

# Fan identification, Schadenfreude toward hated rivals, and the mediating effects of Importance of Winning Index (IWIN)

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to explore potential negative outcomes of high fan identification as well as to identify the causal mechanism or mediator by which high identification may result in such negative responses.

Design/methodology/approach

– A scale development process was used to develop a new mediating construct for the fan identification literature, the Importance of Winning Index (IWIN). Structural equations modeling was used to analyze the surveys.

Findings

– The IWIN construct represents a new and distinct construct from fan identification. Additionally, IWIN mediates the relationship between fan identification and negative outcome behaviors, thus serving as an explanatory mechanism of when fan identification can produce negative behaviors (in this study *Schadenfreude*, or wishing ill/harm on rivals).

Research limitations/implications

– A student sample and limitation to one context of negative outcomes leaves opportunities for future research to assess the generalizability of these results across various populations and contexts.

Practical implications

– *Schadenfreude* is manifested toward a variety of targets associated with a rival team, including the team's sponsors. Companies should be cautious when selecting what teams they sponsor so that they do not alienate potential consumers who are fans of rival teams. Moreover, the study raises important ethical and social responsibility issues with broader implications suggesting

that sports organizations need to promote strong identification among their fans in a responsible manner.

#### Originality/value

– This article is one of few studies that addresses the adverse effects of a highly identified fan/customer base and extends the identification literature by introducing a new variable (IWIN) that mediates the relationship between identification and negative outcomes.

#### Keywords:

Consumer behaviour, Fan identification, Mediation, Schadenfreude, Sponsorship, Sports marketing

***We cheer when our teams cheat. That's because all we care about is winning. And if that makes us immoral, so what? (Beinart, 2007).***

#### Introduction

Marketers covet brand loyalty much as sports teams seek the Super Bowl, the World Series, or the Stanley Cup. Brand loyalty is the ultimate prize for marketers as one of the only true ways to sustain competitive advantage in virtually every industry (Barlow, 2000). Companies with loyal customer bases report a 50 percent increase in revenues (Jakobson, 2009); Lexus estimates that a loyal customer is worth \$600,000 over a lifetime (Marketing, 2006). Reicheld and Sasser (1990) found that retaining an additional 5 percent of consumers might increase profits up to 100 percent. Loyal consumers are also likely to come back more often and to spend more money, and to be less price sensitive, which also contributes to profitability (Reichheld, 1996). Fan identification, like brand loyalty, has most often been considered a powerful and positive force for sports teams. Within the context of sports, consumers can become especially loyal to their favorite teams, often becoming fanatics (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Hunt et al., 1999; Kelley and Tian, 2004; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). When it comes to the intense love for sports, the practical implications are staggering:

- Sporting events are among the most highly rated television programs shown each year. In all programs broadcast by 2000, sports programs accounted for five of the top ten rated telecasts in the USA (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). The 2009 Super Bowl had a rating that was nearly three times higher than the average rating of the top rated network show during the 2008-2009 season (Zap2It, 2009).
- Television commercials during the 2009 Super Bowl cost an average of \$3 million US dollars for 30 seconds (Calkins and Rucker, 2009); the most expensive prime-time show during the 2008-2009 season was also sports related (Sunday Night Football on NBC) generating close to \$450,000 for 30 seconds of ad time while the top non- sports show (Grey's Anatomy on ABC) was commanding just over \$300,000 for a 30-second spot (Steinberg, 2008).

Corporations are willing to incur considerable expenses to tap into loyal fan bases; for example, Citi agreed to a \$400 million deal for naming rights to the stadium of the New York Mets (Thomaselli, 2006) while in 2003 Nextel began its ten-year sponsorship of NASCAR series reportedly costing a total of about \$700 million, including

rights fees and advertising buys (Rovell, 2003). However, insight from academic research and the popular press alike has suggested that fan identification sometimes leads to undesirable, and even deadly, behaviors and outcomes among fans (Hunt et al., 1999; Wakefield and Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2003). The prevalence of some of these behaviors among sport fans indicates that perhaps in the mind of many fans, such behavior may not even be inappropriate or unacceptable; instead it is seen as a normal part of what “real fans” do to help their favorite teams or athletes be victorious. Take for instance the following rather disturbing findings about sports fans from “fan surveys” conducted by a popular sports publication: 63 percent yelled obscenities (Keating, 2009); 55 percent heckled a referee or umpire (Keating, 2009); 30 percent cheered an opposing player's injury (Keating, 2009); 24 percent threatened injury to someone (Keating, 2009); 8 percent used a racial slur against an opposing player or fan (Keating, 2009).

