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Tell me who your favorite team is, and I'll tell you about your moral compass: sports fans and media crises

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Introduction

Sports fanhood in general and football in particular is recognized as a captivating, totalizing experience. For sports fans, their team is a significant component of their self-identity—and their personal, familial, municipal, national identity. A “true” sports fan, whose connection to their team is frequently a matter of family tradition, accompanies their team throughout their life and supports the team through thick and thin (Tamir, 2022).

Sports celebrities benefit from sweeping popularity and support, and as a result are almost constantly in the social and media spotlights. The flip side of this coin is the enormous pressure that this situation creates for them, which is added to the tremendous physical and mental strain that these elite sportspersons experience (Rice et al., 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that a crisis involving a sports celebrity becomes a highly covered media event and a significant part of the discourse of sports fans who religiously follow every event involving their team or its rivals.

Taking this into account, and especially in view of the deep connection between fans and their favorite team, we argue that in a crisis involving a star player, some fans will adopt a principled stance in line with their sports preferences, even if the crisis surrounds an issue that is unrelated to sports. That is to say, sports fans' commitment to a player, a team, and a community of fans will directly affect their moral judgments. Sports, thus, plays a significant factor in shaping fans' moral judgments, and its impact is especially striking during a media crisis.

Sports fanhood

Sports fanhood has been the topic of abundant research in recent years, both due to the unprecedented popularity of sports and the growing number of sports fans globally, but also due to the unique and all-encompassing nature of fanhood. Fans' totalizing experience of sports and their commitment to their team is almost absolute. Fans will sacrifice time, money, and even their health in the name of their team (Ben-Porat, 2010).

Obviously, fandom is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Researchers have classified fans along various categories, but all accede that true fans are those who follow and support their team in all circumstances and are personally and emotionally invested in anything that occurs in the team (Giulianotti, 2002). The main reason for this is traced to the recognition that a sports team represents a significant part of a fan's identity: It allows them to view themselves symbolically, and no less importantly, it allows fans to engage in confrontational behaviors against other communities and identities on a regular and systematic basis.

As a result, sports stadiums and arenas have become authorization zones that legitimate fans' performance of behaviors that deviate from routine conventions and that allow fans to express themselves authentically and spontaneously (Ben-Porat, 2014). Indeed, shirtless fans engaged in aggressive, disruptive behaviors are a very common sight in the sports sphere, mainly in football stadiums but also in other sports. It is therefore possible to understand why researchers treat sports as a significant field of research, one in which fans' unfiltered and unsublimated expressions faithfully reflect their genuine emotions and attitudes (Sorek, 2019).

Crisis communication

Most of the crisis communication research examines attempts to utilize crisis response strategies to influence how publics perceive the crisis and the organization involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2009). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by postcrisis communication and mechanism for anticipating how stakeholders will react to a crisis in terms of the reputational threat posed by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

The basic assumption is that crises can cause people to be less supportive of an organization or severe ties with the organization altogether. That is why the response strategy is of great importance. Coombs (2007) presented primary crisis response strategies in fixed patterns of Deny, Attack, Denial, Excuse, Justification, Compensation and Apology. The current article claims that the deep connection between the fans and the football team directs the fans, in most of the crises involving a star player, to focus on the justification phase.

Discussion

The totalizing nature of sports fanhood finds expression in multiple, diverse practices, from fans' obsession with their team's colors (Tamir, 2021), through chants and behaviors on the bleachers, to manifestations of violence between rival fan camps (Braun and Vliegenthart, 2008; Tamir, 2020). Here we argue that the intensity of fans' support for their team is so overwhelming that it frequently distorts fans' ability to rationally judge reality. Fans feel committed to their team—"in life and death"—and effectively serve as gatekeepers that automatically side with their team and its stars. As a result, when forced to choose between a universal moral principle and commitment to their team, fans exhibit moral flexibility and adjust their moral positions to their sports sentiments.

