Destined to succeed? Team identification and the attributional bias of NFL fans

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Attribution theory focuses on the fundamental need for people to explain the underlying causes of important event outcomes (Weiner, 1985). From a sport perspective, it has been determined that fans and athletes tend to attribute wins to internal, stable, and controllable factors and losses to external, unstable, and uncontrollable factors. This phenomenon is known as the team-serving bias. Previous research in this area has been limited to single game assessments and has yet to examine the impact of an entire season. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the moderating impact of team identification on the attributional bias of two groups of sport team fans that experienced opposite seasonal outcomes. The 2011-2012 seasons’ of New York Jets and New York Giants were examined. Four internal and three external attributes were devised based on the work of Wann and Dolan (2002). The results suggested the seasonal impact of success/failure followed previous theory for internal attribution, but not for external. In addition, the impact of team identification was not statistically significant. The discussion provides implications as well as study limitations and suggestions for future research.

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