In a review of the consumer psychology of sport, Madrigal and Dalakas (2008) suggest that supporting a sports team can take place through both socially acceptable behaviors and negative inappropriate ones and call for more research on the “dark side” of strong fan identification. Our research focuses on this issue and addresses potentially negative behaviors of highly identified fans. More specifically, we attempt to understand whether high fan identification always has the possibility of resulting in undesirable outcomes among fans, or whether there is an explanation for how fan identification leads to detrimental outcomes for fans, teams, and sponsors. While critics could go as far as blaming sports marketers for poor behavior by fans, our position is not that sports marketers should discourage fans from becoming highly identified with their team. Instead, we examine how marketers of sports teams can better understand the process by which fan identification leads to bad behavior and undesirable characteristics, and, therefore, have a better idea of how to encourage fan identification for positive outcomes while avoiding the sometimes dire consequences reported in the literature. This study seeks to understand how and when fan identification develops into potentially harmful behavior (in our case the act of taking pleasure from a rival's misfortune) through the development of a new mediating construct we label the Importance of Winning Index (IWIN).

## Background

Social identity theory holds that people define themselves in part by their memberships and affiliations to various social groups (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). Identification with a sports team, thus involves defining one's identity in terms of one's attachment to a sports team turning the sports team into an integral part of one's self identity (Belk, 1988; Kelley and Tian, 2004; Madrigal, 2000).

Sports marketers credit highly-identified passionate fans for keeping the sports industry alive and prosperous (King, 2002). Strong identification with a sports team influences several aspects of fans' behavior, especially regarding the amount of time, money, and effort that a fan invests in a team like game attendance (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998) and the amount one spends on licensed merchandise (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). Research on the effect of fan identification on fans' perceptions of a favorite team's corporate sponsors has also consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between fan identification and response to team sponsors. For example, highly identified fans are more aware of a team's sponsors

(Dalakas and Levin, 2005; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003), have more favorable attitudes toward the team's sponsors (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000, 2001), are more likely to purchase the sponsor's products (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000, 2001), and are more likely to be satisfied with the sponsors (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003).

While fan identification is traditionally looked on as a desirable characteristic in one's fan base, recent studies suggest that highly identified fans may often become "dysfunctional" and exhibit behaviors that are inappropriate, illegal, and sometimes lethal (Hunt et al., 1999; Wakefield and Wann, 2006). Many of those behaviors entail some form of aggression or willingness to engage in aggressive behavior (see Wann and Wilson (2001) for a review of the spectator aggression literature). High identification is associated with higher fan aggression (Wann, 1993); highly identified fans have reported a willingness to consider anonymous act of hostile aggression (Wann et al., 2003) or to commit violent acts after their team loses (Wann et al., 2005) and have been shown to actually respond in a violent fashion while participating in sporting events for their favorite teams (Wann et al., 1999). Dimmock and Grove (2005) also reported that highly identified fans showed less control over aggressive behavior, sometimes with fatal results. In Italian football, 18 people have been killed by fan mobs since 1963 (The Economist, 2007). Some reports even show that incidences of cardiac arrests rise among obsessed fans when a national team is losing in an important tournament (Winslow, 2009).

