

Understanding the Marketing Implications of Sport Rivalry: What We Know and Where We Are Headed

Cody T. Havard and Vassilis Dalakas

Cody T. Havard, PhD, is an associate professor of sport commerce in Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management at the University of Memphis. His research addresses rivalry in sport and its impact on fan behavior.

Vassilis Dalakas, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Marketing at California State University-San Marcos. His research interests include fan identification, social identity and rivalries, sponsorship, consumer psychology and consumer behavior, and consumer animosity and schadenfreude.

Introduction

The topic of rivalry is a favorite in sport popular culture. Fans, media members, and participants frequently discuss who is a rival team, what constitutes a rivalry, and what rivalries are most relevant in sport. For example, if one turns the television to a sport channel or visits popular sport media websites, they will almost certainly be exposed to a story, highlights, or discussion about rivalry. The phenomenon is so popular among sport fans that major television and media outlets have labeled portions of seasons accordingly (e.g., college football's Rivalry Week typically runs the last regular season week when most traditional rival teams play and Major League Soccer has recently started to promote Rivalry Week two times during its season). However, given the attention the topic receives from fans and the popular media, academic research only recently began to focus on understanding and explaining this topic. The purpose of this special issue is to highlight the phenomenon, and present empirically driven ideas that can help academicians and practitioners better understand the marketing implications of rivalry in sport.

Rivalry in sport begins with the study of social identity (Tajfel, 1974) and group behavior (Turner, 1982), in which an antagonistic relationship creates an in-group and an out-group. Competition reinforces the "us versus them" mentality and intensifies rivalry. This introduction will first visit what we currently know about rivalry in sport, including both the antecedents that lead to the phenomenon and consequences of its presence. We will then discuss future directions of study that will help academicians and marketers better understand how rivalry influences fan reactions and

behavior. Finally, we will briefly introduce the four articles included in this special issue, helping further understanding on the phenomenon and providing a foundation for new directions of inquiry into rivalry in sport.

Rivalry in Sport

Social identity theory states that a person uses the groups in which he/she is a member to communicate something about himself/herself (Tajfel, 1974). Because of their competitive nature, sports provide an opportunity for fans to experience vicarious achievement. People can choose to follow a successful team because they feel it will reflect positively on them both internally (Bandura, 1977) and externally (Campbell, Eisner, & Riggs, 2010) and they use it as an image improvement tactic (Cialdini et al., 1976). For example, identifying with a sport team can positively influence a person's social well-being (Wann, 2006), and college students that identified with athletic teams at their school felt lower levels of depression or loneliness (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Consistent with the premises of the affective disposition theory, in the context of sports (Zillman, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989), people's emotional reactions to sports properties can range from extreme love to extreme hate. Favorite teams elicit a strong affinity while rival teams elicit a similarly strong (or even stronger) animosity. For highly identified fans, the level of identification with a favorite team reaches such levels that the team becomes part of the person's own identity. Strong identification with the team contributes to an in-group bias (Turner, 1982), in which group members find ways to favorably

compare their group to an out-group. To better understand how rivalry is manifested, we will briefly visit some of the antecedents and characteristics of the phenomenon.

Definitions, Antecedents, and Characteristics of Rivalry

Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw (2010) investigated the rivalry phenomenon using intercollegiate basketball players and sport reporters. They defined rivalry in sport as “a subjective competitive relationship that an actor has with another actor that entails increased psychological involvement and perceived stakes of competition for the focal actors, independent of the objective characteristics of the situation” (p. 945). Additionally, they identified several key antecedents that lead to feelings of rivalry. Specifically, the authors pointed to close proximity, similarities between teams, and repeated or consistent close competition as attributes that lead to high levels of rivalry. Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, and Schaffer (2013) defined rivalry as “a fluctuating adversarial relationship existing between two teams, players, or groups of fans, gaining significance through on-field competition, on-field or off-field incidences, proximity, demographic makeup, and/or historical occurrence(s)” (p. 51), thereby adding attributes that do not occur during head-to-head competition to possible antecedents of the phenomenon. Tyler and Cobbs (2015) defined rivalry as “a highly salient group that poses an acute threat to the identity of the in-group or in-group members’ ability to make positive comparisons between their group and the out-group” (p. 230). Additionally, they identified 11 recurring elements of rivalry, thus adding defining moment, recent parity, star factors, relative dominance of one team, competition for personnel, cultural difference, and perceived unfairness to the literature on antecedents and characteristics of rivalry.

Recent research has investigated the many characteristics or situations that can influence rivalry and the way fans view rivals of their favorite teams. For example, rivalry in sport can be influenced by how identified a fan feels toward a favorite team (Aparna & Santhosh, 2016; Wann et al., 2016), gender (Havard, Eddy, & Ryan, 2016), the favorite team or conference a fan follows (Havard, 2016; Havard & Reams, 2016), relative proximity to their favorite team and competitive outcomes between rivals (Havard, Reams, & Gray, 2013), and the introduction of new teams into the competitive relationship (Havard, Shapiro, & Ridinger, 2013; Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013, 2017). It is also important to recognize that fans can identify more than one team as a rival (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017). Further, sport fans perceive rival teams differently based

on the favorite team they follow (Wann et al., 2016) and relative importance they place on a rivalry (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017).

