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Qualitative Assessment of Rivalry and Conference Realignment in Intercollegiate Athletics

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Conference realignment has fundamentally impacted the landscape of intercollegiate athletics in a myriad of ways, one of which is the competitive relationships schools share with each other. The loss of traditional rivals has left many teams, schools, and fan bases the task of finding new teams to fill the void (Maisel, 2011; Thorburn, 2010; Ubben, 2011). The current study utilized various individual and group theories to qualitatively investigate fan reactions to their favorite teams moving to a conference separate from their traditional rivals. In particular, participants were asked to describe their initial and lasting impressions of their favorite teams no longer playing their traditional rivals, their perceptions of conference realignment in general, and to describe the ways conference realignment has and will impact their favorite and traditional rival teams. Through interviews with sixteen fans of intercollegiate teams impacted by conference realignment, fundamental need for rivalry was identified as the core category, along with three supporting categories; derogation of the rival, life cycle of the rivalry, and replacing the rivalry. The current study can help academics and practitioners understand how fans replace a traditional rival that is lost as a consequence of conference realignment. Areas for future research are also discussed.

Since the University of Colorado first announced their athletic teams would no longer compete in the Big 12 Conference in 2010, choosing to join the Pac 10 instead (Thorburn, 2010), an abundance of institutions have either changed athletic conferences or chosen to go independent in football. Among these institutions were schools that shared long-standing competitive rivalries with other teams in their respective conferences. For example, the University of Missouri distanced themselves from the rival Kansas Jayhawks (Maisel, 2011), and

Texas A&M University's move to the Southeastern Conference ended their annual rivalry with the Texas Longhorns (Ubben, 2011). Additionally, the recent realignment trend has impacted numerous conferences. As a result of realignment, the Western Athletic Conference no longer sponsors football (Bullinger, 2012) and the Big East basketball-playing schools have broken away from the football-playing institutions and negotiated to keep the conference name moving forward (Weiss & Rubin, 2013). Further, the football-playing schools in the Big East were left to rebrand the remaining conference as the American Athletic Conference before the 2013-2014 school year (McMurphy, 2013). Conference realignment is not new to intercollegiate athletics; in fact, virtually all institutions have been impacted by conference realignment at some point in their competitive history. However, the latest iteration of schools choosing to change athletic conferences from 2010 to 2013 has played a role in fundamentally changing the current landscape of Division I intercollegiate athletics.

As a result of conference realignment fundamentally impacting traditional rivalries, teams, schools, and fan bases are left to fill the void of these competitive relationships. Hence, the fans of institutions that recently changed conferences were the focus of the current study. According to Reysen and Branscombe (2010), a fan is "any individual who is enthusiastic, ardent, and loyal admirer of an interest" (p. 177). Further, Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) defined sport fans as "individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete" (p. 2), which is separate from a sport spectator who only attends or consumes a sport product to interact with others. Sport fans can follow a favorite team in ways other than just attending a game, such as reading news content through traditional or online media and participating in informal conversations regarding the team, players, and coaches (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003). Further, Toma (2003) asserts that fans of intercollegiate athletics can be positively or negatively impacted by the off-field actions and decisions made by the institutions they identify with, and Gibson, Willming, and Holdnack (2001) found that highly-identified fans tend to spend large amounts of monetary and personal resources to consume a favorite team. However, while university and conference administrators worked to secure the best economic position for the future of the school or conference (Marger, 2011), this vitally important stakeholder group had little to no input toward the final decisions impacting the rivalries with which they had grown to identify.

For this reason, the current study qualitatively investigated the experiences of sixteen individuals whose teams were impacted by conference realignment, with a specific focus on how the fans reacted to their teams no longer playing traditional rivals. Harvard, Wann, and Ryan (in press) quantitatively investigated how conference realignment impacted rivalry in intercollegiate athletics, and the current study extends the knowledge of the phenomenon by detailing individual experiences. The following research question was used to guide the investigation:

RQ: How do intercollegiate fans react when their favorite teams choose to join a separate athletic conference from their traditional rival?

