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Reinvestigating the Impact of Conference Realignment on Rivalry in Intercollegiate Athletics

Cody T. Havard
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Abstract

The current study investigated the influence of a U.S. intercollegiate team competing in a new conference for multiple seasons on fan perceptions of rival teams and likelihood of considering anonymous aggression toward rival teams. Fans of teams that changed conferences during conference realignment reserved stronger negative perceptions of the former rival on factors involving on-field competition and stronger negative perceptions of the current rival on factors involving off-field competition. Additionally, fans were more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression against the former rival team than the current rival team. Implications and directions for future study are discussed.

Keywords: *Rivalry; fan rival perceptions; fan behavior; anonymous aggression; conference realignment*

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The current study reinvestigated how fans reacted to the loss of a rival team by following the framework used by Havard, Wann, and Ryan (2013). In particular, the authors investigated (1) how sport fans react to a change in most significant rival because of conference realignment and (2) how long it takes for fan perceptions of rival teams to change following conference realignment. Fan rival perceptions and willingness to consider acts of anonymous aggression toward the identified rival were compared between the rival in the current conference and the rival in the former conference in intercollegiate athletics. Findings from the current study are important to practitioners faced with identifying and promoting a rival team in a new athletic conference and will add understanding of how fundamental changes or reorganization in competition affiliation can impact sport fans.

Background and Hypotheses

Rivalry has been defined as “a fluctuating adversarial relationship existing between two teams, players, or groups of fans, gaining significance through on-field competition, on-field or off-field incidences, proximity, demographic makeup, and/or historical occurrences(s)” (Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013, p. 51). Further, an important factor that contributes to rivalry is history of competition (Havard, 2014; Kilduff, Elfенbein, & Staw, 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). History is important to investigate in the current study because the teams used in the sample have played their new identified rivals for a period of three to four years. In their work on the phenomenon, Tyler and Cobbs (2015) asserted that historical parity, or competition for an extended amount of time, contributes to fans perceiving other teams as rivals. Further, Kilduff et al. (2010) suggest that rivalry is driven more by long-term than short-term competition. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974), research on rivalry has focused on the influence the phenomenon has on individual sport fans and fan groups (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Dalakas, Melancon, & Sreboth, 2015; Havard, 2014, 2016; Havard, Eddy, & Ryan, 2016; Havard & Reams, 2016; Havard, Shapiro, & Ridinger, 2016). Because competitive history is so important to the formation and existence of rivalry, the recent bevy of schools that changed athletic conferences would fundamentally alter teams seen as rivals to fan groups. For example, when the Texas A&M Aggies left the Big 12 Conference (Big 12) to join the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the Texas Longhorns were left to fill the void caused by no longer playing their biggest in-state rival on an annual basis.

Havard, Wann et al. (2013) investigated the impact of conference realignment on fan rival perceptions and likelihood of considering anonymous aggression toward out-group members. They found that fans of teams changing athletic conferences reported stronger negative perceptions of the current rival team in the conference their team was leaving than the anticipated rival in the new conference. It is important to note that Havard, Wann et al. conducted their study before schools had joined their new conferences. Because schools have now played three to four

competitive seasons in their new conference, it is important to reinvestigate the impact realignment had on fan rival perceptions and intentions. A reexamination of the impact of conference realignment is important because it can shed light regarding how long it takes fans to shift their negative feelings away from a previous rival onto to a current one (Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015).

Based on the findings that fans reported stronger negative perceptions of their current rival from an existing conference (than the anticipated rival in a new conference), and the assertion that history, specifically long-term competition versus short-term competition, is an important antecedent to rivalry (Havard, 2014; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015), it was expected that fans would report stronger negative perceptions toward the rival in the former conference than the rival in the current conference. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1: Fans will report more negative perceptions of the former rival than the current rival.

