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THE IMPACT OF TEAM IDENTIFICATION AND KNOWLEDGE OF AN ATHLETE'S PHYSICAL DISABILITY ON SPECTATORS' IMPRESSIONS OF PLAYERS

Daniel L. Wann[1] and Michael Cottingham[2]
[1]Murray State University, Murray, KY, USA
[2]University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Wann et al. (2006) found that highly identified fans reported positive ratings of a player described as a potential member of a favored team but negative ratings of the same player when he was described as a potential player for a rival team. In a different study of fans' perceptions, Cottingham, Wann, and Byon (2013) found that individuals who learned of players' hearing impairments rated their team more favorably than persons who were not provided with this information. The current study was designed to integrate these two works. Participants (N = 170) watched a video of a potential player who was described as having a hearing impairment (or not) and as a recruit for a favored team or a rival team. Respondents also completed an assessment of their identification with the favored team. Consistent with expectations, mention of the player's impairment resulted in greater perceptions of the player as inspirational. However, contrary to the hypothesis, highly identified fans were not biased in their player ratings.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last two decades, social scientists have shown an increased interest in the psychology of sport fandom (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). This work has targeted a large number of topics, including attendance (Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995), coping strategies (Wann, 2006b), emotional reactions (Gantz & Wenner, 1995), and aggressive responses (Cikara, Botvinivk, & Fiske, 2011). Another issue to gain the attention of researchers concerns spectators' impressions of athletes (Wann, 2006a). Consistent with a long line of research documenting the ingroup favoritism effect (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), a number of studies have found that fans tend to report more positive perceptions of their team relative to rival teams (Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013; Wann, 2006b), a pattern of effects termed the "allegiance bias" (Markman & Hirt, 2002). For

instance, fans report biased evaluations of current team performance (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999) as well as expectations for future team (Funk & James, 2001) and player success (Murrell & Dietz, 1992). The allegiance bias remains intact even when the target player or team is portrayed in a negative light (Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, & Grantz, 2002; Ungar & Sev'er, 1989).

Biases perceptions of favored teams and players are most prominent among fans with high levels of identification, that is, among those with a strong connection to the team (Wann et al., 2001). For instance, consider the work of Wann et al. (2006). In this investigation, participants completed a measure assessing their level of identification with a target college team. They then watched a video clip of a basketball team completing a series of drills. One of the players participating in the drills was described as either a potential recruit for the target team or for a rival team. After watching the video, participants rated the recruit on variables such as athleticism and quickness. Consistent with expectations, the most positive evaluations were reported by persons with high levels of identification with the favored team when the player was described as a recruit for that team. The most negative evaluations were provided by highly identified individuals when the player was presented as a recruit for the rival team. Persons with lower levels of identification provided moderate evaluations (i.e., evaluations between those of the two groups of highly identified fans).

However, an athlete's disability may also impact perceptions. Cottingham, Byon, Chatfield, and Carroll (2013) and Cottingham et al. (2014) observed that consumers may not perceive athletes with disabilities in the same way as they do athletes without disabilities. The distinguishing viewpoints are often driven by the inspirational supercrip, or a perspective of an athlete with disability overcoming certain expectations (Kama, 2004). This supercrip image often detracts from perceptions of the individual as an athlete; rather, the focus remains on the disability and aspect of overcoming (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). While the supercrip trope is seen as paternalistic and negative, little research has contemplated how this may influence fan investment. Disability sports have active but limited fan bases (Evaggelinou & Grekinls, 1998), so efforts must be made to better understand the way athletes with disabilities are perceived to increase attendance (Byon, Cottingham, & Carroll, 2010).

A recent supercrip investigation with particularr relevance to the current work was recently conducted by Cottingham, Wann, and Byon (2013). In this study, participants were asked to view a short highlight video of a hearing impaired NCAA basketball team (Gallaudet University) playing against a hearing team. Prior to watching the video, approximately half of the participants were informed that the players for Gallaudet were hearing impaired, while other participants were not. After the video, respondents completed measures assessing their evaluations of the Gallaudet team and players. The results indicated that participants who were informed of the players' impairments (relative to those not given this information) viewed the players as exhibiting better communication and teamwork, being more athletic and skillful, and being more inspirational.

