

# Rivalry Versus Hate

## *Measuring the Influence of Promotional Titles and Logos on Fan Rival Perceptions*

Cody T. Havard  
Daniel L. Wann  
Frederick G. Grieve

### Abstract

The current study used an experimental design to examine how exposure to promotional titles and logos can influence fan rival perceptions. Students attending two schools that moved athletic conferences, and therefore, began rivalries with teams in their new conference, were exposed to either a neutral or negative fabricated title and logo meant to promote the new rivalry. They then reported their perceptions of the rival team. Results showed that students exposed to the neutral title were less likely to support their rival against another team than students exposed to the negative title. Further, students exposed to the negative title believed their rival fans behaved more poorly. Important implications and ways practitioners can use the data are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Rivalry, fan rival perceptions, promotional titles and logos, promotion of rivalry, experimental design*

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**Cody T. Havard** is an associate professor of Sport Commerce in the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management at The University of Memphis.

**Daniel L. Wann** is a professor of psychology at Murray State University.

**Frederick G. Grieve** is a professor of psychology and the Director of the Doctor of Psychology in Applied Psychology program at Western Kentucky University.

Please send correspondence to Cody T. Havard, [chavard@memphis.edu](mailto:chavard@memphis.edu)

Rivalry has increasingly been used to promote the on-field product between teams. This can be especially helpful to schools that find themselves competing in new athletics conferences. For example, when the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers joined the Big Ten Conference, officials decided they would play their last football game of the season against the Iowa Hawkeyes (O’Gara, 2016). Similarly, the Pac-12 slated their two newest member schools, the University of Colorado Buffaloes and the University of Utah Utes against each other (Kosmider, 2016). These moves by the conference offices can be seen, among other things, as an attempt to introduce and build new rivalries between the new schools and existing conference membership.

The rationale behind using rivalry to promote the on-field product is that fans will be more interested in their favorite team because they are playing a rival (Havard, Shapiro, & Ridinger, 2016) and engage or become invested in the conference in which their favorite team competes. Further, fan engagement surrounding rivalry will continue to increase as the teams share growing competitive history (Converse & Reinhard, 2016). This tactic works with varying degrees. While it is to be seen if the Cornhuskers game against Iowa (The Heroes Game) grows in popularity (Christopherson, 2016), one attempt at creating and promoting a new rivalry that has not worked as well is the University of Connecticut Huskies’ failed attempt to start a football rivalry with the University of Central Florida Knights coined The Civil ConFLiCT (Kren, 2016).

As schools attempt to use rivalry to promote their athletic teams, it is important to examine the manner and extent to which rivalry games increase negative fan perceptions or feelings toward the out-group. Of particular interest is the influence a promotional title and logo can have on the way a fan perceives a rival team. In the current experiment, we examine how fan rival perceptions are influenced by exposure to either a neutral or negative title and logo.

### Background

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 occurrence(s)” (Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013, p. 51). Additionally, sport fans can identify multiple teams as rivals (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017; Wann et al., 2016), and perceptions of those teams can vary based on how closely a fan follows a favorite team (Wann et al., 2016), or the order of importance fans place on those rivals (Havard & Hutchinson, 2017; Tyler & Cobbs, 2017). The importance of the rival can also influence the level of negative perceptions toward rival teams (Havard & Reams, 2017). For example, fans reserve more negative perceptions for primary or main rivals than teams they see as secondary rivals.

Lee (1985) asserted that rivalry has the capacity to cause out-group derogation, and group behavior can become overly negative if not properly controlled. Raney

and Kinnally (2009) found that fans watching rivalry games on television rated them more violent than non-rivalry games. Fans with higher levels of identification with their favorite team were more likely to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants and fans of the rival team (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003; Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999; Wann & Waddill, 2013). Additionally, fans reserved stronger negative perceptions of a former rival team than a current or new rival team (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013). Further, fans with higher level of team identification (Wann et al., 2016), male fans, (Havard, Eddy, & Ryan, 2016), and fans of teams that lost the last rivalry game (Havard, Reams, & Gray, 2013) all reported stronger negative perceptions of rival teams than their contemporaries, and fan aggression can be influenced the type of messaging administrators employ surrounding the game (Berendt & Uhrich, 2017). In particular, acknowledging rather than downplaying a rivalry produced lower levels of fan aggression.