In a series of studies, Wann and associates found that fans highly identified with their teams were more likely to consider anonymous aggression toward participants and fans of rival teams than less identified, casual fans (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003; Wann, Peterson Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013). Based on these findings, Havard, Wann et al. (2013) investigated anonymous aggression toward current and anticipated rival teams. The authors found that fans were more likely to consider committing acts of anonymous aggression toward members of the current rival than the anticipated rival. Based on the collective findings and the importance of history on rivalry (Havard, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015), we expect that fans will indicate higher likelihood to consider anonymous acts of aggression toward the former rival than toward the current rival.

H2: Fans will be more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and fans of the former rival than toward the current rival.

Method

A link to a survey constructed using Qualtrics software was posted on team-specific, non-subscription fan pages of intercollegiate programs that had changed athletic conference affiliation from 2010 to 2013 (e.g. texags.com, killerfrogs.com, blockm.com). The survey was posted on non-subscription-based websites to allow individuals without access to premium team and fan pages to complete the survey. The survey took approximately 10 minutes for respondents to complete, and participants were given a chance to enter a raffle for one of two \$25 VISA gift cards. Data collection lasted approximately three weeks.

Participants

A total of 319 completed surveys were collected. After cleaning the data for incomplete and/or uninterpretable responses, 248 usable surveys were retained for analysis, for a 77.7% usable response rate. The vast majority of respondents were white (92.1%), male (93.3%), and ranged in age from 18 to 74. The majority of fans were alumni of the school where their favorite team plays (73.7%), and all participants reported being fans of their favorite team for at least 5 years, with many indicating they followed their favorite team their whole lives; 42.9% of respondents indicated they held season tickets for their favorite team.

Instrument

The instrument contained eight sections, and the first section asked participants to identify their favorite team, indicate their level of identification with the favorite team using the 7-item Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). (For more information on the SSIS, see Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Section two requested that participants identify the team they viewed as the biggest rival in their favorite team's current conference. In the third section, participants provided their perceptions of the current rival team using the four factor, 12-item SRFPS (Havard, Gray et al., 2013).

In the fourth section, participants were prompted to respond to scenarios measuring their likelihood to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward players, coaches, and fans of the current rival team (Havard, Wann et al., 2013). For information about the items used to measure anonymous aggression, see Wann et al. (2003), Wann et al. (1999), and Wann and Wadill (2013). Sections five, six, and seven replicated two, three, and four, respectively, using the identified former rival. The eighth and final section contained demographic questions.

Results

Preliminary Results

Items and scales were averaged to create a single unit for each measure, and each displayed adequate reliability, with α ranging from .747 to .929 (Table 1). Descriptive data for the scales used in the current study are also available in Table 1. The three teams represented most in the current study were the Texas A&M Aggies ($n = 133$, 53.6%), Missouri Tigers ($n = 46$, 18.5%), and TCU Horned Frogs ($n = 45$, 18.1%). The teams identified most as current rivals were the LSU Tigers ($n = 124$, 50%), Arkansas Razorbacks ($n = 41$, 16.5%), and Baylor Bears ($n = 42$, 16.9%), and the teams identified most as former rivals were the Texas Longhorns ($n = 136$, 54.8%), Kansas Jayhawks ($n = 43$, 17.3%), and Utah Utes ($n = 22$, 8.9%).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability for SSIS, SRFPS sub scales, and Anonymous Aggression

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
SSIS	7.36	0.68	.807
Current OIC	4.06	1.28	.812
Current OS	5.00	1.50	.906
Current SoS	5.79	1.06	.747
Current OAP	3.99	1.64	.888
Current Anonymous Aggression	1.43	0.71	.929
Former OIC	5.81	1.92	.968
Former OS	4.64	1.68	.900
Former SoS	6.16	1.05	.781
Former OAP	3.00	1.76	.925
Former Anonymous Aggression	1.64	1.44	.820