Many teams have gained notoriety for fan bases who behave badly. Philadelphia Eagles' fans have often thrown food and beer on rival team fans visiting the stadium in the past and are infamous for booing and throwing snow balls even at Santa Claus (MacNow and Gargano, 2003). Some teams have found it necessary to take action against more rabid fans. The Cincinnati Bengals tried briefly a "jerk hotline" to report unruly fans in 2006 while the Buffalo Bills franchise began publishing names of those arrested at Bills' games in the local paper in the hopes of shaming fans into better (or at least sober) behavior (Yost, 2008). College campuses too have reported increased incidents of student fan rioting at sporting events on campus, whereby students set fire and destroy property either in over-celebrating on their own campus or destroy property on rival campuses (O'Toole, 2002). The effect of these fans may hurt the bottom line of both sports teams and the advertisers that support them. One survey showed that a majority of fans felt that boxing, hockey, wrestling and extreme sports were overly violent and 57 percent said that violent sporting events could hurt the image of sponsoring companies as well (Tenser, 2005).

Besides behavior exhibiting aggressiveness, high fan identification has been associated with other questionable behaviors as well. For example, Wann and his colleagues found that team identification influenced fans' willingness to consider illegally assisting their team. Their findings showed that while it was only a small minority of student fans that admitted they would be willing to commit anti-social acts of cheating to help their favorite team if their anonymity was guaranteed, team identification was positively correlated to reports of willingness to engage in such behavior (Wann et al., 2001).

With self-concept tied so closely into fan identification, it is important to explore individual differences regarding how much the importance an individual places on his or her team winning embodies the connection of an individual to a sports franchise.

Research has established that fans use team victories as ways to enhance their own self-image and self-esteem by basking in the reflective glory (BIRG) of the team (Cialdini et al., 1976; see Dalakas et al., 2004 for a review). Highly identified fans are more likely to BIRG on present and past victories (Wann and Branscombe, 1990) and more likely to expect team success in the future (Dietz- Uhler and Murrell, 1999; Wann and Dolan, 1994a; Wann and Schrader, 2000). We build upon this body of work by specifically introducing a construct that assesses the extent to which a fan desires a team win over all else where his/her team is concerned. The construct is called IWIN. The very nature of sports involves competition and, thus, winners and losers. It is logical to therefore assume that the desire for winning is reinforced every time a favorite team plays, and is strengthened by higher team identification.

The desire for specific outcomes of sporting events depends largely on the fans' feelings toward the competing teams. The disposition theory of sport spectatorship (Zillmann et al., 1989) suggests that fans experience enjoyment when a favorite team wins but also when a disliked competitor loses. Such tendencies are consistent with the notion of *Schadenfreude*, a German word that describes the pleasure that one party experiences at the misfortunes of another (i.e., losses). *Schadenfreude* is especially likely to exist when there is some form of antagonistic relationship in place (Heider, 1958; Leach et al., 2003); the competitive nature of sports and long rivalries between sports teams create a very conducive context for fan identification to breed animosity toward other sports teams. For example, highly identified fans favorably evaluate fellow fans of the same team and unfavorably evaluate fans of an opposing team (Wann and Dolan, 1994b). Therefore, it is not surprising that *Schadenfreude* emerges, ranging from very mild tendencies (e.g., experiencing pleasure when a rival loses) to more serious ones (e.g., celebrating serious injuries of opposing players).

### Hypotheses

Based on the background literature presented, we formulate specific hypotheses. Our first goal of this study is to test whether Fan Identification and IWIN represent two distinct constructs. Therefore, our first hypothesis is as follows:

*H1. Fan identification is a statistically distinct construct from IWIN.*

The key research question of this study is to discover whether all highly identified fans have the tendency to demonstrate negative outcome behaviors such as *Schadenfreude* or whether there is some causal mechanism that might explain why some identified fans exhibit negative behaviors towards other teams while others do not go to these lengths. A mediating variable is one that explains the psychological mechanism working between an antecedent and dependent variable (Cheung, 2007). We propose that an individual's IWIN may be the mechanism by which some individuals turn to negative or even violent behavior as a result of being identified fans. We suggest that those individuals who feel the need to win at all costs may possess more animosity toward rival teams and thus may be more likely to feel joy at (or even take measures to cause) a rival team's misfortune. Thus:

