uhler, 1999). They may accredit the "failure" to situational causes (e.g., the athlete was in the wrong place at the wrong time) or engage in biased attributions of the situation to put the group into a more positive light (e.g., the athlete did not mean to do it, the athlete was merely protecting himself/herself; Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1998; Wann & Dolan, 1994). The salient feature of these coping mechanisms is sustained support for the group member committing the unscrupulous act.

On the other hand, the "black sheep" effect occurs when group members derogate the guilty in-group member (athlete), and label him/her as "different" than the rest of the group (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). This allows the group members to maintain positive feelings about the group even in the wake of an unscrupulous action of a group member because they no longer consider the black sheep as representative of their group. Rather than supporting the guilty in-group member, fans distance themselves from that particular member.

Dietz-Uhler et al. (2002) tested fans' reactions to law breaking *athletes* who were either a part of fans' favorite teams, or a part of another team. Instead of discovering a "black sheep" effect, they found an in-group bias effect in that participants evaluated the law-breaking athlete from their favorite team more highly than the athlete from a rival team, even when the rival athlete had not engaged in criminal behavior. However, the study did not measure team identification, thus the effects of identification on these reactions could not be ascertained. As the authors noted (2002, p. 168), "the possibility exists that these subjects were not highly identified with their favorite football team." Certainly one can have a favorite team, yet not be highly identified. Further, their study focused on participants' attitudes toward the law-breaking *athlete*, while the current study focuses on attitudes toward the *team* when an athlete on the team engages in an unscrupulous act.

When examining feelings about the *team* in the wake of an unscrupulous act by a player, either the in-group bias response, or the "black sheep" effect should allow the fan to maintain their allegiance to the team. Either of these two broad mechanisms can allow fans to feel good about their team when faced with the negative information regarding a particular player. Whether the fan throws greater support behind the player (in-group bias), or creates distance from the player through derogation tactics ("black sheep" effect), such responses serve to allow for reconciliation between the unscrupulous act of a group member, and the positive feelings about the group. However, identification with the group plays a key role. Highly identified group members are much more likely to exhibit coping reactions when their group is threatened (Branscombe & Wann, 1994, Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993). Because highly identified fans see the team as a reflection of themselves, they will experience a greater need to reconcile the act through some sort of coping mechanism.

Leadership Response: The Effect of Balance Theory on Fans' Responses

In addition, the response of team leaders should impact fans' responses to an off-field incident. Balance theory purports that individuals strive to maintain a sense of balance in their lives (Heider, 1958). They attempt to reach "a harmonious state, one in which the entities comprising the situation and the feelings about them fit together without stress" (Heider, 1958, p. 180). An individual's need to reconcile feelings toward the immoral player behavior with his/her feelings toward the group as a whole leads to this imbalanced state, with positive feelings regarding the team, yet negative feelings regarding a team member. Therefore, something must be done to "balance" the situation. Left to their own devices, fans could engage in one of many balancing techniques (e.g., distancing oneself from the team, derogating the in-group member, exhibiting in-group bias) depending

Journal of Sport Management, 2009, 23, 142-155

upon their level of identification. However, different leadership responses to the unscrupulous act should present different reactions.

A firm and swift response from the head coach, athletic director, or owner (i.e., management) should allow for greater "balance" in the participant's mind. That is, if the participant feels that team leaders are also affronted by the incident, and a "punishment" that fits the incident is levied, he/she might feel better about the team as a whole because the unscrupulous player can be seen as an anomaly and somehow "different" from the rest of the team. This response, in fact, could activate the "black sheep" effect. Group members can still feel good about their team, because their team still espouses the values they hold dear—the coach makes it clear the action by the athlete is not representative of the group.

However, would fans' attitudes differ if team leaders knew about the impropriety and did nothing about it, or attempted to "protect" the unscrupulous athlete? If the team's response is such, there is no longer *a* black sheep to blame. With leadership failing to denounce the act, suddenly the whole team can be viewed in an undesirable light. Then, it becomes quite difficult for a person connected with the team to maintain a balance. Given this response, fans may feel that the team (group) itself no longer espouses the values that they hold dear, and the team is less of a reflection of their personal identities. Thus, he/she may begin to disidentify with the team.