The Current Investigation

The current research incorporated the studies conducted by Cottingham et al., 2013 and Wann et al., 2006. Specifically, we investigated both the awareness of an athlete's physical impairment as well as level of identification on perceptions of a potential recruit. Such an

investigation would allow for determination of which variable (identification or awareness of disability) best predicts ratings of a player. Based on the work of Cottingham and his associates (2013), we hypothesized (Hypothesis 1) that higher ratings of the target player would occur when the player was described as having a hearing impairment. Furthermore, based on the work of Wann and his colleagues, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 2) a two-way interaction involving level of identification and target team. Specifically, we expected the most positive ratings of the target player (e.g., athleticism) to be reported from highly identified persons rating an ingroup recruit while the most negative would come from highly identified respondents rating an outgroup recruit. With respect to the combination of the key variables (i.e., identification, player's team, and mention of a hearing impairment), because past research had not simultaneously examined them, predictions were not appropriate. Consequently, the potential interaction among these factors were examined with the framework of a research question asking, "How will the interactions among team identification, target team (ingroup versus outgroup), and knowledge of the hearing impairment impact perceptions of a target athlete?"

METHOD

Participants and Design

The original sample consisted of 173 college students attending a mid-southern university. However, three of the participants were removed from the sample because they inaccurately answered the manipulation check item (see below). Thus, the final sample consisted of 170 (47 male; 123 female) persons. They had a mean age of 19.96 years (SD = 3.86). The study design was a 2 (Level of Team Identification: high or low) X 2 (Team Recruiting Target Player: ingroup/University of Kentucky or outgroup/University of Louisville) X 2 (Description of Hearing Impairment of Target Player: impairment mentioned or impairment not mentioned). The first variable was a subject variable while the second two were independent variables (participants were randomly assigned to these conditions).

Materials and Procedure

Subsequent to receiving IRB approval and gaining participant consent, respondents were tested in groups (ns ranged from 4 to 18) in a university classroom. Upon entering the testing session, participants completed a short pretest questionnaire assessing age and gender. After everyone had completed the pretest protocol, they were informed that they would be viewing a ten-minute video of a high school team conducting a practice session in preparation for an upcoming tournament. Specifically, they were told that:

> "You are about to watch a ten-minute practice video involving a high school team from Kansas City, Missouri. The team is preparing for an upcoming tournament. I will now show you a one-minute segment of the video so you can become acquainted with the fast-break drill shown on the tape."

At this point, the video was begun and the participants viewed the first minute of the tape (the sound was turned off during the playing of the video).

After approximately one minute, the video was paused and participants received further information about the teams and players depicted in the video. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four versions of the description (thus comprising the Team Recruiting Target Player X Description of Hearing Impairment of Target Player portion of the design). Approximately half of the participants were informed that the players depicted in the video attended a high school that accommodated persons with hearing impairments while approximately half were not provided with this information. Further, approximately half of the respondents were told that an ingroup university (the University of Kentucky) was recruiting a specific player on the team while the remaining persons were informed that an outgoup university (the University of Louisville) was recruiting the player.[1] Thus, in the Ingroup Team Recruiting the Target Player / Hearing Impairment Mentioned condition, participants were told:

> "The team involved in the video is Jones High School. It should be noted that Jones High School has programs/activities specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students. Thus, the players for their basketball team are all hearing impaired. While watching the video, I would like for you to focus on a specific player. This player is wearing uniform number 17. The player you are to focus on is a junior in high school and is being recruited by the University of Kentucky. This player averaged 26 points and 8 assists per game during his sophomore year and led his team to the state championship. Further, this season (his junior year), he was a pre-season all-state player in Missouri and chosen as his conference's pre-season player of the year. After watching the video, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire assessing your reactions to the video."

Those in the Ingroup Team Recruiting the Target Player / Hearing Impairment Not Mention condition were told:

> "The team involved in the video is Jones High School. While watching the video, I would like for you to focus on a specific player. This player is wearing uniform number 17. The player you are to focus on is a junior in high school and is being recruited by the University of Kentucky. This player averaged 26 points and 8 assists per game during his sophomore year and led his team to the state championship. Further, this season (his junior year), he was a pre-season all-state player in Missouri and chosen as his conference's pre-season player of the year. After watching the video, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire assessing your reactions to the video."

Persons in the outgroup team conditions heard identical descriptions, exception that "University of Kentucky" (ingroup team) was replaced with "University of Louisville" (outgroup team).

After receiving the additional information about the video, team, and target player to follow, the video was resumed. As the video was restarted, the researcher pointed out the target player (#17) to insure that the participants knew which player to follow. During the practice drill depicted on the video, the target player attempted four shots, making one. He also tallied one assist, three rebounds, two steals, and had one turnover.

[1] The University of Kentucky, although not the university currently attended by the participants, was chosen as the ingroup team because of the large, state-wide support for the University of Kentucky Men's Basketball Team.