To examine the influence of wording used in promotional titles and logos, the current study used an experimental design in which participants were exposed to either a neutral or negative promotional rivalry title and indicated their perceptions toward the rival team. It was expected that the negativity of the title would influence perceptions of the out-group (rival). Psychological research has found that individuals are often particularly sensitive to negative stimuli as this information tends to be highly salient, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the negativity bias (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008). In sport fan settings, researchers have suggested that the negativity bias may partially explain fans' negative reactions to seasons that were generally successful yet ended with a loss in the playoffs (Wann et al., 2017). Additionally, negative stimuli could prime negative thinking, a process that has been implicated in aggressive reactions (Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995; Berkowitz, 1989), including the responses of sport fans (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Wann & James, in press). The following hypothesis was developed:

**Hypothesis:** Fans exposed to the negative title and logo would indicate stronger negative perceptions toward the rival than fans exposed to the neutral title and logo.

## Method

### Experimental Design

To gain a more realistic measurement of how a rival title and logo influence rivalry, two schools that changed athletic conferences were targeted. This is important because the authors believed that if fans with existing rivalries and rivalry names were exposed to a new neutral or negative logo, they may indicate their level of agreement with the title than rather their actual perceptions and behavioral intentions toward the rival team. After all, history of competition is

an important antecedent and characteristic of rivalry (Converse & Reinhard, 2016; Havard, 2014; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015), so a person may react negatively if they believe a rivalry name is being changed for promotional purposes. In other words, with new rivals, one of the few things that may influence the fans' perspectives on the new team is how the rivalry is framed in the promotional title. To accomplish this, fans of the men's basketball teams at The University of Memphis and Western Kentucky University were used.

First, a new rival team had to be identified for each school. To accomplish this, researchers at both schools polled current undergraduate sport management and psychology students as to which team they believed would serve as the biggest rival for the men's basketball team the upcoming season (Memphis,  $n = 137$ ; Western Kentucky,  $n = 132$ ). The University of Cincinnati Bearcats were identified as the biggest rival by Memphis students and the Middle Tennessee State University Blue Raiders by Western Kentucky students.

In the next phase of the experiment, undergraduate psychology students ( $n = 64$ ) at a neutral school (i.e., not Memphis or Western Kentucky) were exposed to a list of 10 rivalry words ranging from positive to negative meaning. Students were asked to rate their perceptions of the words from 1 (*most positive*) to 7 (*most negative*) in terms of both positive meaning and negative meaning (with 4 representing *neutral*). Mean scores were gathered for each word, and the chosen title was identified using the most neutral and highest (i.e., negative) scores. The two words identified were Rivalry (rated as most *neutral*;  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) and Hate (rated as most negative;  $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). Descriptive data for the rivalry words can be found in Table 1.

In the third phase, the researchers developed two identical logos (see appendix), with the only difference being the wording used. For example, the neutral title read, "Blue and Red Rivalry" and the negative title read, "481 (or 96) Miles of Hate".<sup>1</sup> Next, the lead researcher consulted with graduate students enrolled in a sport marketing class to ensure the titles correctly represented the intended nature. In the fourth and final stage, undergraduate students enrolled at Memphis and Western Kentucky completed a survey in which they were exposed to either the neutral or negative title. They then indicated their perceptions of the rival team.