*H2. There is a positive relationship between fan identification and Schadenfreude.*

*H3. IWIN will mediate the relationship between fan identification and Schadenfreude.*

## Methodology

### **Sample**

Given the introduction of a new measure, a pilot study was conducted using survey methodology to test the hypotheses. The sample consisted of college students from the Midwest region of the USA (n=121). All participants were volunteers who were enrolled in undergraduate sports business courses; none received compensation or extra credit for their participation. We specifically focused on sports-related courses given the emphasis of the study was on sports fans. Using a student sample was appropriate given that research has found many people in this age group to be active followers of sports; therefore, they are a representative sample of sports fans and a meaningful sample to use when the context of the research is sport-related (Dalakas and Kropp, 2002; Lardinoit and Quester, 2001). Nonetheless, use of a student sample may be limiting in some respects and we discuss this further in the limitations section.

The average age of the sample was 23 years old and 58.8 percent of the sample was male. Respondents were asked to rate how much of a sports fan they considered themselves to be in general (where 1=not a fan at all and 7=very much a fan). The average response was 5.59, indicating most of the sample considered themselves fairly avid sports fans. Participants were asked to write down their favorite sports team and to consider that team with regard to the questions for fan identification and IWIN. Participants stated they had been fans of their team for an average of over ten years (standard deviation of 1.2 years). They were also asked to write down the name of the one team they hated the most and answer the questions pertaining to Schadenfreude with that team in mind. Participants indicated they had hated that team for an average of about seven years (standard deviation of 1.2 years). Several teams from different sports (e.g., football, basketball, baseball, and soccer) and levels (e.g., college or professional) were named as most loved and hated teams by the participants, thus a wide variety of teams and sports were represented in our sample.

### **Measures**

The scales to represent IWIN and Schadenfreude were developed following the procedures of Gerbing and Anderson (1988). After the definition of the constructs were established, informal interviews with sports fans conducted, and past research on fan identification and Schadenfreude explored, items were written that were thought to represent each construct. After data collection, these items were then loaded into a confirmatory factor analysis. The initial scale for IWIN was written with five items; however one reverse-coded item did not load onto the construct and was dropped from the final analysis, leaving the four items listed in Table I. The final scale for Schadenfreude included the four items given in Table I. Four items from the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann and Branscombe, 1993) were used to assess fan identification and can be viewed in Table I.

## Results

### **Measurement model**

Structural equations modeling with AMOS 6 was used to analyze the data. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to insure that the scale items demonstrated validity and reliability through proper loading on their respective

constructs (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit ( $\chi^2=86.85$ ,  $df=50$   $p<0.001$ ,  $CFI=0.956$ ,  $TLI=0.942$ ,  $IFI=0.957$ ,  $RMSEA=0.078$ ). All items' construct reliability and average variance extracted were at acceptable levels and can be viewed in Table I.

Discriminant validity, or evidence of each construct's distinctiveness from other constructs in the study, was tested using the method of Fornell and Larcker (1981). With this method, each construct's average variance extracted is compared to the constructs' squared correlation. Where average variance extracted is greater than the squared correlation, the constructs demonstrate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This finding is of particular relevance for the fan identification and IWIN constructs, and supports H1 of the study. Results suggest that these two scales do represent two distinct constructs.

### ***Structural model***

With the validity of the measurement model assured, the structural model was validated. The structural model also demonstrated good fit ( $\chi^2=86.9$ ,  $df=50$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $CFI=0.956$ ,  $TLI=0.942$ ,  $IFI=0.957$ ,  $RMSEA=0.078$ ). Thus, it was appropriate to examine the specific paths of interest in our model for the predicted mediation effect.