At the completion of the video, the video player was turned off and the participants were handed a post-video questionnaire containing four sections. The first section contained a manipulation check item assessing whether or not the participant was, indeed, aware of the team recruiting the target player. This item asked respondents to indicate which university was "actively recruiting this player?" (choices were "University of Louisville," "Duke," "University of Kentucky," and "Murray State University"). The next section contained five Likert-scale items assessing evaluations of the target player. Derived from Cottingham et al. (2013), response options ranged from 1 to 8 with higher numbers indicating a more positive evaluation of the target player. A sample item read, "How would you rate the player's athletic ability?" This item had response options ranging from 1 (*Not at all Athletic*) to 8 (*Highly Athletic*). Subsequent items targeted impressions of the player's skill, teamwork, and communication. An additional question assessed the extent to which participants viewed the player as "inspirational."

The third section assessed whether or not the participant and/or a close friend or family member identified as having a disability. These items read, "Do you identify as having a disability?" and "Do you have a close friend or family member who identifies as having a disability?" Respondents circled either "Yes" or "No" to each item. The fourth and final section contained the seven Likert-scale items comprising the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The SSIS is a reliable and valid measure for assessing team identification (Wann et al., 2001). The scale has been utilized in dozens of studies and has been translated into multiple languages including Portuguese (Theodorakis, Wann, Carvalho, & Sarmento, 2010), Dutch (Melnick & Wann, 2004), and French (Bernache, Bouchet, & Lacassagne, 2007). A sample item read, "How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of (target team)?" Response options ranged from 1 (*low identification*) to 8 (*high identification*). Participants targeted the University of Kentucky men's basketball team (ingroup team) when completing the SSIS.

After all participants had completed the post-video questionnaire, the testing session was complete (total time was approximately 20 minutes). Participants were then debriefed and excused from the testing session.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Three participants incorrectly answered the manipulation check item identifying the team recruiting the target player. Thus, they were removed from the sample. The seven items comprising the SSIS were combined to form a single index of identification (Cronbach's alpha = .954). Similarly, consistent with Cottingham et al. (2013), the two items assessing perceptions of teamwork/communication (TEAMCOMM) were combined to form a single index (Cronbach's alpha = .726) as were the two items assessed perceptions of athleticism/skill (ATHSKILL; Cronbach's alpha = .836).

We then examined the impact of gender and whether the participant and/or a close friend or family member identified as having a disability. A series of one-way analyses of variance found that none of the measures (i.e., identification, TEAMCOMM, ATHSKILL, inspiration) were related to any of the aforementioned subject variables (all Fs < 2.23; all ps > .10). Thus,

all subsequent analyses were conducted across gender and whether or not the participant and/or a close friend or family member identified as having a disability.

A tripartite split was performed on the participants' SSIS scores. This procedure was employed to construct a group of participants with a low level of identification with the ingroup team (n = 50; SSIS range = 7-9, M = 7.28, SD = 0.54) and a group with a high level of identification (n = 56; SSIS range = 26-56, M = 38.68, SD = 9.82). The remaining participants (i.e., those with a moderate level of identification) were removed from the analyses. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed that the high and low identification groups were significantly different in their level of identification with the team, $F(1, 104) = 509.25$, $p < .001$.

Tests of Hypotheses

Perceptions of the target player's teamwork/communication (TEAMCOMM), athleticism/skill (ATHSKILL), and inspiration were examined via a series of three 2 (Level of Team Identification: high or low) X 2 (Team Recruiting Target Player: ingroup/University of Kentucky or outgroup/University of Louisville) X 2 (Description of Hearing Impairment of Target Player: impairment mentioned or impairment not mentioned) ANOVAs.

Perceptions of teamwork and communication. The first ANOVA examined TEAMCOMM scores (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Contrary to Hypothesis 1, this analysis failed to indicate significant main effect for mention of the player's impairment [$F(1, 98) = 1.24$, $p > .20$]. In addition, the team recruiting player main effect was also not significant [$F(1, 98) = 0.75$, $p > .30$]. However, the identification group main effect was significant, $F(1, 98) = 10.84$, $p < .001$. Persons with high levels of identification (M = 11.88, SD = 2.41) reported higher ratings of the player than those with low levels of identification (M = 10.26, SD = 2.91).