Testing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 stated that fans would report stronger negative perceptions of the rival in the former conference than the rival in the current conference. Before analysis on the hypothesis was conducted, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) in SPSS 22 was used to examine if the specific team a fan followed impacted rival perceptions of either the current or former rival. In particular, fans of Texas A&M made up the majority of the sample, so a dummy code was created to examine if fans of Texas A&M significantly differed from fans of other schools in the sample. Significant differences were present (Pillai's Trace .118, $F(4, 490) = 16.46, p < .001$) regarding out-group indirect competition $F(1, 493) = 6.99, p = .008$, out-group fan sportsmanship $F(1, 493) = 39.80, p < .001$, and sense of satisfaction $F(1, 493) = 23.25, p < .001$. In all instances, fans of Texas A&M rated their rival teams more negative than fans of other teams.

Because the current study was investigated main effect differences regarding rivalry and conference realignment, a two-way MANCOVA was run to test Hypothesis 1. A two-way MANCOVA was used to control for differences caused by favorite team (e.g., Texas A&M and all other schools) and fixed variable interactions. The amount a fan identifies with their favorite team was included as a covariate because team identification has been found to impact various fan reactions (Havard et al., 2016; Wann et al., 2016). Significant differences existed between fan perceptions of the current rival and former rival (Pillai's Trace .345, $F(4, 487) = 64.17, p < .001$). Significant differences were present for all four rivalry factors measured. Regarding out-group indirect competition, $F(1, 490) = 156.67, p < .001$, and sense of satisfaction $F(1, 490) = 17.24, p < .001$, fans reported stronger negative perceptions of the former rival than the current rival. For out-group academic prestige $F(1, 490) = 41.45, p < .001$, and out-group fan sportsmanship $F(1, 490) = 6.82, p = .009$, fans reported stronger negative perceptions of the current rival than the former rival, thus partially supporting Hypothesis 1 (Table 2).

Table 2*SRFPS Mean Scores by Conference Realignment for OIC, OAP, OS, and SoS*

Rival Team	Scale							
	OIC		OAP		OS		SoS	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Current Rival	4.05**	1.28	3.99**	1.64	5.00*	1.50	5.79**	1.05
Former Rival	5.81**	1.92	3.00**	1.76	4.64*	1.68	6.16**	1.05

* significant difference at the .05 level

** significant difference at the .001 level

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 stated that fans would indicate higher likelihood to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and fans of the former rival than the current rival. First, frequency distributions (Table 3) for each act showed that the vast majority of fans reported they would not consider committing acts of anonymous aggression. However, small groups of respondents indicated they would consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward rival participants and fans of both current and former rival teams.

Similar to the test in Hypothesis 1, we used an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the impact of specific teams followed (e.g., Texas A&M and all other schools) on likelihood to consider acts of anonymous aggression and it yielded no significant results. Previous work showing that team identification influences fan likelihood to consider anonymous aggression warranted team identification being included as a covariate (Wann et al., 1999; Wann et al., 2003; Wann & Wadill, 2013). Therefore, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test Hypothesis 2. The ANCOVA revealed significant differences $F(1, 493) = 4.88, p = .028$. Specifically, fans were more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and fans of the former rival ($M = 1.65, SD = 1.44$) than participants and fans of the current rival ($M = 1.43, SD = 0.71$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 3
Frequency Distributions (percentages) of Fans' Willingness to Commit Anonymous Acts of Aggression toward Rival Participants and Fans

