Rivalry in Major League Soccer: Antecedents to Rival Fan Discrimination

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As the world’s most popular spectator sport, soccer is full of rivalries at the national, regional, and club levels. Many of the most enduring clashes trace back decades and even centuries to underlying conflicts between groups of various types (e.g., social, geographical, religious, and political). For example, the Skopje derby (Macedonia) between FK Vardar and Sloga Jugomagnat is largely viewed as Macedonian Christians versus Albanian Muslims, with fault lines across both religious affiliation and native/immigrant status (Dmowski, 2013). Conversely, in the crowded spectator sporting space of the United States and Canada, relatively nascent Major League Soccer (MLS) rivalries have emerged from various antecedents within their own chronological context. The intensity of these rivalries, their contributing factors, and the influence on reactions to opposing fans are the subject of this study.

While rivalry has several positive social and professional benefits, such as enhanced group identification (Delia, 2015), match attendance (McDonald & Rascher, 2000), and television ratings (Tainsky & Jasielec, 2014), rivalry can also lead to negative consequences such as hate speech or violence (Guschwan, 2007). Consequently, a crucial question for soccer administrators is how to recognize and celebrate the positive aspects of rivalry while mitigating any negative social consequences. Are there certain triggers to rivalry that are most common across the sport? Is there a relationship between a rivalry’s antecedents and the intensity of the rivalry? Does a particular rivalry antecedent precipitate negative social consequences between fans when compared to other potential antecedents to rivalry? In this study, we address each of these questions within the context of the MLS.

Social identity theory (SIT) explains that individuals formulate their identity to some degree through alignment with social groups, where members share one or more traits (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By engaging in this self-categorization within the broader population, individuals realize several psychological (e.g., sense of belonging, self-esteem, aspiration) and sociological benefits (e.g., position themselves to others and establish status) (Mael & Ashforth, 2001). In doing so, individuals recognize ingroups as those groups in which they claim membership or affiliation, and outgroups signify those groups to which they do not belong (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Based on SIT, Tyler and Cobbs (in press) defined a rival as ‘a highly salient outgroup that poses acute threat to ingroup identity and/or esteem.’ This conceptualization is in accordance with Benkwitz and Molner (2012), who suggest identifying football (i.e., soccer) rivalries based on perceptions of threat while recognizing that rivalry is a multicausal phenomenon. Accordingly, Tyler and Cobbs (2015) uncovered 11 potential antecedents to rivalry within the three dimensions of conflict, peer, and bias.

To date, the research literature on soccer rivalries has focused primarily on the bias dimension, where members of an ingroup are either biased against a particular outgroup based on a perceived difference, or ingroup members perceive a particular outgroup to hold an unfair bias against their specific ingroup. However, practically all of this research has featured rivalries outside of North America. For instance, Majumdar (2008) noted that in India, the fans of Mohun Bagan traditionally represent the region’s original settlers and hold a perceived bias against the newcomer immigrant fans of East Bengal, who pose a threat to the original settlers’ socioeconomic establishment. As a result of this and several other qualitative examples from the literature (cf. Armstrong & Giulianiotti, 2001), we propose that the rivalry antecedents of bias—specifically cultural difference and perceived unfairness—are more strongly associated with discrimination against rival fans compared to other antecedents to rivalry.

To analyze this proposition, we surveyed fans recruited from internet message boards for each MLS team using Qualtrics software. Our efforts resulted in 419 valid responses with representation from each MLS team. Just over 94% of the sample was male; 68% were college graduates. The mean age of respondents was 32, and the average team identification score was 4.9 (out of 7.0) on a 6-item scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The survey asked respondents to name their favorite team, followed by an exercise to allocate 100 rivalry points across one or more of
that team’s opponents. Each respondent was then presented with a series of questions about their favorite team’s rivalry with the opponent to which they allocated the most rivalry points. The first set of items asked the fan use a 7-point scale to rate the importance of each of Tyler & Cobbs’ (2015) 11 antecedents as related to that rivalry. Using previously validated scales (e.g., Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), the next sets of questions measured the respondent’s prejudice (M = 4.32, SD = 1.61), relationship discrimination (M = 3.02, SD = 1.38), and schadenfreude (M = 3.54, SD = 1.72) toward that rival team’s fans, as well as the respondent’s dis-identification toward the top rival (M = 3.66, SD = 1.57). These four measures represented the dependent variables.

In the rating of rivalry antecedents, cultural difference was the sixth highest rated element (M = 4.82, SD = 1.62), while unfairness was the lowest rated antecedent in terms of mean importance to the respondents’ chosen rivalries (M = 4.33, SD = 1.75). The top rated antecedents were geography (M = 5.90, SD = 1.51) and frequency of play (M = 5.83, SD = 1.16). However, an interesting story emerged when we examined the measures of rivalry outcomes as related to these rivalry antecedents. We proposed that, compared to other rivalry antecedents, cultural difference and unfairness are more strongly related to discrimination against rival fans. To test this, we parsed the data into three groups for each rivalry antecedent: group A was composed of respondents that chose either 1 (extremely unimportant), 2 (unimportant), or 3 (somewhat unimportant) for a particular antecedent; group B consisted of respondents choosing 4 (neither important nor unimportant); and group C chose 5 (somewhat important), 6 (important), or 7 (extremely important) for that antecedent. Through conducting a MANOVA in SPSS, for each antecedent, we compared the 3 groups’ outcome measures. For example, we compared the relationship discrimination against rival fans for respondents that claimed cultural difference was unimportant to their rivalry (group A) to respondents claiming cultural difference was important to their rivalry (group C; as well as to fans claiming the antecedent was neutral [group B]).

Post hoc tests reveal that fans are significantly more discriminatory toward rival fans on all four dependent variables (all p < .01) when either the antecedent of cultural difference or unfairness is important to the rivalry (group 3) compared to fans of rivalries where the antecedent was unimportant (group 1) or neutral (group 2). Yet, this same pattern did not repeat itself for the other 9 antecedents of rivalry. These findings have considerable implications for sport administrators tasked with team marketing and event security. Where animosity toward rival fans is a concern, managers would be wise to emphasize elements of rivalry other than cultural differences or perceived unfairness to mitigate the likelihood of undesirable outcomes.