Beyond BIRGing and CORFing: Continuing the Exploration of Fan Behavior

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Abstract

While much previous research has been conducted related to the tendencies for sports fans to bask in reflected glory (BIRG) and cut off reflected failure (CORF), the present work derives a model of fan behavior inclusive of two new concepts that extend existing theory: basking in spite of reflected failure (BIRF) and cutting off reflected success (CORS). The authors provide examples of image-management behaviors associated with BIRF and CORS and suggest multiple explanations for these relatively unusual consumer actions. Further, the authors develop formal propositions to guide future study. The authors conclude with a brief discussion of strategic sport marketing applications as well as a theoretical expansion into additional areas of fanship.

Beyond BIRGing and CORFing: Continuing the Exploration of Fan Behavior

The widely cited claim, “Winning isn’t everything: it’s the only thing” speaks volumes about our culture’s propensity to focus on success and the objectivity of winning. The quotation is most often attributed to the late Vince Lombardi and raises a host of issues that are central to the importance of winning above all else (Simon, 1985). Indeed, a good deal of previous research has examined the importance of a winning record on consumers’ behavior. For instance, utilizing data from college football fans, Kahle, Kambara, and Rose (1996) cited identification with a winning team as a key component in their functional model of fan attendance. Moreover, Greenstein and Marcum (1981) found that 25% of variance in attendance could be attributed to team performance in major league baseball. Pan, Gabert, McGaugh, and Branvold (1997) noted team success as an important factor in purchasing season tickets for intercollegiate basketball games. Finally, across various sports, team success ranked as the primary reason for currently following a team (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). Quite often it seems that a sports fan’s ultimate desire is simply to see their favorite team win (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

In explaining consumption behaviors, winning can relate to an internalized positive self-definition, as well as an externalized enhanced position in the social environment (Kahle et al., 1996). Thus, external fan behaviors can be linked to internal psychological factors of self-image management as well as external sociological factors related to perceptions from others (i.e., the “ideal social self” discussed by Markus and Kitayama, 1991). The phenomenon of basking in reflected glory (BIRG) is well documented and reflects the psychological nature of fanship and the premise of vicarious achievement (Cialdini et al., 1976). On the other hand, when an athlete or team fails, fans tend to distance themselves through a process labeled cutting off reflected failure (CORF) (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford,
Rather than lessen an internal self image, or suffer the consequences of a weakened position in the social environment, fans will often dissociate themselves from unsuccessful teams.

While these constructs are critical to understanding fan behavior, a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that there is much more to fan behavior than just BIRGing and CORFing. For instance, a number of fans will often remain loyal, or even strengthen ties, with unsuccessful sport franchises. Major league baseball’s Chicago Cubs and Boston Red Sox have very loyal fan bases despite their long-standing and well-documented failures to win championships. Similarly, over the years many sports teams (e.g., the NBA’s Golden State Warriors, the NFL’s Detroit Lions, and the NHL’s Toronto Maple Leafs) maintain large, loyal fan bases despite poor winning percentages. Interestingly, this tendency to tout association in the face of failure, to revel in loyalty to losers, has yet to be systematically investigated by sport marketing researchers.

Another observed behavior not fully explained by BIRGing and CORFing is that of fans cutting off ties with successful teams. An increasing number of fans have become disenchanted with seemingly greedy owners, managers, and players (Friedman, 2000). This subset of fans may cite the notion that teams and owners have sold out, that they have lost touch with their fan base, or that perhaps they have strayed from the purity of the game as sport. A potential example of this type of behavior is fans of the Oakland Raiders.

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Throughout the 1970s the Raiders built a large national fan base outside of Oakland. When the Raiders moved to Los Angeles for the 1982 season, a segment of these national fans may have been disgusted by ownership’s off-field decision and stopped rooting for the team. Even as the Raiders went on to win Super Bowl XVIII a year later, this disgruntled group of fans would not bask in the Raiders’ success. In reviewing this example, it is important to distinguish between national Raider fans and those in the local Oakland market, as a component of the local fans’ attachment to the team was based on the geographic area while that was not the case for the national fans.

