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Glory Out of Reflected Failure: The examination of how rivalry affects sport fans

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ABSTRACT

Most studies on participant or fan rivalry have employed quantitative methods to investigate the phenomenon (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Kimble & Cooper, 1992; Smith & Schwartz, 2003). The current study adds to the existing literature by using qualitative analysis to investigate the way fans make meaning of the rivalry. Intercollegiate football and men's basketball fans in the United States were interviewed about their perceptions of their favourite and rival teams, and the enjoyment they experienced when someone other than their favourite team defeated the identified rival. Social identity theory guided the investigation (Tajfel, 1974), and four themes were identified regarding fan reactions to rivalry: (1) socialisation, (2) in-group bias, (3) sense of satisfaction and (4) out-group indirect competition. Further, Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORFing) extends research on disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001), in-group bias (Tajfel, 1969; Turner, 1982), and *schadenfreude* (Heider, 1958) and asserts that fans will rejoice when their rival team has been defeated in indirect competition. Findings from the current study provide academics and administrators many avenues to further the understanding of fan social psychology and sport rivalry. Theoretical and practical implications of the current study along with areas for future research are presented.

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1. Introduction

A sport fan can follow a favourite team for various reasons (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004; Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Snyder, Lassegard, Ford, 1986; Wann, 1995; Wann and Branscombe, 1990, 1992) and research has investigated what influences him/her to consume at different levels (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2011; Funk & James, 2001, 2006). In the United States (US), identifying with a favourite intercollegiate team can help decrease student' sense of alienation (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), improve mental health (Wann, 2006) and assist in the integration to the college lifestyle and help retention measures (Wann & Robinson, 2002). Further, US institutions of higher education use sport to engage alumni and other important stakeholders (Toma, 2003) and fans spend large amounts of resources to display affiliation with their favourite collegiate teams (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002).

One area that is receiving more attention in the sport literature is how a fan may react to an opponent or rival of his/her favourite team. For example, rivals can add a level of excitement and suspense to consuming a favourite team (Kimble & Cooper, 1992), give the casual or avid fan a team to follow when their favourite team is not playing (Mahony & Moorman, 1999) and provide an outlet for self-esteem enhancement and bragging rights (Smith & Schwartz, 2003). Kilduff et al. (2010)

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identified antecedents to the rivalry phenomenon, and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) along with in-group bias (Tajfel, 1969; Turner, 1982) help explain why fans treat supporters of a rival team differently that those of a favourite team. Further, *schadenfreude* (Heider, 1958), or the pleasure one gets from the failure of another, provides a glimpse into the emotions fans experience when a rival is defeated by someone other than the favourite team.

Mahony and Moorman (1999) found that fans of professional basketball were more likely to watch their favourite team's rival play another team if the rival was a threat to their favourite team or if they were likely to lose. Further, fans' reactions to favourite and rival teams on-field production can have physiological (Hillman, Cuthbert, Bradley, & Lang, 2004), neurological (Cikara, Botninick, & Fiske, 2011), identity (Kimble & Cooper, 1992; Smith & Schwartz, 2003) and sponsor consumption implications (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Davies, Veloutsou, & Costa, 2006). However, the majority of existing research has either focused primarily on direct competitive situations or investigated indirect competition using quantitative methods. The current study adds to the literature on rivalry by offering a qualitative investigation of fan reactions to the phenomenon in both direct and indirect competition, using the context of US intercollegiate football and men's basketball. For the purposes of the current study, indirect competition refers to the situation where an identified rival team is playing a team other than the favourite team. Specifically, the following research question was formulated for the study:

> RQ: How do people make meaning of the success and failure of their rival team in US intercollegiate athletics in direct and indirect competitive situations?

The current study assists academics and administrators in further understanding the ways rivalry can affect sport fans. Such understanding is vitally important for sport administrators as fan loyalty is desired by all sport organizations, and rivalry can impact the ways fans interact with those in the in-group and out-group. A theoretical review focusing on social identity theory and in-group bias, along with relevant work on rivalry in sport is followed by a description of the methods used in the current study. The findings of the current study will be discussed and conclusions and future research will be offered.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Rivalry and social identity

Kilduff et al. (2010) investigated rivalry among participants in US intercollegiate basketball and described the phenomenon as subjective and relational in nature, and identified several antecedents to the phenomenon, including proximity, prior interaction and level of historical competitiveness. Additionally, the authors acknowledged that participants could experience rivalry with multiple teams, asserted that rivalry does not have to be reciprocated to exist and suggested that low-performing teams may consider a more successful team a rival as a way to gain status by association, even as the latter does not register the former in the same category. Social identity theory states that people will affiliate with groups of similar others in an attempt to enhance their self-esteem and comparative identity (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975). Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) utilized social identity theory to describe brand and community rivalry among two competing Australian automotive companies, and described rivalry as a continuous phenomenon that can be heightened by specific events, which prompts people to choose sides regardless of their vested interest in the competing groups. Further, Lalonde (1992) also relied on social identity theory to investigate participant evaluations of team and opponent performance following head-to-head contests. In the study, following seven losses, participants on a last place hockey team tended to evaluate the opponent in a negative light. In particular, the hockey participants evaluated the opposing team as more skilled and aggressive several times, but always identified the opponent as dirtier than their team.

Social identity theory builds from balance theory (Heider, 1958), which explains the need for individuals to maintain balance in relationships with others in either dyadic or triadic formations. For example, in order for balance to be maintained in a dyadic relationship, both people must either like (positive relationship) or dislike (negative relationship) one another. This helps to explain how a fan relates to his/her favourite team, but can also describe how two rival groups interact, since rivalry is described as a phenomenon existing on a dyadic level (Kilduff et al., 2010). This supports Tajfel's (1974) assertion that two groups must be present in order for rivalry to activate and Turner's (1975) claim that competition will exist when groups interact. In the case of a rivalry, teams represent a negative relationship, and because of the affiliation a fan has with his/her favourite team (Heider, 1958), he/she will tend to share the negative relationship of dislike for the opponent or rival of his/her favourite team (Dalakas & Levin, 2005).

Likewise, rivalry can impact the ways fans consume their favourite sports and teams. The inherent needs people have to positively compare to others (Festinger, 1954), and be favourably perceived by others (Heider, 1958) drive people to form in-groups with people similar to themselves (Tajfel, 1969). When fans of rival teams interact, they are categorized into separate groups (Turner, 1982), so that each can associate with others that support their common goal, thus forming separate in-groups (Tajfel, 1974). Through this action, an individual can positively compare himself/herself to others in society (Turner, 1975). Once people associate with a group of similar others, they can begin to adopt the identity of the collective (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990), fulfilling their desire to feel belonging to a group (Festinger, 1954). This helps explain how sport fans grow to experience and display such strong ties with their favourite teams and supporters of said team. Further, through the association with a favourite team, fans are able to garner the vicarious experience and achievements of the team (Bandura, 1977), which adds to their positive self-esteem as previously discussed.

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