### Instrument

The instrument used in phase four contained four sections. First, students were asked to indicate their level of identification with either Memphis or Western Kentucky Men's Basketball using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Next, they were exposed to one of the two fabricated promotional titles and logos and read a passage stating that, moving forward, any

<sup>1</sup>481 miles is the approximate distance between Memphis, TN and Cincinnati, OH. 96 Miles of Hate was used for Western Kentucky/Middle Tennessee as it is the approximate distance between Bowling Green, KY and Murfreesboro, TN.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations for Rivalry Words*

<b>Rivalry Word</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
<b>Hate</b>	5.81	1.41
War	5.45	1.52
Battle	4.33	1.71
<b>Rivalry</b>	3.77	1.84
Game	3.02	1.42
Series	2.97	1.40
Cup	2.73	1.36
Classic	2.59	1.39
Trophy	2.58	1.46
Friendly	2.14	1.51

*Note:* 1 = Positive Term; 4 = Neutral Term; 7 = Negative Term

communication or mediated messages about games between the two teams would use the presented title and logo. As a control measure, students were asked to write out the name of the rivalry, indicate whether they believe the title was positive, neutral, or negative, and explain their response.

The third section asked students to indicate their perceptions of the rival team by completing the four facet Sport Rivalry Fan Perception Scale (SRFPS; Havard, Gray et al., 2013). The SRFPS was originally developed using fans of intercollegiate athletics, and measures fan willingness to support the rival against another team, perceptions of rival academic prestige, perceptions of rival fan behavior, and the satisfaction received when their favorite team defeats the rival. Sample SRFPS statements read, “I would support the identified rival in a championship game” (OIC), “The academic prestige of the identified rival is poor.” (OAP), “I feel a sense of belonging when my favorite team defeats my rival team.” (SoS), and “Fans of the identified rival team are not well behaved at games.” (OS). The SRFPS was used in the current study so that higher reported scores indicate stronger negative perceptions of the rival team for all factors. Demographic questions made up the fourth section of the instrument. All measurements used in the study were found to reliable, with Cronbach’s alphas ranging from  $\alpha = .822$  to  $\alpha = .976$ . Descriptive data can be found in Table 2. Students took about 10 minutes to complete the instrument, and were not compensated for their participation in any phase of the study.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for Measures Used for Analysis*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS)	4.30	1.80	.928
Out-group Indirect Competition (OIC)	5.74	1.27	.814
Out-group Academic Prestige (OAP)	3.74	2.20	.868
Out-group Sportsmanship (OS)	3.68	1.54	.979
Sense of Satisfaction (SoS)	4.76	1.94	.919

## Results

Surveys in which the participant (1) could not correctly identify the name of the rivalry or (2) did not correctly label the promotional title (e.g., a student exposed to the negative title was expected to indicate the title was negative) were removed from the sample. After non-usable responses were removed, a total of 117 usable surveys (*neutral title and logo* = 68; *negative title and logo* = 49) were analyzed to test the hypothesis.

### Hypothesis

Previous research into the rivalry phenomenon indicated that rival perceptions could be influenced by team identification (Wann et al., 2016) and the school a fan attends or follows (Havard, 2016). For these reasons, a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was used to test hypothesis 1 in order to control for both team identification and school. The MANCOVA results showed a significant difference was present based on the promotional title and logo to which students were exposed (Wilks' Lambda  $.918(4, 109) = 2.49, p = .048$ ). Univariate analysis indicated that students exposed to the negative title reported stronger negative perceptions of rival fan behavior than fans exposed to the neutral title ( $F(1, 112) = 4.30, p = .04$ ). Fans exposed to the neutral title were less likely to support rival than those exposed to the negative title ( $F(1, 112) = 5.65, p = .019$ ). No significant differences were found regarding out-group academic prestige or sense of satisfaction from beating the rival. Descriptive data can be found in Table 3. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

**Table 3**

*Means, Standard Deviations for Promotional Title influence on Rival Perceptions and Anonymous Aggression*

