

# Fan Reactions to College Football Players' Bowl Game Competition Decisions

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## Abstract

While college football remains one of the most popular spectator sports in America (Norman, 2018; Statistics & Data, 2022), it has undergone changes in recent years. Notably, college football players have been able to profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL), as well as more frequently switch schools without having to sit out a season because of the transfer portal (Rumsey, 2023; Wolken, 2023). Another college football development has been the increased number of players who have chosen to not compete at the end of the season as they decide to opt-out of bowl games to protect themselves from injury in order to be able to care for themselves and their families. While some choose not to compete in their team's bowl games because of their National Football League (NFL) draft prospects, others consider their transfer portal prospects and potential NIL compensation from marketing and promotional endeavors (Rumsey, 2023; Wolken, 2023). These decisions from college-aged players have led to an array of reactions from fans, college football personnel including coaches and administrators, and sport media personalities (Hale, 2023; Wolken, 2023). Some individuals have expressed support (Wolken, 2023), while others labeled the players as selfish and entitled, including that their decisions are hurting their teams (Bromberg, 2022). This dynamic college football environment presents a new reality that sport managers must now traverse with their fans and athletic boosters, which could be even trickier as the college football climate has also become more polarized and politicized (Libit, & Novy-William, 2023). It is notable that there are limited empirical investigations that have considered the fan reactions to player competition decisions (Reilly et al., 2023), and it does not appear any of the extant literature considers fan perceptions. Moreover, much of the college bowl game literature has focused on the media framing of players as professionals (Corr et al., 2023) and spectator attendance (Eddy et al., 2016; Popp et al., 2017). As such, this project aimed to examine fan reactions to college football players opting-out of bowl games, and how their decision impacts the fan's image of the athlete and the fan's image of the team.

An experimental research design was utilized to expand on the limited experimental sport marketing research (Ko & Lee, 2018), and such a design enabled causal, and not correlational, associations. Additionally, two studies were implemented, to compare the reactions of fans as based upon their life stage (i.e., thoughts of peers through a student sample; thoughts of adult fans not in college). A survey was developed to measure how fans perceived athletes, and the team, as based upon the decision of the player to play or opt-out of the bowl game, as well as their provided rationale (i.e., NFL draft preparation, injury risk, transferring to a new school for NIL opportunities) connected to their playing/opt-out decision.

The student survey was administered to 162 participants, of which 97 were deemed usable (rate of 59.9%; Mage=19.64, SD=1.42; 44.3% men, 55.7% women). The adult survey was administered to 192 participants, of which 134 were usable (rate of 69.8%). The planned analyses were 2 (within: player vs. team) x 3 (within: reasoning of NFL draft preparation, injury risk, or transferring to a new school for NIL opportunities) x 2 (between: competition decision of play or opt-out) x 2 (between: gender) mixed repeated measures ANOVAs (Tabachnick &

Fidell, 2013). Preliminary analyses indicated there was a main effect of reason which was qualified by a reason x competition decision interaction (Wilk's  $\lambda=.87$ ,  $F(2, 92)=6.79$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta^2=.13$ ), in which players were perceived most negatively when their reasoning was associated with NIL regardless of their competition decision, and that players were perceived negatively when they opted-out in response to NFL draft concerns compared to when they competed. Moreover, although the main effect of player vs. team was not significant ( $p=.063$ ), there was a significant player vs. team x competition decision interaction (Wilk's  $\lambda=.82$ ,  $F(1, 93)=20.21$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.18$ ), in which both players and the team were perceived more negatively when the player opted-out compared to when they competed, and that players who opted-out were perceived more negatively than the team. Additionally, there was a significant reason x player vs. team interaction (Wilk's  $\lambda=.66$ ,  $F(2, 92)=23.89$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.34$ ), in which all reasons were perceived significantly differently for players and for the team, and that for the draft training rationale the team was perceived more negatively than the player, but for NIL rationale the player was perceived more negatively than the team. No other interactions were significant, which included no significant differences as based upon segmentation by gender. Analyses of the adult fan sample are currently being completed. If accepted, details of the adult fan sample results, as well as implications of the findings, will be included in the presentation.

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We are currently in the data collection phase but will finish data analysis prior to the conference. This study will provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field. Theoretical contributions will include expanding our knowledge on the role of athletic academic advisors within college athletics in both an academic and educational capacity. Additionally, this research will provide us with an alternative perspective of college athlete mental health. Further, the practical contributions will include ways in which college athletic departments can better support staff to ensure they have the necessary support and education to handle all facets of their role."