The purpose of the study was to explore the effect of perceived strength of rivalry on sponsor image and behavioral intentions toward naming-rights sponsors of rival teams in college football. Although research on the effects of partnerships with rival teams on fans’ reactions and/or perceptions of the brand has been appearing for over a decade (Dalakas & Levin, 2005), the volume of work is still quite limited (Bee & Dalakas, 2015). From the research that does exist, findings tend to be fairly consistent in that negative transfer effects on sponsoring brands have been found to exist among rival fans (Davies et al., 2006). Previous work on rivalry effects in the sponsorship literature has seen rivalry treated as a dichotomous concept, and the rivalries have generally been defined a priori by the researchers. Further, the existing literature has focused almost exclusively on very strong rivalries, often referred to as arch-rivalries (Havard, 2014). However, more recent work suggests rivalry is non-exclusive, continuous, and perspective-based (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017). Thus, in this study, participants’ identification with both a self-reported favorite team and a rival team with a stadium naming partner were examined as predictors of sponsor image and behavioral intentions. Perceptions of the strength of rivalry between the two teams were also collected.

A sample of 189 Amazon MTurk workers located in the USA completed a 24-item survey. Rivalry strength was operationalized by a continuous variable in the style of Tyler and Cobbs (2017), and measures of team identification (Trail et al, 2005), sponsor image, and behavioral intentions (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012) were adapted from the literature. The sample was stratified by state of residence, and participants were assigned to a version of the survey contextualized to one of seventeen institutions who have a corporate naming partner for their football stadium. These assignments were based on geographic proximity and/or shared conference affiliation between the sponsored team and the participant's state of residence, for the purpose of diversifying the sample. Since the focus of the study was on rival fans, participants who identified the assigned (sponsored) team as their favorite were removed from the study. Using OLS regression, identification with the sponsored team was found to have a positive relationship with sponsor image and behavioral intention, which was anticipated based on the existing sponsorship literature (Walraven et al., 2012). Unexpectedly, identification with the favorite team was a positive predictor of sponsor image and behavioral intentions toward the rival sponsor, and perceived strength of rivalry was a positive predictor of behavioral intentions. These findings are likely explained by effects of repeated exposures associated with team salience and spectating behaviours on brand awareness and brand equity. Further, naming-rights sponsorships may be less strongly associated with the team brand in consumers’ minds than the activation contexts used in past research on rivalry and sponsorship (e.g. NASCAR vehicle sponsors, shirt/jersey sponsors). Additional findings and discussion, as well as practical implications, will be offered in the presentation.