Participants in the current study were all current students or alumni of the institutions where their favorite teams played. Using social identity theory, social categorization theory, disidentification, disposition of mirth, *schadenfreude*, and existing literature regarding rivalry, the current study provides important information and implications for academics and practitioners about the impact conference realignment can have on rivalry. Such implications will be discussed and future areas of inquiry presented.

Review of Literature

Rivalry in sport has been found to affect physiological (Hillman, Cuthbert, Bradley, & Lang, 2004), behavioral and neurological reactions (Cikara, Botvinick & Fiske, 2011). Additionally, rivalry can impact a fan's mediated consumption (Mahony & Moorman, 1999), likelihood to help others in emergency situations (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005) and willingness to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward participants of rival teams (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pulle, 2003; Wann, Petersen, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999). In order to properly present the current study, a review of fan behavior in intercollegiate athletics and the tenets of rivalry will be discussed. In particular, balance theory, social identity theory, social categorization theory, disposition or mirth theory, and *schadenfreude* will be used to outline fan identification with an intercollegiate team and initiate a discussion of rivalry and rival salience in intercollegiate athletics.

Fan Identification and Intercollegiate Athletics

Balance theory states that a person will strive to achieve a reciprocal relationship with others in order to maintain balance in his/her life (Heider, 1958), which can occur through either dyadic or triadic formations. A fan's relationship with his/her favorite team can be explained using a dyadic relationship, as the fan has a positive impression of the favorite team. A triadic formation, on the other hand, can help explain the relationship a fan shares with his/her favorite team, and rival groups (e.g., teams, fan bases) of the favorite team. For example, if a person has a positive impression of a favorite team, in order to maintain a balanced relationship, he/she will hold a negative impression or relationship with the rival or rival supporters of the favorite team.

Building from Heider's work, social identity theory states that a person will use social categorization to define his/her relationship with others (Tajfel, 1981). Social identity theory has been used in sport to investigate many phenomena, including the differences between sport and non-sport fans (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010), and fan reactions to athletes' off-field behavior (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Additionally, social identity theory posits that he/she will affiliate with others in ways that help create a positive internal and external perception (Tajfel, 1978), as it is important for a person to strive for high self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004). Since it is important for a person to be positively viewed by others, social categorization theory states that an individual will associate with others and form groups with people that share common characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1978), such as supporters of a favorite sports team. Once an individual identifies with a group of similar others, he/she can begin to adopt the collective identity of the group, thus embracing characteristics of the group along with his/her personal characteristics (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

Sport fans can also enhance their social psychological health by associating with a favorite team because of the relationships with others they are able to form (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 2006), thus fulfilling their desire of belonging (Festinger, 1954). Since it is important for people to identify with others who share similar interests in order to positively reflect on a person's image (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1978), the association with a favorite team and its supporters can cause a person to believe they may accomplish a desired self (Cameron, 1999). Through the affiliations with a favorite team, people may also derive the vicarious achievement of said team (Bandura, 1977), which explains why fans may react differently to the perceived on-field success or failure of said team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986).

Level of identification with a team can impact the way fans consume or perceive teams, players, and rivals as well. For example, Wann & Branscombe (1990) found that highly-identified fans were more likely to accept a team's victory as their own and less likely to distance from a team following a loss than fans with lower levels of identification.

However, at the intercollegiate level, fans may display strong affiliation with a favorite team (Gibson et al., 2002), perhaps as a way to relive positive memories of their time spent at the institution (Toma, 2003). Thus, it makes sense that those fans may continue to follow the team through prolonged periods of perceived failure (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004). For example, Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1999) found that college students highly identified with the university's football team tended to describe the team more favorably as the season progressed regardless of on-field performance. Affiliations with a favorite intercollegiate team can have positive (e.g., competitive victory or championship), or negative (e.g., player or coach scandal, NCAA sanctions) impacts on fans (Toma, 2003). While supporting a favorite team, a fan of intercollegiate athletics will typically interact with others equally supportive or more so of an opposing team, which leads to a discussion of rivalry in intercollegiate athletics.

