

Trait Verbal Aggression, Sports Fan Identification, and Perceptions of Appropriate Sports Fan Communication

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This study attempted to further the preliminary research in the area of sports and communication. Specifically, communication constructs including verbal aggression and context appropriateness were applied to the sports setting. Participants ($n = 407$) completed questionnaires based on a team sporting event that they had recently watched. It was found that fans who were high in trait verbal aggression were (a) more likely to see verbal communication directed at the players and coaches during sporting events as appropriate, and (b) less likely to see fan display of support for their teams as an appropriate form of communication at sporting events. Participants who were high in fan identification were more likely to see displaying the team's insignia and verbal communication toward players and coaches as appropriate. Limitations and future directions for the area of sports communication are discussed.

Trait verbal aggression research has previously been conducted within interpersonal contexts such as the marital dyad (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Yelsma, 1995), parent-child relationships (Bayer & Cegala, 1992; Beatty, Burant, Dobos, & Rudd, 1996; Beatty & Dobos, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Beatty, Zelley, Dobos, & Rudd, 1994; Martin & Anderson, 1997; Rudd, Beatty, Vogl-Bauer, & Dobos, 1997; Rudd, Vogl-Bauer, Dobos, Beatty, & Valencic, 1998), sibling relationships (Martin, Ander-

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son, Burant, & Weber, 1997), and workplace relationships (Infante & Gordon, 1989, 1991; Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). In these settings, verbal aggression has been consistently found as an inappropriate, destructive, or incompetent form of communication.

Verbal aggression has been examined in a number of contexts, many of which involve close interpersonal relationships (i.e., siblings). While this is important, a great number of our daily interactions take place with people who we do not know. We are around strangers during the day in various contexts (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants). The interactions among strangers provide us with another area to look at and examine the destructive capability of verbal aggression. Some of these situations are more conducive to aggressive communication than others. One such context where we are around many strangers in which a great deal of emotion can be generated, is attending a sporting event.

Moderate levels of verbal aggression demonstrated by sports fans are often encouraged, and even positively sanctioned by athletic organizations and the sports media. Though the effects of verbal aggression in the context of a sporting event are still seen as negative, the amount of tolerance seems to increase compared to the context of personal relationships. Wann, Dolan, McGeorge and Allison (1994) suggested that "Sports spectators have the ability to influence athletic competitions" (p. 348). Excessive noise levels generated by thousands of screaming fans clearly aids this task and is even considered as "home field advantage." Thus, when many characteristics of verbal aggression are displayed in a sporting context often filled with strangers, these messages may be perceived as more socially acceptable than in closer interpersonal relationships and thus seen as more appropriate, especially by sports fans.

Millions of dollars in revenue are generated yearly as a result of fan attendance, television contracts, and team merchandise sales (Barrett, 1995; Boroughs, 1995). The role of the sports fan, including buying tickets, souvenirs, and merchandise contributes greatly to this financial success (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Popular press coverage of fan exchanges/behaviors is often limited to the most obnoxious or extreme behaviors (Allen, 1985; Farber, 1996; Jenkins, 1993). However, the nuances of appropriate and inappropriate sports fan messages are probably more subtle than the fights and even deaths reported at European soccer games (Allen, 1985). When do messages conveyed by fans at a sports event "cross the line" from being perceived as communicatively competent and socially appropriate to excessive and perhaps offensive? Is verbal aggression acceptable or appropriate in these situations? Is verbal aggression seen as more acceptable or appropriate in this context of communicating with strangers? Limited research has been done examining sports fan behaviors (Wann et al., 1994). This study explores the roles of trait verbal aggression and sports fan identification on perceptions of appropriate messages conveyed within the context of watching a sporting event. To begin this study, verbal aggression research was given a closer look.

Trait Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression is conceptualized as a personality predisposition to put down the self-concept or self-esteem of another individual (Infante & Wigley, 1986). In defining verbally aggressive messages, Infante (1987) included "character attacks, competence attacks, insults, maledictions, teasing, ridicule, profanity, threats, and nonverbal indicators" (p. 182). The amount of damage associated with verbal aggression varies, from harming an individual's self-concept to permanently damaging or destroying relationships. This may hold true in the sports arena as well.