Similarly, major league baseball is wrought with a history of fans cutting themselves off from successful franchises due to allegations of team misconduct (the 1919 Chicago “Black” Sox), players that do not follow league rules (Pete Rose with the Cincinnati Reds), management/ownership that has lost touch with the game as sport (as illustrated by the 1997 Florida Marlin’s buy-your-way-to-a-championship strategy, followed by a calculated dismantling of the team for financial considerations), league-level labor issues (as seen in the 2002 season), or teams that are viewed as soulless for simply buying the best players (e.g., the New York Yankees during the Steinbrenner era and during the 1950s when poorer clubs such as the Kansas City Athletics commonly sold their best players to the Yankees). Moreover, in the era of free agency it is conceivable that once-hated rivals might end up on a fan’s favorite team (e.g., perhaps a subset Oakland Raider fan who despised Bill Romanowski when he starred for rivals the Denver Broncos and San Francisco 49ers, may struggle with rooting for the team once this formerly hated mercenary joins their team or L.A. Lakers fans may have found it difficult to root for the team, having rooted against Phil Jackson for so many years as head coach of the Chicago Bulls). So, while there are many reasons to cut ties with a successful team, this unique area of fan behavior has yet to be studied.

While previous research has related the topics of team success and fan association in the forms of BIRGing and CORFing, there are elements of fan behavior that fall along these dimensions but have yet to be investigated. We propose an extension of the current model relating team-success factors to fan-associative behaviors. Thus, this paper has two main objectives. First, new concepts will be introduced and discussed as extensions of the BIRGing and CORFing phenomena. We believe these new concepts provide the potential for a more complete model of fan behavior relative to team performance and fan associations. Second, directions for future research are offered.

These suggestions include methods for identifying behaviors consistent with the two new concepts presented in this paper and propositions relating the new concepts to existing constructs that have been tested in the context of the established BIRFing and CORSing literature on fan behavior. We conclude with a discussion of strategic marketing implications.

**Conceptual Background**

BIRGing and CORFing relate two distinct notions of fan behavior in relationship to team success. The BIRG effect refers to an individual’s inclination to share in the glory of a successful other with whom they are in some way associated. The original study (Cialdini et al., 1976) has served as the basis for dozens of follow-up studies that consider a wide range of behaviors (see Sloan, 1989 for a review). In the case of BIRGing, team success is positive and fan associations are also positive. Fans tend to associate themselves in a
positive light with a successful team. After a team wins, the loyal fan will tend to wear the team's colors, brandish team logos, and take any opportunity to build a link to the team through their behavior. Kimble and Cooper (1992) concur that fans attain a feeling of vicarious achievement simply through being fans. Additionally, amongst followers of successful teams, perceived group performance is the dominant factor in identification (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). In relationship to image management tendencies, self-image is built up through direct associations with winning teams/athletes.

In the case of CORFing, the team is unsuccessful and fan associations are correspondingly negative. That is, as an indirect method of image management, fans will tend to dissociate themselves from an unsuccessful team. After a team loses, fans will be less likely to wear the team's colors, attend events, or outwardly support the team. Cialdini and Richardson (1980) clearly observed this image-management tendency (i.e., making those with whom we are negatively connected look bad - utilizing the phrase "to publicly blast associative failure"). Providing further support for the lasting effect of negative outcomes, Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, and Kennedy (1992) found that in accordance with social identity theory, fans' mood and self-esteem were impacted by the outcome of sporting events, even when an unrelated task was performed following the sport encounter. Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) noted that a lack of team success is the most important reason in ceasing to follow a once-favorite team. Accordingly, CORFing epitomizes fans' struggles to cope at a time when associative defeat and consequent social scorn would weaken self-image.

Extending the Conceptual Model

Two areas of fan behavior in relationship to team success and failure have received relatively little attention. In the first case, team performance may be negative, yet fans' associations may be positive. Thus, fans behave in such a way as to trumpet their relationships despite a team's failures. We describe these actions as basking in spite of reflected failure, or BIRF. While the team may be losing, fans in this case are reveling in the loyalty, camaraderie, rebelliousness, and other alternative reasons for fanship. The BIRFing fans may be managing self-image through other positive characteristics of fanship. Since the team is not winning, the fan may highlight other positive aspects in order to manage their image. A primary desire may be avoiding being labeled a fair-weather fan.

In the second case, team success might be positive, yet fans' associations may be negative. We label this phenomenon cutting off reflected success, or CORS. In this instance, while a team might have a winning record, a fan may dissociate themselves from the team. Here, we again posit reasons of rebelliousness, loyalty (to an earlier era, a previous style of play, prior coaching/management, etc.), a need for individuality (informally seen as a need to stand apart from the crowd), and possibly a fear of success (e.g., to ascend to new heights implies a chance for a greater fall). The CORSing fan does not want to be associated with the new era of winning, but rather they prefer to stay linked to the past. By CORSing the fan is managing their self-image through an expression of individualism. Figure 1 graphically displays these four elements of fan behavior. In the sections that follow, we discuss the concepts of BIRF and CORS in greater detail.

