Love – and Hate – Thy Enemy: The Benefits of Sport Spectators’ Disidentification with a Rival Team

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Introduction
Rivalries between fans of opposing sports teams are a widely prevalent phenomenon across different sports and leagues. A rival—defined as a “highly salient out-group that poses an acute threat to the identity of the in-group” (Tyler & Cobbs, 2013, p. 6)—is commonly seen as detrimental for fans of a team. The literature on team sports and research on intergroup relations focuses on the negative consequences of rivalries, such as schadenfreude, prejudice, hostility, aggression and violence (Cikara & Fiske, 2012; Lee, 1985; for an overview, cf. Havard, 2011, pp. 43-47).

However, rivalries in team sports are a double-edged sword with both negative and positive consequences. For example, Uhrich (2014) finds that the aversion and derogation of the archrival adds to fans’ enjoyment of team sports consumption. Theoretical arguments and initial empirical evidence suggest that the existence of a rival team can increase fans’ identification with their own team (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Luellen & Wann, 2010). Havard and Eddy (2013, p. 222) even speculate about “a fundamental need for rivalry” among team sport consumers. Despite these initial findings, the potential positive effects of rivalries are under-researched. The present research addresses this gap by examining whether and why rivalries—despite the overt hostility—can have beneficial effects for team sports consumers.

Theoretical Background
This research draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the concept of organizational disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). A key notion of SIT is that a person’s self-esteem is enhanced by membership in a favorable group (= in-group) and the existence of a strong out-group against which favorable (e.g., the own team defeats the rival) or unfavorable (e.g., the own team loses against the rival) comparisons are possible. Similarly, the concept of organizational disidentification stresses that people build a positive social identity by identifying with attractive organizations and/or disidentifying with organizations from which they perceive their identities to be separated. Disidentification involves a categorization of organizations into groups such as rivals or enemies. Thus, people define and affirm their self-concept by both who they are and who they are not (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt & Spears (2001) find that out-group threats to the in-group (e.g., perceived discrimination) can increase group identification. These theoretical arguments suggest that the existence of a rival team can help team sport consumers in defining and strengthening their own identity as fans of a particular team. We therefore propose that fans of sport teams desire and positively evaluate the existence of an archrival. In addition, we hypothesize that a fan’s disidentification with the rival team predicts identification with his/her favorite team.

Method and Results
In a pilot-study, we interviewed 41 fans of German Bundesliga soccer clubs Borussia Dortmund and Schalke 04. The two teams share arguably the most famous and heated rivalry in German sports. The purpose of this exploratory pilot-study was to obtain an initial assessment of fans’ evaluations of and feelings toward their archrival. The results indicate support for the proposition that fans see benefits in the existence of the archrival. Participants scored low on the item “I wish the archrival would be relegated to a lower division” (M = 2.71, SD = 2.12 on a seven-point scale with 1 = fully disagree to 7 = fully agree). In addition, 86.5% of the participants indicated that they wished the rival to return to the first division as soon as possible in case of relegation. Participants also showed strong agreement with the statements “Games against the archrival are the highlight of the season” (M = 5.76, SD = 1.3) and “I think it is good that the rival is in the same division as my favorite team” (M = 5.93, SD = 1.57).

In a second study, we conducted an online survey with 732 persons that were supporters of either Borussia Dortmund (n = 584) or Schalke 04 (n = 148). The goals of this study were 1) to assess the fans’ desire for rivalry in a
more indirect way and 2) to examine the relationship between the fans’ disidentification with the rival team and their identification with the own team. Disidentification and identification were measured with established multi-item scales from the literature. Participants were asked to rank the rival team in an imaginary end-of-season table with the instruction to choose a rank for the rival that maximizes their personal pleasure. Only 19% of the participants placed the rival team in the relegation zone of the table (rank 17 or 18), while the vast majority wanted the rival to remain in the first division. This result provides further support for the proposition that the existence of a rival team is beneficial for team sport consumers. A regression analysis shows that disidentification with the rival team significantly predicts identification with the own team, $b = .23$, $t(508) = 5.20$, $p < .001$. Disidentification with the rival also explains a small but significant proportion of variance in the team identification scores, $R^2 = .051$, $F(1, 508) = 27.10$, $p < .001$.

A follow-up study including fans of eight Bundesliga teams examines how different levels of rivalry intensity influence fans’ disidentification with the rival and identification with the own team. It also evaluates the extent to which these factors reduce different threats to the fans’ identity, such as distinctiveness and group esteem threats. Data collections will be finished by the end of this year and the results will be presented at the conference.

Innovations

Our study contributes to the team sport literature by 1) shifting the research attention from negative to positive consequences of rivalry, one of the game’s most fundamental phenomena and hence deserving of a balanced analysis, 2) presenting additional empirical support for the notion that rivalries in team sport are desired by fans and 3) providing the first empirical evidence that a feeling of separateness from a rival team contributes to fans’ identification with their own team. While fans of rival teams detest each other in public, they secretly appreciate the rival’s existence to enhance their self-concept and identification. This raises the question whether teams without an archrival could be missing a unique opportunity to strengthen the bond with their fans. This issue will be addressed in the follow-up study. Overall the findings of this research add to our understanding of the consequences that team sport rivalries have for fans, teams, leagues and society. The findings indicate that the functional aspects of rivalry should be considered in decisions on league realignments, new leagues or the design of competitions. In addition, from a public policy perspective, positive aspects of rivalry should also be considered in assessments of rival games that commonly focus on the prevention of violence. Rivalry may also be used in sport teams’ marketing activities.