With H1 establishing that fan identification and IWIN were distinct constructs it was appropriate to assess H2 and H3. H2 predicted that fan identification was positively related to Schadenfreude. Results of path analysis support this hypothesis ( $\gamma=0.281$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). H3 predicted that the IWIN construct mediates the positive relationship between fan identification and Schadenfreude. A variable is a mediator when it accounts for or explains the relationship between an independent and dependent variable. To test the mediation effect of our IWIN construct, we use the method put forth by Baron and Kenny (1986). In this test a true mediation effect exists if three criteria are met. First, there must be a relationship between the independent variable and the mediator variable. Indeed, our structural path shows a significant path from Fan Identification to the IWIN variable ( $\gamma=0.487$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Second, there must also be a significant relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable. Our results do show a significant positive relationship between IWIN and Schadenfreude ( $\gamma=0.363$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Finally, Baron and Kenny's (1986) test stipulates for true mediation that a previously significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable will no longer be significant once the relationship through the mediator is introduced. Indeed, as H2 suggests, before the introduction of the IWIN mediation path fan identification is positively related to Schadenfreude ( $\gamma=0.281$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). However, when the mediation path is introduced between fan identification, the IWIN construct and Schadenfreude, the relationship between fan identification and Schadenfreude becomes insignificant ( $\gamma=0.135$ ,  $p=0.206$ ). This indicates a complete mediation effect through which the relationship between fan identification and Schadenfreude can be explained entirely by the presence of the IWIN construct. The mediation model is presented in Figure 1.

### **Discussion**

This research intended to explore the dark side of fan identification and to identify when fan identification may turn into negative or harmful behaviors. This study provides significant contributions, both methodological and practical. From a methodological standpoint, we introduce a new construct and scale in the literature,

the IWIN. This construct has been shown to be conceptually and statistically distinct from fan identification. In this research, we have explored the possibility of this new construct as a mediator variable in the link between fan identification and negative outcomes of avid sports fans. Specifically, we discovered that the importance of winning construct mediated the relationship between fan identification and an individual's feelings of joy at a rival team's misfortunes, or Schadenfreude. Future research might explore the extent to which IWIN may explain other negative outcomes found in past research on fan identification.

The fact that consumers may hate a brand and feel joy when bad things happen to that brand is not uncommon and can be witnessed in a variety of consumption contexts. The plethora of web sites dedicated to hating and derogating brands (e.g., Walmart Sucks ([www.walmartsucks.org](http://www.walmartsucks.org)) against Wal-Mart, United ([www.untied.com](http://www.untied.com)) against United Airlines, Farmers Insurance is Rated Worst ([www.farmersinsurancegroupssucks.com](http://www.farmersinsurancegroupssucks.com)) against Farmers Insurance Group to name just a few) confirms this tendency. However, the common factor in all these cases is the fact that consumers are very disgruntled with the company due to a very dissatisfying experience they had with it. In the context of sports, fans feel hatred toward sports teams and wish for bad things to happen to others associated with that team is not because these teams failed to provide high-quality service but because the fans are highly identified with their own favorite team and place high importance on winning. This finding is very interesting and confirms that sports, one of the biggest industries in North America, can be unique in certain respects when compared to other service industries or consumption contexts.

#### Managerial implications and applications

The findings have also practical implications in a variety of areas. One aspect of the findings, the fact that Schadenfreude is manifested toward a variety of targets associated with a rival team, including the team's sponsors, is particularly interesting and relevant for managers. Companies engage in sponsorships in order to build their brand image and increase brand loyalty (Cornwell et al., 2005; Pracejus, 2004). However, recent research has suggested that highly-identified fans may develop negative attitudes toward sponsors of teams they dislike (Dalakas and Levin, 2005). Our findings confirm this tendency suggesting that companies should be cautious when selecting what teams they sponsor so that they do not alienate potential consumers who are fans of rival teams, or encourage retaliatory behavior from rival fans.