Figure 1

<table>
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<th>Association</th>
<th>Team Success</th>
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<td>Positive</td>
<td>Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRG)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
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Basking in Spite of Reflected Failure

The potential reasons for BIRFing can be divided into two main areas. Internally, a number of image-management issues arise. Loyalty is often described in terms of a blend of attitude and behavior that can be measured by the degree to which one favors a certain product and/or brand (Day, 1969; Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). Basking in spite of reflected failure may be deemed loyalist behavior, wherein a fan remains loyal to the team (as a branded product) regardless of team failures. BIRFing implies loyalty even in the face of failure. As much as loyalty is seen as a positive human attribute, BIRFing exists as a fan's attempt to manage their self-concept. Loyalty likely boosts self-esteem. The notion of a direct management of the self-concept has received much empirical support (Sirgy, 1982, Sirgy & Danes, 1982).

Simultaneously, the notion of BIRFing becomes a direct method of retaining cognitive balance (Heider, 1958). While the team is losing, the fan must still see themselves as a winner due to their loyalties as a true fan. In this sense, BIRFing fans may be dealing with a
form of post-purchase dissonance following a loss. If committing to be a fan of a team is conceptualized as a purchase, then the potential for post-purchase remorse when the team fails to live up to expectations appears likely. Fans may turn to BIRFing as a means of dealing with the cognitive incongruities that develop between being a fan and seeing one's team lose. The incongruity creates the desire to justify the fan's level of commitment. Additionally, BIRFing may stem from a fan's internal need for either camaraderie or individuality. BIRFing relates to camaraderie in the sense that these fans prefer to be with people of like values and opinions. It relates to individualism in the sense that the fan that engages in BIRFing may harbor a deeply felt need for individuality and look upon BIRFing as a means of expressing "self-uniqueness" through consumption (Lynn and Harris, 1997). BIRFing fans are clearly engaging in less common fan behaviors. Finally, BIRFing may be viewed as a self-perpetuating force. To not BIRF (essentially, to CORF) may begin an internal degradation of the self as nonloyal, a quitter, or a fair-weather fan. To stop BIRFing may leave one with internalized feelings of dissonance.

Externally, BIRFing entails an indirect method of image management. These social techniques are characterized as indirect because they influence one's image in the eyes of social observers (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Again, inasmuch as society views loyalty as a positive trait, people will tend to BIRF as an attempt to signal this positive attribute in the eyes of others—an external badge of honor worn to display loyalties in the face of hardship. As discussed above, BIRFing always has the prospect of future pay-off. Believing that "someday, my loyalties will be recognized and rewarded," fans are driven by the social process of image management. Moreover, not BIRFing may have some social stigma attached. One may be seen by society as disloyal. That is, to cease BIRFing after having started would lead to being looked upon as unfaithful. Lastly, the act of basking in spite of reflected failure may lead to a strengthening of social bonds amongst these true, diehard fans. So, aside from the matter of loyalty, issues of consumer rebelliousness and camaraderie appear to relate to fan behaviors surrounding unsuccessful teams (e.g., the NFL's New Orleans Saints fans continuing to support the team while playfully wearing bags over their heads). This example also illustrates that fans reacting to losing by BIRFing are not pleased with the mounting losses, so, they are not basking in the failure, but in spite of the failure.

**Cutting Off Reflected Success**

The reasons for cutting off reflected success can similarly be divided between internal and external bases. The primary internal element surrounding CORSing is the desire to have things remain as they once were. The CORSing fan may have a high preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, and Newsom, 1995) and a low susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989). For some, the need for consistency may be so strong that remaining true to previously held values may supersede their relationship with the team. The fan still wants their favorite team to win; however, only under certain circumstances. The fan may not want to be a part of wholesale changes such as new management philosophies or different team/player personnel. Another possibility for explaining such behavior may have to do with the exhilaration some fans realize by associating themselves with an underdog. Once the team begins to achieve consistent success, the interest of such fans dissipates as the team assumes the role of a favorite. As a result, some fans may root for another (perhaps downtrodden) team. Further, the fans that engage in CORSing may harbor a deeply felt need for individualism. Almost certainly, the act of CORSing relates to a relatively smaller group of fans that do not require social approval and are not as susceptible to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel, 1989) or reference group influence (Park and Lessig, 1977). They do not feel the need to stay on the winners' bandwagon. In fact, as the suddenly successful team attracts scores of new fans, the initial attraction for becoming a fan of the team likely dissipates, as the uniqueness of the experience is replaced by a feeling of just being part of the crowd.