The Sport Rivalry Fan Perception Scale (SRFPS) was developed and validated as the first scale to measure initially how fans evaluate their collegiate rival teams regarding four facets of rivalry (Havard, Gray et al., 2013). Specifically, the SRFPS measures (1) fan likelihood to support the rival team when they are not playing the favorite team, (2) the prestige of the academics at the rival school, (3) rival fan behavior, and (4) the satisfaction they receive when their favorite team defeats the rival. The measure was recently modified and validated so that it can examine the way fans feel about rivals at the professional level as well by having fans rate the prestige of the city or region where the rival team plays rather than the academic prestige of the rival institution (Havard & Hutchinson, 2017). Finally, in an effort to further the study of rivalry, two websites are dedicated to the study and future understanding of rivalry. SportRivalry.com focuses on history and qualitative means to describe rivalry while KnowRivalry.com uses quantitative means to provide the public with fan data regarding the phenomenon.

Consequences of Rivalry

The rivalry phenomenon can influence fan perceptions and behavior toward the out-group in several positive or negative ways. For example, the presence of a rival can increase participant effort and performance (Kilduff, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010), but also participation in unethical behavior (Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016). For sport fans, the presence of a rival team can influence the way they associate with a followed team in public (Kimble & Cooper, 1992), likelihood to help people experiencing emergencies (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005), and willingness to consider anonymous aggression (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003; Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013). The presence of a rival can also make fans form a stronger bond with other favorite team supporters (Smith & Schwartz, 2003), thereby serving a positive role for fans by increasing group cohesiveness and group distinction (Berendt & Urich, 2015; Delia, 2015).

The rivalry phenomenon in sport also influences the way fans consume the sport. In particular, playing a rival team positively influences fan likelihood to attend a live game (Havard, Shapiro et al., 2013) and the amount they are willing to pay for tickets (Sanford & Scott, 2016). Rivalry can influence the way fans evaluate team branded merchandise (Kwak, Kwon, & Lim, 2015), team sponsors (Angell et al., 2016; Bee & Dalakas, 2013; Dalakas & Levin, 2005;

Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015), league-wide cause-related marketing (Nichols, Cobbs, & Raska, 2016), fan behavior (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Greive, 2005; Wenger & Brown, 2014), and player performance (Wann et al., 2006).

An important consequence of rivalry is understanding how fans react to failure by the out-group (e.g., rival team). For example, sport fans' joy at a rival team loss is similar, or even exceeds that experienced when a favorite team wins (Lehr, Ferreira, & Banaji, 2017; Mahony & Howard, 1998). Additionally, fans of the National Basketball Association (NBA) indicated a rival being likely to lose as one reason they would consider watching a rival team play someone other than the favorite team (Mahony & Moorman, 1999).

Schadenfreude (Heider, 1958), or taking pleasure in the demise of another, can help explain how and why sport fans react when a rival of their favorite team experiences failure. Evidence of schadenfreude has been found in sport (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012) and outside of sport (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). For example, Cikara, Botvinich, and Fiske (2012) found that baseball fans exhibited schadenfreude when a rival lost to a third neutral team, Leach and Spears (2009) observed fans displaying joy seeing another team lose after suffering in-group failure, and Dalakas, Melancon, and Sreboth (2015) found evidence of Cleveland Browns fans experiencing schadenfreude following the death of Baltimore Ravens owner Art Modell. Glory out of reflected failure (GORFing) also describes the excitement some fans experience when their rival team loses to a neutral team, and serves as a way to make them feel better about themselves and their favorite team (Havard, 2014; Havard & Hutchinson, 2017).

Future Directions in Sport Rivalry and Special Issue Articles

The study of rivalry in sport is relatively young, and therefore it is important to acknowledge how future study can help us better understand the phenomenon. An annual online discussion meeting, the Forum on Sport Rivalry held during college football's *Rivalry Week* in November, has been created to address current findings and future study into the phenomenon. To this point, much of the research so far has focused either on professional or high-level male collegiate team sports in the US. The study of rivalry will benefit by also using research context in women's sports, individual sports, and sports outside the US. Study on how rivalry is manifested online through social media or message boards would also add to the growing sport rivalry literature. Additionally, most research on

the rivalry phenomenon to this point has relied on fan recollection, either through interviews or survey-based data.

Observational investigation would add to our understanding of how rivalry influences fan behavior. Likewise, much of the current understanding on how rivalry influences fan behaviors and consumption is based on fan likelihood or willingness. As there is little understanding of the phenomenon that employs fan behavior data, additional investigation using this method should be conducted. Regarding the future investigation into how fans react to rival failure, quantitative means for measuring both schadenfreude (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012) and GORFing (Havard & Hutchinson, 2017) can assist researchers seeking to examine the differences between the two phenomena. Finally, more research using experimental settings through lab studies or field experiments would also improve our understanding regarding the influence rivalry has on sport fans.

The Current Special Issue

While recent research on rivalry has used both quantitative and qualitative means, research has almost exclusively focused on team sports. Two articles in this special issue focus on understanding the antecedents and characteristics of rivalry in individual sport. Specifically, Lamar Reams and Terry Eddy examine rivalry among Ultimate Fighting Championship participants, and focus on how the phenomenon can help promote the sport product. Scott C. Ambrose and Nathan Schnitzlein investigate antecedents and outcomes of rivalry in professional men's tennis.

Differences in rival perceptions have been measured at the collegiate level; however, little is known about how rivalry differs between fans of teams and conferences at the professional level. An article by Joe Cobbs, Daniel Sparks, and B. David Tyler investigates how intensity toward the rival team is different between fans that follow teams in the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association, (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Soccer (MLS). Finally, Tyler, Craig A. Morehead, Cobbs, and Timothy DeSchriver employ a new method for estimating the influence of rivalry on spectator sport consumption.

We are excited to present this special issue on the marketing implications of rivalry. As we have established, the area of study is growing and we hope this special issue encourages other researchers to investigate the phenomenon, and further our understanding of rivalry in sport.

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