Rivalry and Fan Identification

People tend to compare their actions and accomplishments to others in an attempt to display superiority (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). One way to display superiority, and enhance self-esteem, is through the vicarious achievement of a favorite team as stated earlier (Bandura, 1977). Social categorization theory asserts that a group, which shares a collective identity, will search for an out-group to compare against (Turner, 1978). Additionally, when groups sharing collective identity interact, members of those groups tend to display in-group bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1978). In fact, one way for an individual to display their affiliation with a team or group is to disidentify with an opposing group (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Sport 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)" (Harvard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, & Schaffer, 2013, p. 51). Among the antecedents of rivalry Kilduff, Eifenbein, and Staw (2010) identified, they found that close competition and history are important predictors of the phenomenon. In other words, when two teams are evenly matched regarding contest outcomes, there lies a strong predictor that a rivalry will develop between the two groups. Additionally, teams that share a historical relationship will likely develop a rivalry with each other. This history can cause salience for the rival team among fan bases. Further, Smith and Schwarz (2003) found that fans displayed stronger in-group bond when faced with a rival, and will increase their level of identification with a favorite team (Luellen & Wann, 2010) when a rival is made salient (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In other words, once fans have identified an out-group or rival of a favorite team (Turner, 1978), they will display stronger identification toward their favorite team, as well as derogation toward the rival team (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

One way people can display bias is through their descriptions of in-group and out-group member actions (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989), and this tendency may act as a way to protect self and group identity. For example, Cialdini and Richardson (1980) found that when faced with a level of perceived failure, college students chose to derogate the rival. Sport fans have been found to display in-group bias through their evaluations of favorite and rival

participants and fans (Wann & Grieve, 2005, Wann et al., 2006), and some fans may use out-group derogation to justify their membership in the in-group (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995).

Rivalry in sport can also be explained using disposition of mirth (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) and *schadenfreude* (Kahle & Close, 2011). Disposition of mirth states that a person will rejoice when someone they dislike is unsuccessful (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), and the German term *schadenfreude* refers to the pleasure one gets from the demise of a person not similar in characteristics (Heider, 1958). Both disposition of mirth and *schadenfreude* relate to social identity theory and social categorization theory in that individuals compare themselves against an opponent. Disposition of mirth has been tested in the sport setting, and it was found that fans rejoiced for the failure of their rival team in direct competition (Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989). Intuitively, it makes sense that fans would cheer for the failure of their rival team in direct competition, but what about when a rival fails and the favorite team is removed from the equation? Leach and Spears (2009) found that international soccer fans displayed *schadenfreude* toward both a team that defeated and one that did not play the favorite team. Additionally, fans of Major League Baseball and college football and basketball will rejoice when their rival team experiences failure against someone other than the favorite team in certain circumstances (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Havard, in press). For example, a fan of the Oregon Ducks would likely rejoice if the Utah Utes defeated the Oregon State Beavers, regardless of their favorite team not being involved in the contest.

Salience of the rival team is of particular interest in the current study. Most of the rivalries that are being impacted by conference realignment have a long and storied history, some dating over one hundred years. The question that remains is what happens to those rivalries and fan perceptions of a rival team when the teams decide to no longer play one another due to conference realignment. For example, will fans hold onto the negative feelings they have regarding the rival, take a neutral to reminiscent approach to the end of the rivalry, or feel a sense of anger or apathy toward administrators of their favorite institutions for deciding to end, at least temporarily, competitions with the rival team? For this reason, it is of interest to determine what a fan experiences when their favorite team will no longer play the rival team on an annual basis. Conference realignment has been investigated quantitatively, and fans indicated they reserved stronger negative perceptions toward the current rival than anticipated rival (Havard et al., in press). The current study adds to the literature by documenting individual fan reactions to conference realignment and the impact it will have on their favorite team's relationships with traditional rivals.