With respect to interactions among the variables, the hypothesized (Hypothesis 2) Target Team X Identification Group two-way interaction failed to reach statistical significance [$F(1, 98) = 1.80$, $p > .10$]. The Target Team X Mention of Impairment interaction was also not significant [$F(1, 98) = 0.23$, $p > .80$]. However, the Mention of Impairment X Identification Group interaction was significant, $F(1, 98) = 4.09$, $p < .05$. Highly identified fans tended to rate the teamwork/communication of the target in a positive fashion whether the target's impairment was (M = 11.64, SD = 2.53) or was not mentioned (M = 12.11, SD = 2.30). A post-hoc analysis indicated that these means were not significantly different, $t(54) = 0.72$, $p > .40$. However, while low identified fans reported similarly positive TEAMCOMM scores when the player's impairment was mentioned (M = 11.04, SD = 2.72), these individuals gave less positive responses when the impairment was not mentioned in the description, (M = 9.19, SD = 3.06). These means were significantly different, $t(48) = 2.25$, $p < .05$. The three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 98) = 0.11$, $p > .70$.

Perceptions of athleticism and skill. The second ANOVA examined ATHSKILL scores (see Table 1). This analysis failed to indicate significant main effect for mention of the player's impairment [$F(1, 98) = 1.01$, $p > .30$], thus failing to confirm Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, the team recruiting the player [$F(1, 98) = 1.05$, $p > .30$] and identification group

[$F(1, 98) = 1.57$, $p > .20$] main effects were not significant. With respect to Hypothesis 2, the Target Team X Identification Group interaction was not significant [$F(1, 98) = 0.23$, $p > .60$]. Similarly, the neither the Target Team X Mention of Impairment [$F(1, 98) = 0.81$, $p > .30$] nor the Mention of Impairment X Identification Group [$F(1, 98) = 0.17$, $p > .60$] two-way interactions were significant. Further, the three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 98) = 1.33$, $p > .20$.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for TEAMCOMM, ATHSKILL, and Inspiration by Identification Group (High or Low), Team Recruiting the Target Player (Ingroup or Outgroup), and Mention of the Player's Hearing Impairment

	Low Identification		High Identification	
	Ingroup Team	Outgroup Team	Ingroup Team	Outgroup Team
TEAMCOMM				
Mention of impairment	11.41	10.50	11.55	11.71
	(2.87)	(2.51)	(2.38)	(2.69)
No mention of impairment	10.00	8.58	11.92	12.27
	(2.96)	(3.12)	(1.98)	(2.60)
ATHSKILL				
Mention of impairment	10.94	11.33	12.09	11.82
	(2.44)	(1.50)	(1.38)	(1.91)
No mention of impairment	10.78	10.92	10.39	12.13
	(3.83)	(2.75)	(2.81)	(2.77)
"Inspirational"				
Mention of impairment	4.47	4.25	5.45	5.41
	(1.70)	(2.73)	(1.70)	(1.73)
No mention of impairment	2.78	3.33	4.31	4.20
	(1.72)	(2.15)	(2.14)	(1.32)

Notes: Standard deviations appear in parentheses below each mean. Cells *n*s ranged from 9 to 17.

Perceptions as inspirational. The final ANOVA examined perceptions of the target player as "inspirational" (see Table 1). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, this analysis revealed a significant main effect for mention of the player's impairment [$F(1, 98) = 10.70$, $p < .001$]. As expected, the target player was perceived as more inspirational when his hearing impairment was mentioned ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.99$) than when it was not mentioned ($M = 3.76$,

SD = 1.89). The identification group main effect was also significant [$F(1, 98) = 8.95$, $p < .005$] as the target player was perceived as more inspirational by highly identified fans ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.79$) than by those with lower levels of identification ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.14$). The team recruiting the player main effect was not statistically significant [$F(1, 98) = 0.02$, $p > .90$]. With respect to interactions, once again the Target Team X Identification Group [$F(1, 98) = 0.10$, $p > .70$] interaction was not significant (contrary to Hypothesis 2). Additionally, neither the Target Team X Mention of Impairment [$F(1, 98) = 0.22$, $p > .60$] nor the Mention of Impairment X Identification Group [$F(1, 98) = 0.03$, $p > .80$] interactions were significant. Further, the three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 98) = 0.31$, $p > .50$.

DISCUSSION

Wann and his colleagues (2006) found that highly identified sport fans provided particularly high evaluations of a player described as a potential member of a favorite team but especially low evaluations when the same player was described as a recruit for a rival team. Lower identified fans were found to report similar and moderate evaluations of the target player regardless of which team was recruiting him. In a more recent investigation of spectators' evaluations of players, Cottingham et al. (2013) found that target players were perceived in a more positive fashion (e.g., more athletic and more inspirational) when their hearing impairment was explicitly noted. The current investigation was designed to combine and extend these studies. First, consistent with Cottingham et al., it was hypothesized that mention of the impairment would result in more positive evaluations of the target player (Hypothesis 1). This expectation was partially supported. Consistent with past work (Cottingham et al., 2013), mention of a hearing impairment led to increased perceptions of the target player as "inspirational." While it has been hypothesized that athletes with disabilities are perceived differently (Berger, 2008), some disability sport promoters have stated beliefs that athletes with disabilities are in fact inspirational in the same way and to the same extent as their non-disabled counterparts (Cottingham, Gearity, & Byon, 2013). These findings would support theorists who note differences in perceptions of inspiration of athletes with disabilities.

