Chapter 3

Out–Group Treatment in Higher Education: Using Rivalry to Allow Student Comparison of In–Group and Out–Group Members in NCAA Competition Divisions

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ABSTRACT

The chapter investigates differences in the ways college students compare to out-groups using the different NCAA competition divisions. In particular, students enrolled at schools in all six (i.e., Power Five, Group of Five, FCS, DI No Football, DII, DIII) reported their perceptions of rival school’s athletics teams using the Sport Rivalry Fan Perception Scale (SRFPS). Differences were found regarding student perceptions among competition divisions. Specifically, attendance at a Power Five School influenced student’s willingness to support rival teams against other teams, the enjoyment from defeating the rival team, perceptions of rival academic prestige and fan behavior, and likelihood of experiencing Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORFing), or celebrating when the rival experiences indirect failure. Further, students attending DI No Football Schools and DIII Schools chose academic prestige as a way to derogate their rival schools. Discussion focuses on implications to higher education and avenues for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Intercollegiate athletics and higher education have been linked tightly together for a long time (Brand, 2006). While the role of intercollegiate athletics in higher education has been criticized, such as serving as a band aid or cover for the amount of importance diverted to research at major research universities (Sperber, 2000) or how it has clouded the definition of amateurism (Vanover & DeBowes, 2013), it has also been credited to be beneficial to student-athletes, non-student-athletes, administrators, and institutions (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Brand, 2006). For example, the excitement that the use of athletics logos elicit can be used in developing a strong brand for institutions of higher education (Watkins & Gozenbach, 2013). Additionally, athletic success can lead to an increase in student applications (Toma & Cross, 1998) and private donations (Walker, 2015), suggesting that winning an athletic national championship can benefit a university financially. For example, students who identify with an athletics team at their school experience greater psychological benefits and lower levels of depression and being alone (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

In the context of the current study, intercollegiate athletics serves as a way for students to evaluate and compare to an opposing or rival institution. As social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) asserts, individuals will seek membership in groups they want to positively reflect on them. Competition and comparison (Festinger, 1954) states that people want to favorably compare to others and this comparison will influence their output or effort. Further, in-group bias (Turner, 1982) allows individuals to illustrate their affiliation by treating in-group members more positively than out-group members. Evidence also exists that shows students who want to become more central members of an in-group will highlight their derogatory behavior toward the out-group (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995). In the current study, an in-group represents the institution the student attends, and by extension the affiliated athletics teams, while an out-group represents an opposing or rival school and its athletics teams.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues, Controversies, Problems

The purpose of the current study is two-fold. First, we investigate how in-group member evaluations of rival school athletics teams differ by competition division as determined by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Second, in-group member likely reactions to the news of a rival school’s athletics teams experiencing indirect failure (i.e., failure not directly involving the favorite team) is
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