	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>
Rivalry (Neutral)	5.95*	1.21	3.53	1.29	3.43*	1.20	4.66	1.68
Hate (Negative)	5.45*	1.30	4.03	1.32	4.02*	1.12	4.89	1.48

*Note:* Significant at the .05 level

### Discussion

The current study examined how exposure to a promotional title and logo influenced fan perceptions toward an out-group (rival team). Before continuing, we will briefly discuss possible limitations to the current study. One possible limitation is the small sample size in the current study. This, combined with the data collection period (two seasons) may have impacted the results. However, because the intent was to test the influence of a promotional title and logo on fan rival perceptions and behavior, it was important that too much time not pass to try and limit the influence of repeated and regular competition.

Results indicated that exposure to different titles and logos influenced student perceptions of their rival team. In particular, students exposed to the negative title (*hate*) believed rival fans behaved more poorly than students exposed to the neutral title (*rivalry*). This supports prior work on in-group bias (Tajfel, 1974) and the rivalry phenomenon (Havard, 2014). Further, it would be expected that exposure to a word such as *hate* would increase the level of negativity toward the outgroup. The current results also lend support to findings that indicate the type of messaging used by administrators can influence fan aggression (Berendt & Uhrich, 2017).

An interesting finding was that students exposed to the neutral title (*rivalry*) reported being less willing to support another team than those exposed to the negative title (*hate*). Even though the opposite relationship was expected, we may refer to the previous work on schadenfreude (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Dalakas, Melancon, & Sreboth, 2015; Heider, 1958) and Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORFing: Havard, 2014; Havard, Wann, & Ryan, in press) to help explain this finding. These findings suggest that exposure to the word *rivalry* could, in fact, have more influence on creating feelings of rivalry than a negative word

such as *hate*, which is a very important outcome of the research. In other words, using a word such as *rivalry* could help create feelings of rivalry (i.e., not willing to support the rival no matter who they are playing), whereas a negative word such as *hate* builds animosity, but not necessarily rivalry, among groups. Of course, it is also possible to explain this finding through competition and comparison (Turner, 1975), meaning that fans exposed to the negative title may want their rival team to perform well against other teams, thereby raising the importance of a game against their favorite team.

Exposure to the negative title and logo did not significantly influence students' perceptions of the academic prestige of the rival school or the amount of satisfaction they receive when their favorite team defeats their rival. These can be explained by the fact that the schools only recently started playing the rival teams and, therefore, fans may not be as familiar with the rival school's academics or may not yet place great value on beating the rival as opposed to another team in the conference. Another antecedent of rivalry is repeated competition (Havard, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Therefore, it would be expected that, as the rival schools regularly compete, these findings may change.

### Implications

The findings in the current study carry several important implications for sport practitioners. First, the findings provide administrators with empirical evidence that the titles and logos used to promote rivalries significantly influence fan perceptions of the rival team. So in this way, marketers can in fact influence the way fans perceive opposing teams and supporters. Additionally, the current study suggests that using neutral words such as *rivalry* may help fans understand the competitive relationship with a rival team without increasing feelings of overt animosity and deviance. This is important, as we see numerous negatively worded rivalry promotional titles such as The Holy War (Utah/BYU), the Civil War (Oregon/Oregon State), Backyard Brawl (Pitt/WVU), and the Crosstown Shootout (Cincinnati/Xavier) in college sports today. We have seen examples of institutions changing names of rivalry games in an attempt to distance from negative participant or fan behavior. For example, following a fight that broke out between players, the Crosstown Shootout was referred to as the Crosstown Classic for two seasons. Another example includes the football rivalry between the Texas Longhorns and the Oklahoma Sooners. In 2005, administrators chose to change the way they referred to the rivalry from the Red River Shootout to the Red River Rivalry in an attempt to distance from the negative connotation of violence. However, in both of these examples, administrators later changed course and started referring to the games as the Crosstown Shootout (Groeschen, 2017) and the Red River Showdown (Patterson, 2014) respectively. Both illustrate a change from a more positive name to a more negative one.