Contrary to the earlier study, mention of a hearing impairment did not lead to increased perceptions of teamwork/communication (TEAMCOMM) or athleticism/skill (ATHSKILL). Perhaps the inconsistent findings were due to the fact that the previous study targeted *team* perceptions while the current work focused on perceptions of an *individual player*. That it, participants in the Wann et al. study may have been able to infer a greater number of potential instances of athleticism and teamwork given that they viewed the entire team engaging in a series of team-oriented drills. Conversely, the current work asked persons to focus on a specific player which may have reduced opportunities to notice events/behaviors that could be viewed as particularly athletic or evidence of teamwork. A second explanation may simply be familiarity. The subjects were told these athletes were being recruited by schools with which they were familiar. The supercrip image is predicated on lower expectations of people with disabilities. Cottingham et al. (2013) used Division III as the context, a division of lower ability, thus further lowering expectations. In contrast, if an athlete is recruited by a well-known Division I University (as with the current work), it may be presumed that the

university will recruit athletes with more athleticism and teamwork; therefore, the skill expectations will be higher regardless of the presence of disability.

With respect to Hypothesis 2, we expected the most positive ratings from highly identified persons rating an ingroup recruit and the most negative from highly identified respondents rating the outgroup recruit. However, contrary to previous work (Wann et al., 2006), this ingroup bias pattern was not found. The lack of a significant Target Team X Identification Group interaction indicated that highly identified fans did not report particularly positive evaluations of the target player when he was described as a recruit for a favored team and lower evaluations when he was described as a recruit for a rival team. Given that the ingroup favoritism effect has repeatedly be found among highly identified sport fans (Havard et al., 2013; Markman & Hirt, 2002; Wann, 2006b; Wann et al., 2001), the lack of such an effect here is quite puzzling. One might imagine that there was something peculiar about the current video and player that resulted in the lack of replication. However, such a suggestion lacks merit given that this video was in fact successfully used to elicit the ingroup bias effect in previous work (Wann et al., 2006). Additionally, the reader might argue that the difference involved the mention of the hearing impairment. However, because the allegiance bias was not evident either with or without mention of the impairment, this explanation also lacks validity. Thus, the processes underlying the current findings remain unclear and additional research is needed.

Two unexpected findings warrant special mention. First, highly identified fans (relative to those with lower identification) perceived the target player as more inspirational, regardless of whether or not the player's impairment was noted. Perhaps as highly identified fans, they are *fans*, and thus are more likely to be inspired by athletes. That is, due to their interest in sport as fans (i.e., fandom and identification are highly correlated, Wann, 2002), highly identified fans may simply be more inspired by athletes in general, relative to less identified persons.

A second unexpected finding was the significant Mention of Impairment X Identification Group interaction for perceptions of TEAMCOMM. Essentially, mention of the impairment did not significantly alter the perceptions of highly identified fans. However, for low identified persons, mention of the impairment was critical as those receiving information on the impairment rated the player's teamwork and communication significantly higher than those not receiving this information (i.e., those in the no mention condition). This finding is actually quite consistent with Cottingham et al. (2013). In this work, participants who were informed about the team's hearing impairment rated the team as having better teamwork and communication.

The same pattern was found in the current work, but only for persons with low levels of identification. However, given that the target team in the Cottingham et al. work was Gallaudet University, it seems safe to assume that the participants in that study (none of whom had heard of Gallaudet) had low levels of identification. Thus, it appears that among persons with low levels of identification, mention of a team or athlete's hearing impairment will result in increased perceptions of teamwork and communication.

In conclusion the findings reported here may provide opportunities for two distinct groups. The first are established non-disability sport programs who recruit athletes with disabilities. These teams may attract new spectators with low identification who are interested in watching the athlete with a disability such as the University of Florida's preferred walk on Zach Hodskins.

The second group consists of disability sporting events and teams. Byon et al. (2010) noted that attendance at the events can be problematic. If more spectators with low identification can be attracted by the promotion of the supercrip image, then promoters may increase knowledge, a factor which is important for high levels of identification (Byon, Carroll, Cottingham, Grady, & Allen, 2011), hopefully transitioning new spectators to fans.

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