Finally, this study raises important ethical and social responsibility issues with broader implications. There is no doubt that sports organizations and media broadcasting sports can capitalize on and profit from fan's hatred toward other teams. Usually, hated opponents generate higher attendance for the teams and higher ratings for the media while victories against such opponents have the potential for sales of licensed merchandise that celebrates such victories (Dalakas et al., 2004). Media that cover sports often capitalize on fans' hatred for rival teams by drawing attention to bad blood between teams before an upcoming game through showing repeated highlights of bad behavior occurring in the previous competition and through online polls for fans to comment. One has to wonder how much these practices facilitate and even encourage fan animosity and, consequently, Schadenfreude and other negative behaviors. Along those lines, sports organizations need to promote strong identification among their fans in a



responsible manner. Promotions or activities intended to mock opponents are not uncommon and are usually rationalized as being fun. For example, in college football, mascots often are seen beating a toy version of the opponent's mascot. Nonetheless, based on our findings that fan identification is associated with negative behaviors against opponents, any team-sponsored activities that directly or indirectly attack opponents only reinforce the potential for negative behaviors among the team's highly allegiant fans. Team spirit and passion can be and should be exhibited through exciting but socially responsible support and teams with such fans should be recognized and rewarded by their leagues.

#### Limitations and future research

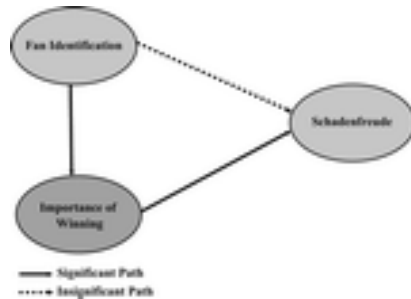
The study provided interesting insight with theoretical and methodological contributions. However, it is important to note the exploratory nature of the study and its limitations. Identifying these limitations should be useful in designing future research that can further validate these findings.

An important limitation to recognize is the use of a student sample. College students have been used widely for research in this area because they are typically avid sports fans. Given this was a pilot study introducing a new construct in this literature, such a sample may be appropriate but further validation of the IWIN construct and its effects is needed with non-student samples as well. One potential area of concern is that the young age of students may make them less likely to contemplate potential consequences of negative behavior and thus, more prone to have tendencies to engage in such behavior than an older sample of sports fans. Because of the focus of this research stream, it will be beneficial for future research to incorporate other samples of sports fans outside the traditional context of university students.

Possible ways to generate non-student samples of sports fans include collaboration with sports organizations that will facilitate data collection from fans during athletic events or through a team-maintained database. Additional opportunities may exist through social networks like Facebook, which have designated pages for sports teams with fans as their members. When using this type of sample, one needs to be cautious about the possibility of self-selection bias of the participating fans; nonetheless social networking sites can be useful in providing samples that are not only student-based.

Another limitation of the pilot study is that it examined the new variable of IWIN in the context of only one aspect of negative fan behavior. Future research studies should examine the new measure in other contexts of negative fan behavior to further validate it and test its applicability. This can be especially beneficial if studies incorporate measures of actual behavior, above and beyond attitudinal measures. Some examples of possible negative behaviors to examine in future research include direct face-to-face verbal abuse of opposing fans and opposing players/coaches, altercations with opposing fans, and verbal abuse of opposing fans and opposing players/coaches through anonymous postings on internet forums and discussion boards. The last example is especially interesting given the proliferation of such outlets recently. Moreover, the fact that, unlike direct face-to-face interaction, they allow the participants to not reveal their identity may potentially induce more fans to engage in that type of behavior. Given the potentially grave consequences of negative fan behavior, additional studies will enrich our understanding of potential antecedents for such behavior and may, therefore, provide insight on how it may be curtailed. We strongly encourage further investigation of those negative behaviors expecting that our measure can provide insight on understanding

them better.



**Figure 1** Mediation model

Construct	Construct reliability	AVE	Sample items	Loadings
Fan identification	0.94	0.52	I am proud to bring fans of my favorite team	0.891
			I often see me in my fan of my favorite team	0.894
			I often cheer loudly whenever the scoreboard is in my favor	0.794
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.899
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.899
Importance of winning	0.79	0.33	It is important to win	0.711
			It is important to win	0.711
			It is important to win	0.711
			It is important to win	0.711
			It is important to win	0.711
Schadenfreude	0.88	0.35	I often see myself with my favorite team	0.711
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.711
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.711
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.711
			I often see myself with my favorite team	0.711

**Table I** Scale origins, construct reliability, AVE, items and item loadings

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