Item (Willingness to)	Response (Current/Former)							
	1 (Definitely Would Not)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 (Definitely Would)
Trip Star Player	78.6 / 74.2	6.0 / 2.4	2.8 / 5.6	2.0 / 0.8	2.0 / 2.4	1.6 / 2.4	0.8 / 1.6	6.0 / 10.5
Trip Coach	74.2 / 73.8	6.5 / 3.6	3.6 / 5.6	2.4 / 1.2	1.6 / 2.0	2.0 / 2.8	0.8 / 0.8	8.9 / 10.1
Trip Fan	76.2 / 72.2	8.1 / 3.2	2.4 / 4.8	3.2 / 3.6	2.0 / 2.4	0.8 / 2.4	0.8 / 1.6	6.5 / 9.7
Break Star Player Leg	92.7 / 88.7	2.4 / 2.4	1.2 / 0.8	0.4 / 2.0	0.8 / 1.2	0.4 / 1.6	0.8 / 0.0	1.2 / 3.2
Break Coach Leg	90.7 / 90.3	2.8 / 2.0	1.2 / 0.0	1.2 / 0.8	0.8 / 0.8	0.8 / 0.8	0.4 / 0.8	2.0 / 4.4
Break Fan Leg	94.0 / 90.3	2.4 / 1.6	0.4 / 0.4	0.8 / 1.2	0.4 / 2.0	0.0 / 0.4	0.4 / 0.8	1.6 / 3.2
Murder Star Player	96.4 / 94.8	0.4 / 1.2	0.4 / 0.0	0.4 / 0.0	0.4 / 0.8	1.2 / 0.8	0.0 / 0.4	0.8 / 2.0
Murder Coach	96.0 / 94.4	0.4 / 0.8	0.8 / 0.0	1.2 / 0.8	0.4 / 0.4	0.4 / 0.8	0.4 / 0.4	0.4 / 2.4
Murder Fan	96.0 / 95.2	0.4 / 0.8	0.8 / 0.0	1.2 / 0.8	0.4 / 0.4	0.4 / 0.4	0.4 / 0.4	0.4 / 2.0

Discussion

The current study investigated the impact of conference realignment on fan rival perceptions and intentions (Havard, Wann et al., 2013). It is important to briefly mention potential limitations to the current study. Participants were reached using team-specific fan pages, and the level of identification of respondents could have resulted in findings that would be different from respondents reached using other means. Additionally, because the data were collected using the online format, responses could differ if other collection methods were used.

The current study found that significant differences exist between perceptions of current and former rival teams. Specifically, fans held stronger negative perceptions of the former rival regarding the rivalry factors involving on-field competition, supporting previous findings (Havard, Wann et al., 2013). At least three years after beginning competition in a new conference, fans were still less likely to support their former rival team in indirect competition and indicated they would experience greater satisfaction by defeating the former rival in direct competition than the current rival. These findings support rivalry literature that states both history and exposure to an opposing team can play important roles in creating and fostering a rivalry (Havard, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Further, the findings support research that long-term and consistent competition influence fan perceptions of rival teams (Kilduff et al., 2010). In fact, the frequency of competition can be most important in developing a rivalry in fan minds (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). The current study partially supports this findings. For example, fans reserved stronger negative perceptions of teams they shared a longer history with when it came to on-field competitive characteristics.

However, the findings that fans reserved stronger negative perceptions of the identified rival in the current conference for the out-of-competition rivalry factors of academic prestige and fan sportsmanship contrast those of Havard, Wann et al. (2013). These findings support the in-group bias literature describing how people will describe members of an out-group (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Havard & Eddy, 2013; Maass et al., 1989; Wann & Dolan, 1995; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Additionally, aside from consistent and long-term competition, fans may look to other characteristics to compare against a rival. For example, participants in the current study looked to off-field characteristics in an attempt to derogate their rival team (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Further, characteristics of opposing universities can foster rivalry (Kilduff et al., 2010), which helps to explain participants in the current study focusing on institutional prestige and sportsmanship to derogate a recently identified rival. Regarding history of competition, it is also noteworthy to point out that fans of Texas A&M displayed stronger negative perceptions of their rival teams than fans of other schools. A unique aspect of Texas A&M versus other schools in the sample is that the Aggies share a longer history with their current rival than most other schools, having played LSU 54 times.