Considering social identity theory and the balance theory in tandem, one would expect that an individual with stronger ties to an organization would have a greater need to obtain "balance" when something negative occurs within the organization. Indeed, Dietz-Uhler (1999) found that highly identified group members were more likely to engage in biased processing of negative group information to maintain a more positive social identity. Because the highly identified individual expresses a "oneness" with the organization, he/she especially will need something positive to counteract the negative situation. Highly identified fans should feel more compelled to seek out positive information to counteract the negative. Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (1998) noted that when presented with both negative and positive information about a group, highly identified members placed more emphasis on the positive information to maintain a favorable feeling about their connectedness to a group. Thus, highly identified fans should be more influenced by leadership's response to a negative situation than those less identified—that is, they, especially, will look for *something* positive to maintain the balance of being connected to the group which they love when faced with unscrupulous actions of a group member (i.e., player). If these highly identified fans perceive that team leaders do not condone the action, these fans may have negative feelings about the *individual athlete*, but their feelings about the team should remain positive.

The above background literature leads to the hypothesis of this study.

H1: There will be a significant interaction between fan identification level and leadership response on fans' subsequent levels of identification. When highly identified fans are faced with information regarding an unscrupulous act by a team player, their team identification will change as a function of leadership's response to the situation.

Journal of Sport Management, 2009, 23, 142-155

Method

Procedures and Participants

We incorporated a 2 (high vs. low identification) × 2 (strong vs. weak leadership response) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the hypothesis. Participants' change in team identification scores (pre–post) served as the dependent variable.

First, participants were pretested on their initial levels of fan identification which was used to create high and low identified groups. Two weeks later, participants received one of two newspaper story manipulations creating four groups: high fan identification-strong leadership response (n = 23); high fan identification-weak leadership response (n = 20); low fan identification-strong leadership response (n = 20); and low fan identification-weak leadership response (n = 19).

Manipulation

Copies of a life-like newspaper article were designed for the study. The "article" was constructed to look exactly like one taken from the local newspaper's webpage. It had the newspaper's insignia, a current sportswriter's byline, and the "breaking news" headlines aspect found in the actual newspaper Web page.

The newspaper story described the university's star quarterback charged with serious off-field offenses, drunk and disorderly conduct and assault and battery. In the "strong leadership response" manipulation, the coach and athletic director responded to the charges quickly, expressed severe disappointment in the behavior of the athlete, indicated the behavior was not consistent with their expectations for team member behavior, and immediately suspended the player from the team. In the "weak leadership response" manipulation, the coach and athletic director were slow to respond to the charges, indicated that the pending offenses were a "team matter" and would be dealt with internally, and punishment, if given, would be administered after all the facts had been gathered.

Study participants were undergraduate students who were enrolled in humanities classes (N = 88) at a Midwestern university. Humanities classes were used to obtain more variability in team identification. The study was conducted during class time and participation was voluntary. Participants were given a brief introduction of the study by the experimenters, in which they were told that they were being used as part of a sport marketing study. All students were told to put a code name on their survey and were first pretested on the fan identification scale. The experimenters used the pretest scores to group subjects into high (M = 5.93) or low (M = 2.99) identification categories using a conceptual split. Because 4 was the midpoint on the scale, those below a 4.00 were considered "low" while those 5.00 or above were considered "high." This resulted in the loss of six original subjects. Results of an independent sample t test indicated that the group means were significantly different ($t_{(1, 81)} = 1.76$, $p < .001$) for the high and low groups. Using the code names, participants were randomly assigned to the strong/weak manipulations, ensuring near equal numbers of the manipulations between the high/low participants.

Three weeks later, the experimenters handed out the materials (the one-page newspaper article and the subsequent page with manipulation check and posttest

measure) using the code names. Participants were told that they were being tested that day due to the breaking news that was contained in the newspaper article. Participants had two minutes read the article. They then completed the post test team identification measure and, after that, the manipulation check measure. After all participants had completed the materials, the class was debriefed and told that the newspaper story was made up and the content was not true.

Measures

The mean of the items represented the final score for each measure. Reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for each measure and are reported below.

Fan identification was tested using Trail and James' (2001) 3-item Team Identification Index (TII) which utilizes a 7-point Likert scale. An example item is: "I consider myself a big fan of the _____"(university team mascot name). Individual items were totaled and divided by the number of items to obtain a mean score. The reliability estimate was high ($\alpha = .87$).

Leadership response was measured to ensure that the manipulation was successful. Three items made up the scale and were preceded by the phrase, "the athletic department's response to this situation was . . ." and anchored by 7-point semantic differential scales. The endpoints were "*weak-strong,*" "*lenient-strict*" and "*moderate-firm.*" Individual items were totaled and divided by the number of items to obtain a mean score. The reliability estimate for the measure was high ($\alpha = .91$)

Analyses

A 2 (high vs. low identification) $\times$ 2 (strong vs. weak leadership response) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis. Participant's change in identification scores on the team identification measure (pre–post) served as the dependent variable.