The findings suggest that marketers and administrators facing the implementation of a new rivalry avoid words that increase out-group animosity



and instead focus on more neutral words that may elicit rivalry without some of the negative side effects of animosity. Practitioners can refer to Table 1 to help identify more appropriate wording. The findings can also be helpful to marketers and administrators engaged in current and long-lasting rivalries. In particular, the use of tactics such as Hate Week should be avoided as evidenced by the negative influence such wording. Additionally, media should avoid the use of such negative wording in promotional messages. Fox Sports implemented a campaign to promote the 2017 college football season in which rivals are described as hating each other. Based on the finding in the current study, advertisements such as these should also be avoided as they have the capacity to increase out-group animosity, however, may not build on feelings of rivalry.

To compound this issue, the number of schools that have changed conference affiliation raises an important question about how new rivalries are named and promoted. This is important because practitioners often cannot fundamentally change the title or logo of a promoted rivalry. Many of the strong rivalries carry long historical roots that can make it hard for practitioners to alter fan perceptions or behavioral intentions. However, practitioners at schools that changed athletic conferences have the rare opportunity to fundamentally shape the way a rivalry is promoted with a new team. As such, it is important that practitioners at schools attempting to create or promote newer rivalries attempt to stay away from negatively worded titles or logos. This is important for multiple reasons. First, using a negatively worded title increases beliefs that the out-group is behaving inappropriately, but may not necessarily influence fan feelings of rivalry toward an out-group. Rather, practitioners should use neutral words like Rivalry, as they may serve as a constant reminder that their favorite team shares a rivalry with an opponent. Further, research indicates that fans of teams changing athletic conferences need time to adapt and begin to supplant historical rivalries they shared with teams in their former conference (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2017; Havard, Wann, Ryan, & O'Neal, 2017). Given this timeframe, it is important that practitioners choose the wording of promotional titles wisely, and steer clear from taking shortcuts that may build animosity at a quicker rate, but possibly do little to build feelings of rivalry.

When promoting a new rivalry, it is important that administrators either work with fans to identify potential rival teams or obtain buy-in from influential fans who can further promote the rivalry to the rest of the fan base (Livingston, 2014). Examples of practitioners attempting to put a positive spin on an athletic rivalry include the aforementioned Heroes Game between Nebraska and Iowa and the Freedom Trophy between Nebraska and Wisconsin. These two games attempt to place rival fans in a larger in-group through the collective support of good citizenship (The Heroes Game) and the military (Freedom Trophy). However, a popular rivalry between Nebraska and the Minnesota Golden Gophers referred to as the \$5 Bits of Broken Chair Trophy was born organically through a Twitter

battle between a Nebraska fan (i.e., FauxPelini) and the Golden Gopher mascot (Kirshner, 2016). This anecdotal example raises two important questions. One, is the successful creation and promotion of rivalry led by practitioners or fans? Two, if fans ultimately promote rivalries, do they prefer more negatively slanted titles and logos? For example, during the data collection in the current study, it was brought to the research team's attention that players and fans started referring to the rivalry between Western Kentucky and Middle Tennessee State as 100 Miles of Hate. We mention this not to suggest that students got the idea for the rivalry title from the study, but rather to point out as another example of fans choosing more negative wording to describe and promote rivalries. Additionally, we point this out to illustrate that marketers and administrators have to be careful in rafting promotional messages to help control against fans identifying and adopting negative sentiments surrounding rivalry games.

The current study investigated how promotional titles and logos can influence fan perceptions toward an out-group (rival team). Findings indicate that promotional and organizational messaging can in fact result in more negative perceptions of the rival group. These findings serve as warning for practitioners to practice caution when designing materials to promote rivalry games. Future investigators should examine other factors within and outside a sport organization that influence rivalry, and the current study provides a starting place for such study.

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