One of the significant expressions of this phenomenon is fans' behaviors and choices during a crisis that involves a star on their favorite team. In such events, team fans tend to align themselves with and support the star, especially when facing fans of rival teams who, unsurprisingly, celebrate the crisis and exploit it to snub the first team. The dynamics of exploiting a personal crisis of a team star within the context of fans' rivalry is well known on sports fields. In view of fans' declared commitment and devotion to their team,

this is not unexpected, but when such crises involve ethical and moral issues, fans' commitment has deeper implications.

Israeli soccer, for example, has provided several very prominent examples of this phenomenon in recent years. In these high-profile events, several well-known revered national team stars were named in incidents involving moral issues that extended beyond the game itself. One player was convicted of conspiracy to commit a crime and abet a theft (after having been involved in several incidents of purse-snatching from women), another player was suspected of statutory rape according to Israeli law for having consensual sexual conduct with two female minors under age 16 (after which he announced his resignation from the national team), while another player tore off his captain's armband during a vital qualifying championship game that Israel lost (and was consequently suspended from the team). In all of the cases, sports fans' opinions mirrored their team affiliation: The player involved in the crisis received the support of his team's fans, which reduced the perceived gravity and repercussions of the player's actions, while fans of rival teams emphasized the moral turpitude of these behaviors, a point they used to discredit and ridicule the player's team.

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory posits that when a person holds beliefs, attitudes or values that are not congruent with each other or with actual behavior (Cooper, 2007), the individual experiences discomfort and therefore seeks ways to regain a sense of psychological balance. Dissonance may also arise when people behave, and evaluate their behavior, as violations of the familiar and accepted standards, and norms of their environment (Stone and Cooper, 2001).

In the current case, we are dealing with crises in which the players' behavior deviates from accepted positions and values (sometimes even beyond the law) and therefore the fans are in a challenging psychological position.

Festinger pointed out three ways for reducing a sense of dissonance: changing a cognitive element to create congruence; adding a new cognitive element to create balance in the system; and changing the weight or significance of a cognitive element. Obviously, the intensity of experienced dissonance varies from case to case and depends, among other things, on the intensity of the person's beliefs in the conflicting values. The stronger these beliefs, the more intense the sense of dissonance.

It seems that football fans tend to change the weight or significance of a cognitive element, in order to preserve their deep sentiment for the team. It is true that there are cases in which fans completely disapprove of a player's behavior and shun him (for example, the case of Manchester United and English professional footballer Mason Greenwood), but these are usually extreme cases that do not represent the regular pattern. A sports team represents an element of the fan's identity and therefore He will seek to try and maintain her support. To this end, the fan is "forced" to minimize the abnormal behavior of the star of the team, in order to reduce the feeling of dissonance. In effect, fans' commitment to and support for a team affects their moral judgment. In all the significant crises concerning Israeli soccer in recent years that centered on the immoral or unsporting behaviors of a local soccer star, we witnessed how fans of these individuals'

teams automatically stood by their favorite team and its players (Obviously the status of the target player affects the degree of the fans' support). In many of these events, public discourse centered on deep-seated moral issues, such as a player's behavior toward women, toward national symbols, to underprivileged groups in society, etc., and the fans of the player's team tended to minimize the player's guilt and stressed the player's right to rehabilitation. While fans of the rival team mocked the players involved in the crisis, chanting and expressing their disapproval by booing, the fans of the players' teams enveloped them in love and signs of support. Most interesting—and this is the core of the argument—is the fact that when the players who featured in these media storms transferred to another team, fans' opinions on these issues realigned to reflect new affiliations and commitments. Fans' positions on the very same issues reversed completely, depending on the player's team membership: The same fans who initially supported and defended a player who was on their favorite team now mocked and ridiculed him and reversed their position after the player transferred to a rival team, and these fans now chanted the same deriding chants against that player, even as far as using the same words.

Studies show that sports serve as a reflection of and a key to understanding social relationships. Here we highlighted the role that sports plays in shaping social reality and affecting fans' positions on moral and ethical issues during a media crisis.

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