Results

Manipulation Check

To ensure that the manipulation was successful, an independent sample *t* test was performed. The means of the two conditions within the manipulation (i.e., strong versus weak leadership response) were significantly different, $t_{(1,81)} = 7.38$, $p < .001$. The mean for the "weak leadership response" condition was 1.7 ($SD = .81$) while the mean for the "strong leadership response" condition was 5.3 ($SD = 1.4$). Thus, the manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesis, a difference score was calculated by taking a subject's pretest mean score and subtracting it from the subject's posttest mean score on the team identification scale. Then a 2 (high, low identification) $\times$ 2 (weak, strong

leadership response) ANOVA was conducted with the difference score as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction effect ($F_{(2, 80)} = 23.71$, $p < .001$) which explained 23% of the variance in the difference between prepost test scores. As Figure 1 and Table 1 indicate, fans low in team identification showed very little difference in their pre and post test scores as a result of the manipulation regardless of the managerial response. However, in the high identification group, those exposed to the weak leadership response showed a significant decrease in their identification scores (mean difference score = –.76) while scores for those exposed to the strong leadership response remained relatively stable (mean difference score = .07). Further, a one sample t test against zero indicated that the decrease in identification scores for this group was significant ($t = 9.89$, $p < .001$) while the changes in the other groups were not significantly different from zero.

Discussion

The results of this study provide evidence that unscrupulous acts by athletes off the field of play can impact levels of team identification. This was particularly true for highly identified fans exposed to the "weak leadership response." The ANOVA revealed that those fans, compared with the others, experienced a decrease in their fan identification scores. This supports the notion that social identity theory can work in tandem with the balance theory. People who are highly identified fans have a greater need to achieve balance when presented with an in-group member (athlete) who commits an unscrupulous act. When team leaders actually support that athlete, it appears that the fan has nothing "positive" to attach him or herself to–thus, their fan identification scores drop. However, when team leaders provided a strong response, one that clearly denoted the athlete's actions were out of line with team expectations for behavior, it provided something positive for the highly identified fan to attach to in the wake of outsiders' negative commentary regarding the situation. Thus, the "threat" to the team's social status was mitigated. Most likely this was the result of a "black sheep" effect. Highly identified subjects in the "strong leadership response group" could more easily consider the athlete on their team as an anomaly, acting inconsistently with the team (group) values with which the fan feels a connection. This is, in fact, consistent with others' work. Branscombe et al. (1993) showed that the most highly identified group members responded most negatively to in-group members who failed to live up to the positive group image. If the highest identifiers automatically have a tendency to engage in the black sheep coping mechanism, that mechanism could certainly be enhanced with the "strong leadership response."

Social groups structure a foundation for identity and the concepts of our personal identities intersect with our social group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, it is not surprising that the behavior of in-group members was germane to subjects' team identity scores. Recent work in social psychology has elucidated the concept of "vicarious shame" (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). This work has shown that people can feel ashamed of a negative event, even if they are not personally responsible for it. Just as fans can experience vicarious achievement with a successful other even though they personally contributed nothing to the victory (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, &

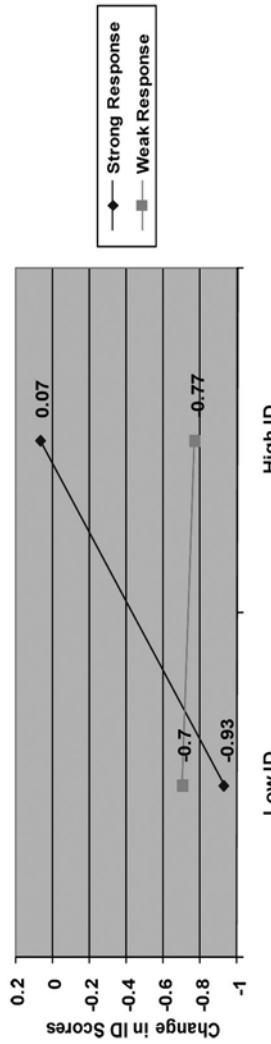

Figure 1 — Graph of interaction effect: pretest, posttest difference scores.

Journal of Sport Management, 2009, 23, 142-155

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations: Difference Scores

High-Low Id Group	Managerial Response Group	*M*	*SD*	*N*
Low id	weak	–.7016	.56641	19
	strong	–.9333	.70636	20
High id	weak	–.7668	.34331	20
	strong	.0729	.28321	23

Dependent variable: Difference scores

Sloan, 1976), it seems that people are capable of experiencing shame even if they had nothing to do with the wrongdoing (Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005). However, this vicarious shame is predicated on identification with the group. As Lickel et al. (2005, p. 148) stated:

> Because perceptions of a shared social identity are a source of self-identification and esteem, people are invested in maintaining a positive reputation of their social identities and are loath to have negative stereotypes about their groups confirmed.