Methods

Constructivism was used as the theoretical framework in the current study because it allows individuals to make meaning of the world around them (Crotty, 1998). Since the purpose of the current study was to provide participants with a platform to discuss their meaning of how conference realignment impacts rivalry in intercollegiate athletics, and existing theories do not exist to explain this phenomenon, an inductive grounded theory approach was used (Merriam, 1998). Grounded theory is used when researchers want to allow participant responses to guide the formation of a new theory or explanation of a phenomenon. In the current study, it was important that participant responses be allowed to drive the interpretation of how conference

realignment impacted rivalry in intercollegiate athletics; therefore grounded theory was an appropriate methodological approach.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used in the current study to allow participants to fully explain their perceptions of the phenomenon. Also, the use of the semi-structured interview protocol allows researchers to ask follow-up questions and allow participant responses to guide the investigation and formation of additional questions. In the current study, the researchers believed that no new questions were necessary, but minor variations in wording, as well as changes to the question ordering based on participant responses to preceding questions, occurred during data collection. A list of primary interview questions can be found in the appendix. Sixteen self-identified fans of teams impacted by conference realignment participated in interviews that contained eleven primary questions or prompts. The first question asked participants to identify their favorite team and the team they felt was the biggest rival of the favorite team. It was important for the purpose of the current study that participants were able to identify the team they felt was their favorite team's biggest rival, a method similar to one used by Sierra, Taute, and Heiser (2010), instead of being provided with a rival name a priori since fans of a favorite team can identify different rivals of that team. Subsequent questions asked participants about their initial and continuing reactions to their favorite team no longer playing the traditional rival(s) on an annual basis, how they felt about their team moving to a new athletic conference, how conference realignment would impact the future of the relationship between their favorite and rival teams, and their perceptions of conference realignment in general. Looking forward to the new conference, fans were also asked to identify a team, or teams, with whom they felt their favorite team would develop competitive rivalries, and why.

Collection and Analysis

Interviews were collected via face-to-face, telephone, or email interface. Conducting qualitative research online can provide access to participants living in regions that are great distances away from the researcher (see Gruber, Szmigin, Reppel, & Voss, 2008). Additionally, email interviews allow people to participate in an interview at their convenience, without having to plan time for travel or consider expenses related with face-to-face interviews (see Bjerke, 2010). Since participants in the current study were fans of schools spanning the United States, the researchers felt it was appropriate to conduct interviews using the three collection methods both to increase participant response and reach fans living in close proximity to their favorite teams. Participants were reached using purposive sampling techniques by indicating they were interested in discussing their feelings about their favorite team changing conferences. A snowball sample was used along with contacting respondents to a survey from a previous study on rivalry in college sports. Participants were given an opportunity to choose a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of responses. If a pseudonym was not chosen, one was assigned during collection.

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted by both researchers, then were transcribed using a digital recording device, and all transcriptions were independently analyzed by the two researchers. Open coding was first used to identify the meaning of participant responses to prompts, followed by axial coding to identify common responses and develop the category structure. For validity and reliability purposes, peer examination and an audit trail check were performed, in addition to researcher triangulation outlined above, throughout the data collection and analysis process (Merriam, 1998). For example, the researchers independently

analyzed the transcripts and identified any subsequent questions or alterations to existing questions that should be asked of participants or added to new interview scripts. Further, if a participant made a claim about the historical facts of a rivalry, the researchers conducted an audit trail to determine that those details were accurate.