When determining whether or not a message is considered verbally aggressive, several different perspectives may be considered: (a) the individual, (b) the dyad, (c) outside observers, or (d) society at large (Infante, 1987). Thus, it may be challenging to determine perceptions of verbally aggressive messages since situational and/or relational factors need to be considered. This is especially true in the context of sporting events. It is not uncommon for spectators to either say or hear messages that could easily be deemed verbally aggressive. For example, derogatory remarks such as "You're an idiot; my grandmother could've made that play" are often made by fans about players or coaches. While players and coaches probably do not find these messages appropriate or helpful, the focus of this particular study is on the perspective of sports fans.

Essentially, an individual's level of trait verbal aggression interacts with situational factors which may inhibit or disinhibit verbal aggression, ultimately impacting an individual's response or behavior (Infante, 1987). Verbal aggression can serve as a trigger mechanism for violent acts when individuals cannot argue their opinions competently (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). They become frustrated and resort to aggressive communication or behavior. Spectators can become frustrated about not being able to control the players' mistakes, the coaches' bad calls, or ultimately the outcome of the game. This frustration may lead to physical aggression toward others around them, including other fans or even their relational partners.

This particular study is interested in learning how an individual's predisposition toward verbal aggression influences his or her perceptions of the appropriateness of communication messages when examined in the sporting context. Since sports fans differ in their communication patterns, some fans may find certain behaviors appropriate while others would consider those same behaviors inappropriate under any circumstances, including an emotionally-charged sporting event. The levels of dedication, loyalty, and involvement fans have toward their respective teams may impact their perceptions of appropriate communication in the sports setting. The next section reviews the literature on sports fan identification.

Sports Fan Identification

Wann and his colleagues (Wann, 1996; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann, et al., 1994; Wann & Schrader, 1996; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996) have been at the forefront of research on sports fan involvement. Branscombe and Wann (1992) defined spectator identification as "the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as fans of the team, are involved with the team, are concerned with the team's performance, and view the team as a representation of themselves" (p. 1017). Specifically, this area of research examines the perceptions, behaviors, and level of connectedness felt by sports fans toward their respective athletic teams. Identification acts as a stable trait or characteristic for highly identified fans (Wann & Schrader, 1996).

A recent study by Rocca and Martin (1998) examined the relationship between sports fan identification and trait verbal aggression. They found that as fan identification increased, levels of verbal aggression also increased. This finding coincides with information already known about fan identification and verbal aggression. Infante (1987) noted that physiological changes tend to occur when a person becomes verbally aggressive. Highly identified sports fans experience physiological changes when watching games (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and feel more frustrated when their team loses (Wann et al., 1994). In

looking at the findings of verbal aggression and spectator identification together, communicative exchanges may be impacted.

Rationale for Research Questions

Past research on trait verbal aggression has indicated that verbal aggression is negatively related to perceptions of appropriate communicative interactions in the context of the parent-child relationship (Beatty et al., 1996; Rudd et al., 1997). Within the sports context, where spectators are surrounded by strangers, there appears to be a greater latitude of acceptance for more excessive forms of communication or behavior than in the context of interpersonal relationships. Though verbal aggression among spectators at a sporting event is probably not productive or seen in a positive light, it does seem to be more socially accepted in that context. This may be because sports fans are less like to receive negative sanctions for their behaviors (Beller & Stoll, 1992). Since these interactions often take place among strangers who probably will not build a personal relationship with one another, there is no fear of harming the relationship as there is in closer interpersonal relationships. Thus, the first research question examines the relationship between trait verbal aggression and perceptions of appropriate fan communicative messages.

RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between trait verbal aggression and sports fans' perceptions of appropriate communicative messages at sporting events?

