Examining the Impact of Promotional Rivalry Titles on Fan Perceptions and Behavior in Intercollegiate Athletics

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The purpose of this on-going experimental study is to examine the impact of promotional titles given to rivalries on fan perceptions and behavior toward rival teams in intercollegiate athletics. Currently in intercollegiate athletics, universities use creative names to promote contests between rival teams (e.g., The Game – Ohio State/Michigan; Civil War – Oregon/Oregon State; Iron Bowl – Alabama/Auburn), which can create excitement surrounding the rivalry contest. Further, with over 40 intercollegiate programs changing conferences since 2010, it is important for athletic departments to identify teams within their new conferences to promote as rivals (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013; Havard & Eddy, 2013). However, it is empirically unknown at this time how the titles and logos used to promote rivalry games impact fan perceptions and behavior toward rival teams. For example, does having words such as War, Hate, Shootout, and Brawl cause fans to internalize more negative perceptions and display more negative behavior toward rival teams? This question is especially important for administrators at the numerous schools that have had rivalries impacted in recent years. Knowing how titles and logos can impact rival fan behavior, they may be able to promote a rivalry in a way that will increase fan interest but not elicit unwanted fan deviance, as the latter can be detrimental to both college athletics and individual institutions and athletic departments.

Rivalry can impact the way fans describe, perceive (Havard, 2014) and consume sport (Havard, Shapiro, & Ridinger, in press; Mahony & Moorman, 1999). Rivalry exists because people affiliate with others that support their favorite team (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990), and compete against supporters of a rival team (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1974). Variables such as favorite team consumption (Havard, Reams, & Gray, 2013), gender (Havard, Eddy, & Ryan, in press), and conference affiliation (Havard & Reams, in press) can impact the way fans perceive their rival teams. However, as previously stated, little is known about how titles can impact fan perceptions and behaviors toward rival teams, and the following research question is posed to examine this question:

RQ1: Do negatively worded promotional rivalry titles cause fans to display stronger negative perceptions of rival teams than neutral or positively worded titles

Rivalry can also impact fan behavior. For example, rivalry can impact fan physiological reactions (Hillman, Cuthbert, Bradley, & Lang, 2004), consumption of team sponsors (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Davies, Veloutsou, & Costa, 2006), willingness to help others in emergency situations (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). Additionally, rivalry has the potential to cause fan deviance if not monitored (Lee, 1985), displayed by the number of fans that reported they were likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward rival participants and fans (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003; Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann & Wadill, 2013). The following research question is posed to examine the impact of promotional titles on fan behavior:

RQ2: Do negatively worded promotional rivalry titles cause fans to be more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward fans and participants of rival teams than neutral or positively worded titles?

Research Setting and Method

This study consists of three phases, the first of which was used to identify a rival team of focus. Because the purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of promotional titles and logos on fan perceptions and behavior toward rival teams, it was important to use universities that did not share current on-going rivalries with other schools. For example, if established rivalries such as the Red River Classic (Texas Longhorns and Oklahoma
Sooners) were used to investigate the research questions, participants may evaluate the apparent change in rivalry title rather than the impact of title wording.

During conference realignment, the Memphis Tigers joined the American Athletic Conference and Western Kentucky University joined Conference USA. Both universities were faced with similar dilemmas in identifying another team within the conference to share a rivalry with, making the two universities appropriate institutions for examining the research questions. In fall 2014, 137 students at The University of Memphis and 132 students at Western Kentucky University were asked to identify the conference team they believed would serve as the biggest rival for their athletic teams moving forward (i.e., beginning in the 2015-2016 academic year). Students at The University of Memphis identified the Cincinnati Bearcats as the most likely rival and students at Western Kentucky identified the Middle Tennessee State Blue Raiders as their most likely rival.

The second phase of the study was designed to identify words representing negative, neutral, and positive sentiment to be used in the experiment. To satisfy this phase, 64 students at a university independent of Memphis or Western Kentucky were asked to evaluate ten terms such as hate, war, rivalry, trophy, battle, classic, and friendly to determine which term was most negative, most positive, and identify a neutral term. Specifically, students were asked to first rate the ten terms for their relative positive meaning (1 = Positive Term, 4 = Neutral Term, 7 = Negative Term). To ensure that question wording did not improperly bias student responses, participants were also asked to rate the terms in order from most negative to most positive meaning (1 = Negative Term, 5 = Neutral Term, 10 = Positive Term).

When asked to evaluate the terms for relative positive meaning, the term friendly (\(M = 2.14, SD = 1.51\)) was rated the most positive, and the term hate (\(M = 5.81, SD = 1.41\)) rated the most negative. When asked to evaluate the terms in order of negative to positive meaning, the term hate (\(M = 1.94, SD = 2.02\)) was rated the most negative, and the term friendly (\(M = 9.03, SD = 2.34\)) rated the most positive. Further, the term rivalry was rated the most neutral term in both questions. Following these findings, the terms friendly, rivalry, and hate were used in the third phase of the experiment.

The lead researcher next developed promotional logos using the three terms for the third phase of the experiment. For example, the terms used for the Memphis Tigers logo read The Blue and Red Friendly, The Blue and Red Rivalry, and 481 Miles of Hate (the distance between Memphis and Cincinnati). The terms used for the Western Kentucky logo read The Blue and Red Friendly, The Blue and Red Rivalry, and 96 Miles of Hate. To ensure that the promotional titles were causing differences in fan perceptions and behaviors, the three logos appeared exactly the same with only the titles altered. After the logos were created, the images were examined by the research team and a focus group of graduate sport commerce students at The University of Memphis and suggested edits were made.

In the third phase of the study, which is currently underway, fans of the Memphis Tigers and Western Kentucky Hilltoppers will be shown one logo at random (either negative, neutral, or positive), and then asked to report their perceptions of their rival team using the Sport Rivalry Fan Perception Scale (SRFPS: Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013), and their likelihood to consider committing acts of anonymous aggression (Wann et al., 2003; Wann et al., 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013). A MANOVA will be used to answer research question 1 (i.e., perceptions of the rival team), and an ANOVA will be used to answer research question 2 (i.e., willingness to consider anonymous acts of aggression).

The findings from this study will add to the literature addressing in-group bias and rivalry in intercollegiate athletics. Further, findings from the current study carry important implications for practitioners tasked with developing material with the goal of promoting rivalry between schools. Avenues for future study will also be discussed.