Second, respondents indicated they were more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and fans of the former rival team than the current rival team, which is consistent with fan-reported intentions before playing in the current conference (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013). Again, the history that exists between teams that have played each other extensively seemingly has not dissipated in the three- to four-year period the teams have not played (Havard, 2014; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). These findings support previous work on fan anonymous aggression (Wann et al., 2003; Wann et al., 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013). Finally, it is important to note that level of team identification was controlled for when examining Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Doing so provides robustness to the current findings as the influence of team identification was incorporated into the model.

Implications

Findings from the current study support the assertion that conference rivalry in U.S. intercollegiate athletics impacts the way fans perceive and behave toward rival teams (Havard & Eddy, 2013; Havard, Wann, & Ryan 2013). The current study adds to the rivalry and competition realignment literature by showcasing what happens after fans have been exposed to the rival team for a number of years. Regarding anonymous aggression, findings add to the existing literature (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013; Wann et al., 2003; Wann et al., 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013), and support Lee's (1985) assertion that if not properly maintained, rivalry can cause aggression between in-group and out-group members.

Sport marketers can garner important implications from the current findings. First, as the current study illustrates, it is important for marketers to understand that time is needed to build and foster rivalries in new conferences or leagues, and fans will often hold onto their feelings toward the former rival. In the current study, fans were more negative toward their former rival regarding on-field characteristics (out-group indirect competition, sense of satisfaction) and more negative toward their current rival regarding off-field characteristics (out-group academic prestige, out-group sportsmanship). If marketers want to promote the current rival as an alternative and possible replacement of the former rival, it may be wise to avoid using on-field characteristics to do so until longer periods of time (and competition between the favorite and current rival) have passed.

Because of the importance of history and prior competition, it is important that marketers pay attention to the desires of fan bases when choosing a rival in new conference. At the very least, marketers need to research potential rivals using the antecedents and characteristics discussed in the current study. It is also important that teams and marketers work with the rival school in order to promote the rivalry to fans of both teams to help establish and grow the rivalry.

Another implication for sport managers can be found in the descriptive frequencies fans provided regarding the anonymous aggression questions. The vast

majority of fans indicated they definitely would not consider committing the anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and rival teams; however, there were small groups of fans that indicated high likelihood of doing so. Inspection of the frequency distribution shows that fans indicated the highest likelihood to trip a participant or fan of the rival team than break a leg or commit murder. This is important because in sport, practitioners often use creative promotions and skits to increase fan interest surrounding a rivalry game. Findings in the current study illustrate that managers should show caution when using a rival team to control potential negative fan behaviors.

Future Study

More research is required to fully understand how fans begin to replace negative feelings toward the former rival with negative feelings toward the current rival. Additionally, research is needed to examine why fans hold stronger negative feelings about on-field competition toward the former rival and off-field competition toward the current rival. Both quantitative and qualitative methods should be utilized to further understanding of these issues. Future study should attempt to replicate the current research in different cultures and sports where rivalries change.

Specific to the conference realignment phenomenon, it is important for future researchers to investigate how fans have reacted to their favorite teams moving conferences and how that has impacted their consumption intentions. As the current study found, fans were more negative toward the current rival than the former rival only on the two off-field competition factors of the SRFPS, so it important that future research continue to take a longitudinal approach to investigate the topic. Finally, if the former rival teams begin to play each other again, future research should investigate the impact the renewed rivalry has on the rivalry in the current conference.

The current study investigated how playing in a new conference for a short amount of time impacted rival perceptions and anonymous aggression considerations toward current and former rival teams. Findings illustrated that fans reserved stronger negative feelings toward the current rival on off-field competition factors but maintained their negative feelings toward the former rival on on-field competition rivalry factors. Fans were also more likely to consider acts of anonymous aggression toward participants and fans of the former rival team. It is important that academics and practitioners understand how changing conference affiliation can impact perceptions of rival teams, and the current study assists in this pursuit.

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