The second research question looks at the relationship between sports fan identification levels and perceptions of appropriate forms of communicative messages. Rocca and Martin (1998) noted "It seems logical to expect different behaviors from fans who see themselves as highly involved with their team and those with low levels of involvement" (p. 7). In addition, Wann and Branscombe (1993) indicated that highly identified fans showed greater interest in their team and demonstrated a level of bonding with their fellow fans. Highly identified fans may be so involved with their teams and so wrapped up in the game, that they begin to see verbal aggression as appropriate in the sports setting. Possibly, fans who are more highly identified would perceive certain communication messages that are inappropriate in other contexts to be appropriate in the sporting context. Here we examine the relationship between levels of fan identification and perceptions of the appropriateness of various forms of communicative messages. Thus, the second research question is proposed:

RQ2: What is the relationship between sports fan identification and sports fans' perceptions of appropriate communicative messages at sporting events?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 407 individuals participated in this study. Participants were 213 undergraduate students from a large Eastern university, and 194 undergraduate students from a medium-sized Midwestern university. There were 210 male and 190 female participants (7 did not report gender). The average age of participants was 20.19 ($SD = 3.14$).

Instrumentation

The Verbal Aggression Scale (VAS) has been found to be both valid and reliable in assessing verbal aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). The VAS is a 20-item Likert-type scale with response categories ranging from (1) almost never true to (5) almost always true. This measure includes 10 positively worded and 10

negatively worded items. The reliability has been .80 or above in several studies (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rubin et. al., 1994). Obtained reliability for the verbal aggression scale in this study was .81. The mean for the VAS was 50.73 out of a possible 100 ($SD = 9.93$).

Fan Identification

The Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) is a seven-item measure assessing the degree of connection an individual has with a sports team. Responses range from (1) complete disagreement to (8) total agreement. Some items from this measure include "It is very important to me that this team wins," "I see myself as a big fan of this team," and "During the season, I follow the team often either in person, on TV, on the radio, or in the newspaper." The SSIS has been found to have reliabilities of .88 or above (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann et al., 1994). The obtained reliability for this study was .93. The mean was 36.20 out of a possible 56 ($SD = 13.66$).

Appropriate Communicative Messages

A modified version of the Sports Identification Behavior Scale (SIBS) developed by Rocca and Martin (1998) was used to assess the appropriateness of different communicative messages that occur when watching sporting events. The original version of the SIBS is 46 items, and is used to measure a variety of spectator behaviors at sporting events. However, for this study, a 27-item version of the scale was used that specifically focused on different forms of verbal and nonverbal messages fans could engage in while watching sporting events. Participants were asked to assess the level of appropriateness for each item on a scale of (1) very inappropriate to (5) very appropriate. Some items include: "Fans wearing clothing with the team's name/logo on it," "Fans yelling at the referees when they make a bad call," or "Fans taunting the opposing team about their weaknesses" (See Table One for a full listing).

A factor analysis revealed three main types of communication behaviors demonstrated by fans when watching sporting events. Overall, 17 of the 27 items loaded onto one of three categories: (a) fan display, where fans display items showing support for their team, (b) verbal response, which includes verbal remarks made by fans during the course of the game, or (c) violent response, where fans become physically violent toward objects or people (See Table One). Obtained reliabilities for the fan display, verbal response, and violent response were .78, .93, and .85 respectively. The mean for fan display was 22.49 out of a possible 25 ($SD = 2.87$). The mean for verbal response was 22.80 out of a possible 45 ($SD = 9.56$). The mean for violent response was 4.15 out of a possible 15 ($SD = 2.21$).

Procedure

Questionnaire data were collected in communication courses at the two respective universities. Participants were asked to refer to a team sporting event they recalled observing over the past three months which would serve as a reference for completing the survey. All participation took place during regular class time and participants were offered minimal credit for participation.