Analysis and Discussion

A total of 16 (13 male, 3 female) fans of intercollegiate athletics teams impacted by conference realignment were interviewed. Sixteen participants were deemed appropriate because the researchers determined at this point during the researcher triangulation process that saturation had been met regarding the primary purpose of the study. Individuals included in the sample were fans of the University of Colorado (3 participants), University of Nebraska (4 participants), University of Missouri (2 participants), Syracuse University (2 participants), Texas A&M University (3 participants), and Texas Christian University (2 participants). The majority of participants fell into the 20 and 30 age ranges (62.5%), was Caucasian (93.8%) and were alumni or current students (one graduate student) (68.8%) of the institutions where their favorite teams played. In addressing the research question, four thematic categories were identified to address the impact of conference realignment on rivalry in intercollegiate athletics. Fundamental need for rivalry emerged as the core category - to expand, the data indicated that rivalry appears to act as a basic interpersonal need (similar to our basic needs for family and friends), where it is necessary to have an opposing person or group with whom to compare oneself. Consequently, this category also addressed how rivalry impacts familial and social traditions and relationships. The other categories consisted of derogation of the rival, life cycle of the rivalry, and replacing the rivalry. Each will be discussed in detail below:

Fundamental Need for Rivalry

The Fundamental Need for Rivalry category refers to the sentiment shared by participants that everyone needs a rival or nemesis for comparison sake, and how losing that rival, and conference realignment in general, can impact fans' relationships and identity. This supports social categorization theory (Turner, 1978), and is consistent with research asserting that people tend to compare their personal and vicarious actions and achievements to others (Mowen, 2004; Zillmann et al., 1989). As previously discussed, people relate with others using in and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982), therefore it is important for people to have another person or group that opposes themselves to compare against (Turner, 1978). Additionally, when people join groups of similar others, those groups need to feel distinct in order to solidify their identity (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Further, one way for people to display identification with a favored group (team in this instance) is to disidentify with an opposing group (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Regarding the specific rival, some participants qualified the identified rival teams, listing two or three depending on the sport; however, the majority identified a sole rival across multiple sports. This feeling is illustrated by Julie's comment about the University of Colorado playing the University of Nebraska in the annual Thanksgiving football game,

“It's always been a big game. Whenever Nebraska would come to town for football the fans would come into town from Lincoln and (you) would see them

displaying their colors. The red in the stadium and it was an immediate spark. And CU fans would say you're not as good as us."

In Julie's statement, the red color of Nebraska represents not only an identifiable contrast for Colorado fans, but also a readily available out-group with which to compare against, as well as directly observe (Turner, 1978).

Additionally, participants displayed a sense of self-definition in stating they were taught at an early age who the traditional rival was and the feelings they should have toward that team, which is consistent with prior research (Harvard, in press). Responding to the end of the annual football game between Colorado and Nebraska, Christine said, "Well, I mentioned to you before jokingly, I thought who am I going to hate now." This comment is consistent with balance theory (Heider, 1958), disposition of mirth theory (Zillmann & Canter, 1976) and *schadenfreude* (Heider, 1958), as Christine displays the type of negative sentiments she would be expected to hold relative to the rival of her favorite team. As part of this definition, family structure was also impacted by realignment and the loss of the annual contests between traditional rivals. "Thanksgiving Day will never be the same for me as long as the game isn't played." (Timothy, Texas A&M fan) Similarly, Texas A&M fan George said, "I grew up with those games. Thanksgiving was built around the game. The routine was to eat food all day and watch the game at night." Finally, Christine responded to the end of the annual Colorado/Nebraska football game by stating, "... in my family our activities revolve around running the Boulder Bolder, we always do that. And then going to the CU/Nebraska game is another one." Collectively, these responses detail the participants' feelings about conference realignment and how no longer playing the traditional rival will impact their basic interpersonal needs (i.e. family gatherings and activities).

Even though the participants felt a fundamental need for rivalry, they understood why conference realignment was occurring, and some were critical of its impact on intercollegiate athletics. For example, Wheeler stated, "I find it troublesome but inevitable. There is no doubt that realignment is based almost entirely on money." Likewise, Phil said, "It is somewhat unfortunate, especially for a sport (college football) that is so heavily grounded in the history of doing things a certain way. College football has always been extremely regional, but the game is becoming more national." Specific to the impact on the favorite team, John responded, "It is a bummer. It is disappointing. But I think it is unfortunately necessary for the survival of Syracuse University Athletics, specifically for the football program."