Externally, cutting off reflected success may appeal to rebellious individuals who act against convention in social situations. The need for individuality may also impact a fan's decision to create distance from a successful team. Rubenfeld (1986) describes a desire to balance the need for community and the need for individuality. CORSing may be a manifestation of an individual seeking that balance. A second external reason for CORSing is that a fan may hold resentment towards bandwagon jumpers— that is, other fans who have not been loyal through the bad times and now join the crowd as a team becomes successful. In the 1990s examples of franchises that went from the bottom of their respective leagues to the top include the Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, and Dallas Cowboys.
Each of these franchises garnered many new fans as they began to achieve on-field success. It is entirely plausible that many diehard fans felt resentment and even diminished in their roles as fans of these franchises. While the Los Angeles Lakers recently enjoyed a tremendously successful run of three straight NBA championships, their fan base continued to grow (as many sports fans long to BIRG). Our assertion is that a subset of disenchanted fans may have been CORSing. It is not hard to imagine this group of fans as fed up with the team’s multi-million dollar superstar athletes, their extravagant lifestyles, or their pretentious styles of play (e.g., many fans may be turned off by Gary Payton’s taunts while dribbling up the court). The CORSing Laker fan perhaps longs for the old school values of sportsmanship ahead of showmanship, their extravagant lifestyles, or their pretentious styles of play (e.g., many fans may be turned off by Gary Payton’s taunts while dribbling up the court). The CORSing Laker fan perhaps longs for the old school values of sportsmanship ahead of showmanship, dedication to the team before dedication to the paycheck, and the athlete as role model rather than celebrity superstar (Sukhdial, Aiken, and Kahle, 2002).

“*The more highly identified fans feel closer to the team, they believe that they share common bonds/values, and they may be more vulnerable to changes in the team’s performance*.”

**Directions for Future Research**

Certainly, BIRFing and CORSing are unusual and, to some extent, counterintuitive fan behaviors, which is what makes the potential for further study of these elements of fan behavior so intriguing. In an effort to set in motion a series of investigations into BIRFing and CORSing, it would be important to first provide empirical evidence of the existence of fans’ behavior consistent with these concepts. In order to do so, a starting point would be to survey or interview fans displaying outward affiliation (such as clothing) after team losses, in order to determine if such behavior is random or a systematic attempt to affiliate with a losing team, in order to bask in spite of reflected failure. Such a procedure would follow a protocol similar to how Cialdini and his colleagues initially provided support for BIRFing. Uncovering empirical evidence of CORSing may be more challenging. One method for tapping into fans that are engaged in this phenomenon may be to monitor message boards online to detect changes in sentiment and the causes of fans’ defecting from teams that are currently successful. Such a study may provide evidence from a naturalistic setting to support and offer further explanation of why fans engage in a seemingly counterintuitive behavior.

Empirical support for the existence of the proposed constructs could then lead to testing the relationships between BIRFing and CORSing and more established constructs. In order to stimulate such research, we have arbitrarily identified three constructs (identification, time, and individualism) that may be of interest to sport marketing researchers and practitioners, as examples of potential future study. For example, research has shown that more highly identified fans are more likely to BIRG and less likely to CORF (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). The more highly identified fans feel closer to the team, they believe that they share common bonds/values, and they may be more vulnerable to changes in the team’s performance. Thus, it seems logical to suggest that more highly identified fans will engage in higher levels BIRFing and CORSing. Through BIRFing, fans express their loyalties to the team. By CORSing, these same highly identified fans express their distaste for the way things have changed. Thus,

**P1**: In relation to fan identification, more highly identified fans will engage in higher levels of BIRFing and CORSing.

As a general extension of the identification proposition above, time may prove to be an important element in relation to BIRFing and CORSing. Time spent being a fan relates positively to identification (Turner, Hogg, Turner, and Smith, 1984). Moreover, people who have followed a team for a long time may have more strongly held beliefs about the team. Time spent as a fan may appear as a moderating variable to the degree of BIRFing and CORSing. Interestingly, however, time spent as a fan could be expected to relate negatively to CORSing. Those fans that have followed the team for a longer period of time will likely stay fans during the successful seasons for which they have waited so patiently. Therefore,

**P2a**: In relationship to time spent as a fan, the longer a fan has followed a team, the more likely they will be to BIRF.

