Investigating the Influence of Media Headlines on Fan Behavior

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Abstract 2017-420 Room: Columbia

The current on-going experimental study investigates the impact of media headlines and narratives on fan perceptions of and behavior toward rival teams. Rivalry in sport plays an important role in fan consumption and behavior. For example, people may feel more satisfaction when their favorite team defeats their rival team (Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013), show bias in favorite and rival team branded merchandise (Kwak, Kwon, & Lin, 2015), celebrate when a rival experiences failure (Havard, 2014; Zillman, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989), and evaluate player performance more positively for a favorite team than for a rival team (Wann, Koch, Knoth, Fox, Aljubaily, & Lantz, 2006). Further, sport fans can perceive multiple teams as rivals (Wann et al., 2016), and vary in their intensity toward stated teams (Tyler & Cobbs, in press).

Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) assert that rivalry has a constant presence for group members that can be heightened by specific events. Head to head competitions between a favorite and rival team can heighten the intensity of a rivalry. Lee (1985) stated that rivalry carries the capacity to foster negative sentiment and deviant behavior between fans. In fact, fans have evaluated contests between rival teams to be more violent than games between non-rivals (Raney & Kinally, 2009). Rivalry also can increase the amount of group cohesiveness (Delia, 2015), which can carry positive and negative consequences (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016).

The current study utilizes an experimental design that exposes fans to one of three media messages (e.g., either positive, neutral, or negative) in order to measure the impact the narrative has on fan rival perceptions and behavior toward the out-group. Research has found that being exposed to negative titles and logos used to promote rivalries can influence fans to perceive the rival in a more negative light and be more likely to consider derogative behavior toward out-group members (Havard, Grieve, & Wann, 2016). Based on these findings, practitioners can work to minimize negative fan behavior by responsibly promoting rivalries, which was a call by Dalakas & Melancon (2012). However, some fan behavior is beyond the control of practitioners, and seeing such negative behavior can be detrimental to organizations through legal and monetary means, along with the potential loss of consumers and sponsors that are turned off to the negative interaction. The current study seeks to investigate how such behaviors, along with the way media cover rivalry contests can impact fan behavior. The following hypotheses are offered:

H1: Fans exposed to negative media messages surrounding a rivalry game will report more negative perceptions of rival teams that fans exposed to neutral or positive messages.

H2: Fans exposed to negative media messages surrounding a rivalry game will report a higher likelihood of considering committing anonymous acts of aggression toward our-group members than fans exposed to neutral or positive messages.

Methods
Data collection is currently underway, and the study utilizes an experimental setting to test the influence of media coverage on rival fan perceptions and behavior. In particular, fans are exposed to either (a) a negative media headline and narrative that describes a fight between rival fans before a contest, (b) a neutral media headline and narrative that provides a preview of the rivalry matchup, or (c) a positive media headline and narrative that describes fans of rival teams participating together in a food drive to support the area food pantry. After reading the headlines and short narratives (designed to be read in 30 seconds or less), participants are asked to report their perceptions of the rival team and their likelihood of considering anonymous acts of aggression toward out-group members.

Instrument
The survey consists of five sections. In the first section, fans are asked to identify a favorite team and the biggest rival of that team. Participants are then asked to report their level of identification with said team using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS: Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In section two, respondents are exposed to one of the three experimental messages described above. After being given time to read and comprehend the media narrative, participants are asked a series of questions to ensure they understand (a) understand the message, and (b) evaluate the message consistent with the research design (e.g., identify a negative message as negative, a neutral message as neutral, and a positive message as positive). In the third section, fans report their perceptions of the rival team using the Sport Rivalry Fan Perception Scale (SRFPS: Havard et al., 2013). Next fans report their likelihood of considering anonymous acts of aggression such as tripping, breaking a leg, or hurting a member or supporter of the rival team (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003; Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann & Wadill, 2013). In the fifth and final section contains demographic questions.

Analysis
Data will be analyzed using SPSS 24 to investigate the hypotheses. To investigate H1, mean scores for the four facets of the SRFPS (e.g., out-group indirect competition, out-group prestige, out-group sportsmanship, and sense of satisfaction when the favorite team beats the rival team) will be compared among the experimental groups using a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANOVA). An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to test H2.

Discussion
Discussion will focus on interpreting the experimental findings and pertinent lessons for researchers and practitioners. For example, if the hypotheses are supported, practitioners can use the findings to show support for hosting social responsible events such as food drives involving rival fan bases. Theoretical contributions to the social identity theory and organizational disidentification will be discussed. Areas for future research will also be provided.