Some fans portrayed a more positive view of conference realignment, and thought of it as an evolution of intercollegiate athletics. To this point, George stated, "It seems like realignment is slowly leading to an eventual playoff which I think is good for college football." Additionally, Stanley responded specifically about Colorado's move, "It's tough for us to leave the Big 12, but at the same time the Pac 10 is going to be a better conference for recruiting for us, for either basketball or football...". Overall, the sentiments in this theme indicated that fans were managing their feelings regarding the conference move by looking forward with excitement about the move, sometimes at the expense of the current rival, which leads to the category addressing the derogation of the rival.

Derogation of the Rival

Participants took many opportunities to derogate the rival, in varying forms. For example, when asked to identify the main rival of Texas A&M University, Timothy responded, “Texas A&M’s biggest rival is the University of Texas (or t.u. for our purposes) by far.” This is consistent with the way people describe members of the out-group or rival team (Maass et al., 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Grieve, 2005; Wann & Thomas, 1994; Wann et al., 2006). Further, using others to create an impression of the self is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), and identifying a rival to compare oneself to is a tenet of social categorization theory (Turner, 1978). Additionally, participants chose to take shots at their current rival teams when describing their excitement of the favorite team joining a new conference. For instance, some participants indicated that the rival team was being left in an inferior conference and the favorite team was joining a better conference. When asked about his rival and favorite teams playing in different conferences, Phil responded, “... there’s some *schadenfreude* involved in watching Missouri improve its athletic standing by moving to a premier conference while the school’s most hated rival is left behind in a conference that many pundits have destined for failure.” Sam responded similarly, “I am very happy because my favorite team (Missouri) is going to a better and more secure conference while Kansas is stuck in a worse conference.” When describing her favorite team Colorado moving to another conference than Nebraska, Julie responded, “I don’t know if it makes sense for Nebraska. For a Colorado fan, it makes perfect sense. CU is more of a West Coast school.”

Disposition of mirth (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) and *schadenfreude* (Kahle & Close, 2011) assert that people rejoice when someone they dislike is unsuccessful. As previously stated, through the assertion of balance theory that people are related with others in dyadic and triadic relations (Heider, 1958), social identity theory that people associate with others using in and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982), and social categorization theory that people will compare against groups not similar to theirs (Turner, 1978), it is appropriate that people will attempt to derogate their rival team when given the opportunity. For example, John (Syracuse fan) responded to the University of Connecticut being left in the Big East Conference by saying, “I think UConn is getting some karma. I think they are getting what they deserve in this.”

Another way that participants displayed derogation was through their reactions to no longer playing the traditional rival in athletic contests. Although most participants felt remorse about losing the rival game(s), some reported that they would not miss it or didn’t care. This sentiment also potentially points to a form of derogation. George pointed out his impressions of how realignment could negatively impact schools when he stated, “Realignment could cause bad feelings among schools and administrators.” Similarly, Timothy stated, “There was obviously a lot of bad blood between the administrators at Texas and Texas A&M when A&M left for the SEC, and the fans reflect that.” This form of derogation can either cause fans to further dislike or, conversely, grow to appreciate the traditional rival as time progresses.

Life Cycle of the Rivalry

Another category that emerged was the life cycle of a rivalry. For the most part, participants indicated that rivalries were formed from the on-field or on-court competitiveness. For example, Bryan responded, “To me, for it to be a rivalry, if you play 20 games each wins 10. Not one wins 18 and one wins two.” Wheeler added, “I think to have a rivalry it must be two

way.”, and Mark stated, “Rivalries are really kind of born on the playing field...” Further, fans indicated they believed the rivalry would diminish post-conference realignment. For example, Christine stated, “I think eventually it will disappear because it just won’t be as significant anymore.”