**P2b**: In relationship to time spent as a fan, the longer a fan has followed a team, the less likely they are to CORS.

Both of the proposed consumer/fan behavioral phenomena relate to felt needs for individuality. These somewhat rebellious fans are engaging in behaviors that would tend to be going against more popular, and more generally accepted, fan behaviors. Here, the need for self-monitoring would tend to be lower for fans engaging in BIRFing and CORSing activities. Self-monitoring of expressive behavior has been defined as self-observation and self-control guided by situational cues of social appropriateness (Snyder, 1978). Consequently, propositions can be made regarding BIRFing, CORSing, and a host of issues surrounding individualism.
P3a: BIRFing and CORSing will relate positively to measurements of individualism and/or the need for self- uniqueness.

P3b: BIRFing and CORSing will relate negatively to consumers/fans’ susceptibility to reference group influence.

P3c: BIRFing and CORSing will relate negatively to consumers/fans’ propensity to self-monitor their behavior in general.

These propositions are offered as suggestions for conducting future research that would substantiate the importance of BIRFing and CORSing, but certainly are not intended to be exhaustive. Many other variables could and should be considered and ultimately investigated as research into this area of inquiry develops.

Conclusions

Marketing researchers should continue to study sport consumption, as the processes of fan behavior are dynamic, complex, and contain many socio-psychological interactions. The purpose of this paper was to introduce and discuss two extensions to existing theory on the subject of fan behavior in an effort to guide future study. The complexity of fan behavior lends itself to many (often opposing) interpretations. Constructs such as loyalty, individualism, self-esteem, image management, cognitive balance, dissonance, and association with underdogs were among those discussed in this first attempt to introduce BIRGing and CORSing to the sport marketing conversation. Undoubtedly, extensive future research will be needed to test the relationships between BIRFing and CORSing and a host of other constructs.

Ideally, sport marketers would be able to utilize strategic applications relative to BIRFing and CORSing. For instance, marketers may be able to tailor specific promotions and advertising messages aimed at the subsets of BIRFing and CORSing fans. The marketing of tickets (especially during sub-par seasons) seems to directly relate to loyalist behaviors and BIRFing. On the other hand, in an effort to lessen any effects of CORSing, marketers may want to stress loyalty factors, the consistency of the organization’s management philosophy, or the social rewards of remaining true to the team.

In addition, the identification and activation of sponsors could relate to these concepts as BIRFing fans may tend to seek out and reward loyal sponsors, just as CORSing fans would likely tend to shun sponsors who do not make a strategic fit with what these fans view as the traditional mission and philosophy of the team. Also, the subsets of both BIRFing and CORSing fans may carry unique strategic market segmentation issues relative to their behaviors. While BIRFing fans would be expected to rate highly on variables such as loyalty, collectivism, and needs for belonging, CORSing fans may be measured more by independence, rebelliousness, and old schoolness.

Interestingly, to the extent that sport is just one form of the product that is entertainment, the notions of BIRFing and CORSing can be applied to a broader range of fan behaviors. The concepts can quite easily be related to fans consuming the fine arts, dramatic arts, and performing arts. For instance, many people brag about an artist, actor, or musical group by stating, “Well, I knew them when,” or, “I was a fan before they made it big.” The very phrase, starving artist, holds a great deal of appeal to the common fans rooting for their favorite artists to achieve commercial success. These fans are seemingly BIRFing. Of course, if their favorite artists do succeed they may proceed to BIRG.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that another distinct subset of fans of artists, actors, and musical groups become disenfranchised when the artist/band they follow becomes too popular, sells out, or becomes too commercialized. In such an instance this subset of fans may begin to CORS. Of course, it may be more likely that a fan would dissociate from failure (CORF) rather than success (CORS), but it is not difficult to imagine (e.g., “I really admired Thomas Kincaide, Tom Hanks, or Bruce Springsteen before they became so popular. I really prefer their earlier works. Now, I just see them as commercial sell-outs.”). In an international sporting context, a CORSing explanation may in part explain the double-edged sword of popularity enjoyed by soccer superstar David Beckham. His celebrity status endears him to many fans, but many highly involved soccer fans describe him as overrated and are turned off by his mainstream (i.e., off-field) celebrity.

Regardless, we believe that consumer behavior researchers studying the complex and intriguing world of fan behavior will certainly benefit from further investigations as well as more scientific examinations of the BIRF and CORS concepts.
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