RESULTS

Research Question One asked about the nature of the relationship between sports fans' trait verbal aggression and perceived appropriateness of communicative messages. A multiple regression analysis regressing verbal aggression on fan display, verbal response, and

violent response was performed to answer this research question. When entered simultaneously into the regression analysis, two of the three variables, fan display and verbal response, contributed to verbal aggression, $F(3, 395) = 19.84, p < .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .12$. Verbal response had the greatest influence on verbal aggression ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), followed by fan display ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$). Violent response was not significant ($\beta = .10, p = .08$). Thus, as trait verbal aggression increases, (a) team identification symbols, such as wearing clothing and jewelry, are perceived as less appropriate forms of communication, while (b) verbal messages, such as yelling at players or officials while watching sporting events are considered appropriate forms of communication.

Research Question Two asked about the nature of the relationship between sports spectator identification and appropriate forms of communicative messages. A multiple regression analysis regressing sports spectator identification on fan display, verbal response, and violent response was also performed to answer this research question. When all three variables were entered simultaneously into the regression analysis, fan display and verbal response contributed to sports spectator identification, $F(3, 395) = 13.75, p < .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .09$. Verbal response had the greatest influence on sports spectator identification ($\beta = .27, p < .01$), followed by fan display ($\beta = .17, p < .01$). Thus, as a fan's level of spectator identification increased (a) the display of team dress or apparel was more likely to be considered an appropriate form of communication, and (b) verbal remarks toward players or officials were

TABLE ONE
Fan Behavior Measure

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1. Fans who cheer a great deal
 2. Fans having their faces painted in the team colors
 3. Fans with permanent tattoo with the team's logo
 4. Fans wearing clothing with the team's name/logo on it**
 5. Fans wearing jewelry with the team's name/logo on it**
 6. Bumper sticker of the team on cars at the game**
 7. Fans who buy a newspaper to read about the team**
 8. Fans who get into arguments with others who do not like their team
 9. Fans crying if their team lost the game
 10. Fans who shout at the TV when they watch games
 11. Fans who shout at others when watching games
 12. Fans who yell at the officials (i.e., referees, umpires)*
 13. Fans who destroy objects when they watch games (punch walls, break things, etc.)***
 14. Fans who physically hit someone during an intense game***
 15. Fans becoming more violent than usual during games***
 16. Fans talking with others about their team**
 17. Fans whose friends come to them when they have questions about the team
 18. Fans complimenting opposing players/teams when they play well
 19. Fans verbally attacking their own team when they make mistakes*
 20. Fans yelling at referees when they make a bad call*
 21. Fans taunting the opposing team about their weaknesses*
 22. When the team plays poorly, fans yelling about the incompetence of the team*
 23. When the coach does something regarded as stupid, fans openly criticizing him/her*
 24. When watching games, fans say things that others would consider unsportsmanlike*
 25. Fans swearing at members of their team when they are disappointed
 26. Fans making fun of players on the opposing team when they make mistakes*
 27. Fans taunting players on the opposing team in crucial situations*
-

* Verbal

** Identification

*** Violent

All others did not load on one of the three factors

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perceived as appropriate communicative messages. However, one's level of sports fan identification was not related to one's perceptions of violent response appropriateness.

Supplemental analyses revealed no differences between the context of the event (home, in public, at the game) for verbal aggression or any of the three types of appropriate messages (verbal, violent, display). For spectator identification, a t-test revealed one significant difference between watching the game at home or being at the game, $t(385) = -2.6, p < .01$. Spectators who were at the game were higher ($M = 38.26, SD = 12.68$) in sports fan identification than those who were watching the game at home on TV ($M = 34.60, SD = 14.28$).

DISCUSSION

Watching sporting events is a popular past time for millions of people. In fact, some sporting events achieve "holiday" status since they are anticipated and watched by vast portions of society (*Psychology Today*, 1996). Although sports play an interesting and important role in society, little is known about spectator communication patterns (Wann et al., 1994) or about the role of communication in the sporting arena (Rocca, Martin, & Toale, 1998). This study examined the relationship between trait verbal aggression, sports fan identification, and perceptions of appropriate communication messages sent while watching sporting events.