However, fans were excited about the possibility of playing the rival again following a hiatus, as Stephanie’s comment illustrates, “...if NU and CU play out of conference it will be a huge game with bragging rights that could last years.” Ashton responded to the prospect, “... if we do, it will be a bowl game which could lead to even more hype and intensity.” Jacob responded similarly, “If we did not play for ten years and we played in 2025 I would be excited for that game because it would bring back memories.” As expected, fans also stated that they would continue to watch their favorite teams play, even if no longer against the traditional rival. Ashton responded, “...I never went to (the) game or watch(ed) on TV because of the rival; I did because I like my team, and that doesn’t change regardless of whether we play Texas on Thanksgiving.” Further, John stated, “I would watch the Orange (Syracuse) if they were nearby regardless.”

Participants in the current study indicated that they felt balanced competition was important to the development and sustainability of a rivalry, which supports Kilduff et al.’s (2010) work on antecedents of the phenomenon. The excitement participants indicated in looking to the future could be caused by an individual’s connection with the institution of higher education previously discussed (Toma, 2003). Further, this excitement leads to the last category in which fans discussed how their favorite teams would move forward and how they would replace the traditional rivalry.

Replacing the Rivalry

Fans displayed a sense of loyalty to their favorite team through agreement with the school’s decision to join a new conference. Specifically, participants indicated they felt the school was making the correct decision, and overall they displayed excitement for the move. This unanimous belief in the institutions’ choices appeared to be consistent with the in-group bias that fans will typically display toward their favorite teams (Noel et al., 1995; Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Grieve, 2005, Wann et al., 2006). For example, Daniel responded to the decision of his favorite team (TCU) joining the Big 12 Conference by stating, “We’re coming home”, addressing the institutions shared competitive rivalries with several of the schools in the Big 12 from their days of being a Southwest Conference member. One reason discussed by participants explaining the excitement of the move was the belief that their team was joining a superior conference. Texas A&M and Missouri fans were excited to join the Southeastern Conference because of the talent pool in the conference, as illustrated by Ashton’s response, “Excited Texas A&M is moving to the SEC”. Although excited about the competition level in the new conferences, TCU and Syracuse fans also indicated their teams were joining more prestigious academic conferences. For example John, a Syracuse fan, was impressed by the ACC, stating, “I like how ACC has private schools. I think ACC is a great landing spot.”

Participants were asked to identify teams in the new conference they felt would develop into competitive rivalries. As previously stated, fans were looking forward to beginning rivalries in the new conference, and most looked to schools which their favorite team’s had a competitive history with, which is consistent with Kilduff et al. (2010). For example, most Texas A&M fans identified Louisiana State and Arkansas as potential rivals in the SEC, while Missouri primarily

identified Arkansas. When asked what would cause these rivalries to form, participants indicated proximity and recent history. For example, Phil responded,

“Most Missouri fans are expect(ing) to develop a rivalry with the University of Arkansas, and I’m inclined to agree. There are cultural similarities and differences that lead themselves to a possible rivalry, but the teams’ recent athletic history makes the rivalry even more imminent. Missouri recently beat out Arkansas for the top football recruit in the country, and Arkansas recently poached Missouri’s head basketball coach. There’s never been much love lost between the two schools, and all of the recent history seems to be accelerating it.”

Still, some participants felt the new rivalries would not supplant the loss of the traditional one. Timothy responded, “LSU and Texas A&M will become large conference rivals, but won’t come close to filling the hole left by the Thanksgiving Game being gone.” In an attempt to fill this perceived gap, beginning in 2014 the SEC will move the football game between LSU and Texas A&M to Thanksgiving Day to compete with the Texas Longhorns’ game against another Texas Big 12 school (Hinnen, 2013).