When faced with a negative action by an ingroup member, Lickel et al. (2005) found that people felt vicarious shame when they had a strong shared social identity with the wrongdoer, and thus felt that this negative event would somehow reflect badly on them personally. In addition, they found that this sense of shame led people to distance themselves from the wrongdoer and the event.

Though we did not directly measure shame, it is plausible that because of highly identified fans' strong connections with the team, they felt vicarious shame for the athlete's wrongdoing. Indeed, a quick perusal of recent sport incidents in which players have engaged in unscrupulous acts hint at these feelings. For example, after the eighth athlete from the Cincinnati Bengal was arrested in 2006, coach Marvin Lewis said, "It's an embarrassment to our organization, to our city, and to our fans" (Maske & Carpenter, 2006). A blogger was even more insistent. He wrote:

> I am utterly ashamed and appalled to be a fan of the Cincinnati Bengals. I have spent the last 17 years of my life as a fan of the Bengals, not much by most people's standards, but quite a lot considering I'm only 22 years old. . . . Until I see changes in the drafting and team-building policies of the Cincinnati Bengals franchise, I will no longer be a fan. I can tolerate losing with dignity, and certainly winning with class, but I cannot handle winning with criminals. Until further notice, I will no longer be wearing my orange and black. (Brown, 2006)

An NBA enthusiast had this to say following the ugly brawl that occurred between fans and players in the Detroit Pistons-Indiana Pacers game:

> Being a sports fan carries with it the potential for both immense joy and disappointment. There's the thrill of watching the players you emulate succeed against bitter rivals. There's the dejection that accompanies painful losses.

> And this week I have just discovered a third emotion—shame. Not shame at outcomes, but shame at the way the team I support and the fans I identify with act on the field. (Mata-Fink, 2004)

Thus, it does appear that some fans are capable of feeling vicarious shame when a team member is caught committing an immoral act.

Implications, Future Directions, and Limitations

The results of this study suggest that unscrupulous acts by athletes can affect highly identified fans' level of identification with the team. Further, the response by team leaders appears to be vital in mitigating those effects. The implication is clear. Team leaders (e.g., coaches, athletic directors, management) must carefully plan their response to unscrupulous off-field acts. When an athlete has clearly engaged in a devious act, team leaders should denounce the act as inconsistent with the team's expectations for behavior as this appears to lessen the negative impact of the act. Failure to respond in such a manner could serve to dispirit the general public as well as their core base of highly identified fans.

Future research should attempt to measure the *longitudinal* effects of such dubious acts. A limitation of this study is that posttest measures of fan identification were collected immediately after subjects read the mock newspaper article. It is plausible that fans experience an immediate reaction that subsides after time. This is a particularly important point given the fact that most studies on identification show it to be a relatively stable trait, especially for those who are highly identified (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

The experimental nature of the study prohibited such longitudinal measurement as subjects had to be deceived into thinking the mock newspaper article was genuine, then debriefed regarding the true nature of the study upon completion of the post test measure. Had subjects been given another post test measure some time later, they would have known the story regarding the athlete was not true.

Similarly, future studies should assess the impact of a series of off-field incidents by athletes on the same team. For example, perhaps the Bengal's fan quoted above did not feel such shame after the first incident, but reached that point after a certain number of incidents. It may be easier to explain away one dubious act, but much more difficult to feel a sense of connection with the team when such acts occur frequently. Further, future studies should attempt to measure vicarious shame to concretely determine whether fans feel such emotions in the aftermath of such events.

Future studies should also assess reactions of fans of different teams. Some teams have historically embraced and espoused a rogue image (e.g., Miami Hurricanes, Oakland Raiders). Highly identified fans of these types of teams may connect to the team *because* of such qualities. If so, they would be much less likely to distance themselves from the team (or the athlete) in the wake of scandalous behavior.

In addition, future studies should incorporate fans' point of attachment. Recent research has shown that the object of a fan's identification can stem from numerous aspects: the team itself, particular players, the coach, the organization, and even the community in which the organization plays (Kwon, Trail, &

Anderson, 2005; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003). Results may differ if the fan's point of attachment is high for the particular player that causes the trouble and relatively low, in comparison, to the team itself. If a fan's attachment is solely to a player, it stands to reason that he/she will not view the organization or its leaders as part of the "in-group." Subsequently, fans may react differently relative to the object of their attachment.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that sport fans are not immune to the unscrupulous off-field acts of athletes. In fact, such acts have a negative impact on team identification levels, particularly when the response by team leaders was perceived to be weak and lenient. This is especially true for those with the highest levels of team identification. Further, the results suggest that aspects of social identity theory and the balance theory are influential in predicting and explaining fan response to such events.

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