The results from this study indicated that trait verbal aggression is related positively to verbal response appropriateness. Upon closer inspection of the items within the category of verbal response, this finding is not surprising. Communication behaviors such as yelling at referees and ridiculing or taunting players or coaches, seem closely related to constructs on the verbal aggression measure. However, fan display appropriateness was negatively related to trait verbal aggression. This finding was somewhat surprising. The correlation was small, however, and future researchers may find it necessary to examine this relationship outside of the college setting, a context in which sports fan (students) wear clothing with the school insignia on a daily basis.

The findings on sports fan identification suggest that high levels of identification with a sports team are positively related to fan display and verbal response appropriateness. In fact, these behaviors may be normative for those individuals highly identified with a sports team (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Interestingly, there was not a significant relationship between levels of sports fan identification and perceptions of violent response appropriateness by the participants in this study. This was surprising due to the violence at sporting events, presumably by highly identified fans (Allen, 1985).

This study increases our understanding of both the areas of communicating with strangers who we are not in personal relationships with and the area of sports fan communication. However, there is still much that needs to be addressed. First, are there different norms for appropriate communication based on the type of sport? Although participants in this study watched a variety of sports, the majority of the respondents in this study observed football games. This was probably influenced by when this data was collected (i.e., in the fall, near the end of football season). Gathering data at other times in the year when other sports are more accessible may provide additional information to identify discrepancies if they exist. Second, although we did not identify any significant differences in levels of appropriateness based on the level of competition observed, the majority of respondents in this study either watched professional or college sporting events. Would perceptions change if the data had been collected from pee-wee or high school sporting events, where the primary fans are parents and other family members who often know one another?

Third, there may be a social desirability bias impacting results. We asked individuals to assess the appropriateness of various verbal and nonverbal messages that they may have observed when watching a sporting event. This study did not ask respondents if they (a) had actually demonstrated any of these behaviors, or (b) thought that if they personally communicated in this fashion, if it would be considered appropriate. Finally, future studies may wish to gather information on outside influences, such as alcohol consumption or game importance, on fan behavior.

Preliminary work in the area of communication as it is applied to the sports context suggests that this is an area worthy of further investigation for communication scholars (Rocca, Martin, & Toale, 1998). Beginning research in this area (Rocca & Martin, 1998) suggests that sports fan identification is associated with trait verbal aggression. This study built from that finding to assess the relationship between verbal aggression, sports fan identification, and appropriate communicative messages among strangers at a sporting event.

Practical Application

Studying appropriate forms of communication is challenging because results may vary depending on the perspective taken. Spitzberg (1994) defined appropriateness as "enacting behavior in a manner that is fitting to the context, thereby avoiding the violation of valued rules, expectancies, or norms" (p. 31-32). Determining when a message goes from being appropriate to inappropriate in the context of sporting events may be complicated.

Communication scholars consider norms as an important part of learning about communication (i.e., Spitzberg, 1994). The norms that develop in the sporting context are important to consider for several reasons, including that of the communication between strangers. Individuals in relationships may establish norms as the relationship progresses, but in a group of strangers one must understand the existing norms to be socially accepted. The sporting context is one of those areas in which the norms and the communication patterns that take place need to be understood in greater detail.

While individuals who are high in verbal aggression or sports fan identification may perceive yelling at referees and swearing at players as appropriate forms of communication, others who are at the same event may be disturbed by such behavior, and bothered by the norm violations. Not only may these behaviors seem "normal" to those high in verbal aggression or spectator identification, they may lead to more destructive behaviors, including physical violence among fans attending games, as well as fans watching the game at home.

Watching sporting events is a primary form of leisure entertainment for millions of individuals and sports are a pervasive part of American society. By understanding more about communication in the sports context, we can use this practical knowledge to predict fan behavior as well as understand it on a deeper level. Possibly, we can gain a deeper insight into how to control inappropriate behavior in the sports context, and how to have more clearly defined norms of what is appropriate and inappropriate communication among strangers who watch a sporting event together. The role of communication in the sporting context warrants future research.

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