Syracuse and TCU fans were quick to point out the long-standing rivalries they had with teams in the new conferences. For example, Syracuse played Boston College and Virginia Tech before those two schools left for the ACC (Boston College, 2003). Additionally, Syracuse and Pittsburgh are leaving the Big East for the ACC together so the rivalry between those two schools could be strengthened by the move. Further, John identified Maryland as a potential rival for Syracuse, and also some of the private schools competing in the ACC. Jacob added to this sentiment by stating,

“For basketball Duke and UNC. All three have storied traditions and have quality teams. They will easily become a must see event. For football, since there are more private schools like Syracuse I think Boston College (since they were a rival of Syracuse back in the 1990’s), Wake Forest, and even Duke.”

Jacob also added an interesting take on his favorite team playing against other private schools in the ACC, stating, “Syracuse ended up in the right place for football because there are other private schools.... For football there are other smaller schools in the ACC and I think it will be beneficial for Syracuse.”

TCU fans were elated by joining the Big 12 Conference and having the opportunity to revive rivalries with Baylor, Texas Tech, and Texas, as previously indicated. Daniel responded, “Clearly, Baylor because our institutions are so much alike. Similar size, similar mission, both church affiliated. We are only 150 miles apart.” Wheeler identified Baylor as the main rival as well, but added, “However, to be very fair TCU views Texas as the evil empire. That is the hated rival. That is the one they want to win no matter what. But I do not feel reciprocation from the Longhorns.” Regarding Texas, Daniel also indicated he would like to see Texas and TCU develop into rivals but was not sure if it would due to differences in the institutions. Both participants also identified Texas Tech, with Daniel stating, “TCU and Texas Tech have played each other quite often since the old Southwest Conference.”, and Wheeler adding, “Texas Tech would also be considered a very hated rival. And I think they would hate us back.”

It was interesting to note that the participants mostly suggested new rivals who were among the strongest teams competitively in the new conference, regardless of the quality of their favorite team. Since competitive balance was a key aspect of the life cycle of a rivalry outlined above and by Kilduff et al. (2010) and an out-group is used for comparison sake (Turner, 1978), this suggested that fans saw their favorite teams as equals with these schools, even though a quick review of recent performance history did not support this in most cases. Hence, the commonalities in the strength of teams identified as potential rivals appears to be another example of a self-esteem protection mechanism related to social identity theory, social categorization theory and in-group bias (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999; Tajfel, 1978, Turner, 1978).

Conclusions

The current study identified the fundamental need for rivalry as a core category, and three supporting categories; derogating the rival, lifecycle of the rivalry, and replacing the rivalry to address conference realignment's impact on rivalry in intercollegiate athletics. The fundamental need for rivalry finding is consistent with competition and comparison literature (Mowen, 2004; Zillmann et al., 1989) social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), social categorization theory (Turner, 1978), and the idea that people or groups need opponents to solidify the identity of the in-group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Participants were accepting of conference realignment, although grudgingly in some instances, and were already looking forward to starting competitive relationships with teams in the new conference. Additionally, fans felt that their favorite teams made the right decision to change conferences, stating they felt they were leaving an inferior conference for a superior one. It is interesting that fans of Missouri and Texas A&M stated the Big 12 was an inferior conference while TCU fans were elated to join. One explanation for this finding could be that fans realistically believe the move will benefit their favorite team, whether through prestige or monetary value. However, this trend also points to the assertion that a fans favorite team can do no wrong when it comes to conference realignment, and fans may be resilient when it comes to administrative decisions that have the potential to be unpopular (Simmons, 2013), which could be a result of the ties intercollegiate fans have with their favorite teams and institutions (Toma, 2003). As stated by participants, most expected that conference realignment would somehow impact their favorite team, so some possibly just accepted it as an eventual outcome.

Participants were looking forward to their schools competing in the new conference, even though some looked back with sadness about leaving the traditional rival. One explanation for this phenomenon can be drawn from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and social categorization theory (Turner, 1978). In particular, since participants knew that their favorite team would no longer be competing against the rival on an annual basis, they believed that the life of the rivalry was coming to a halt. This caused participants to look toward the future and identify new teams as rivals of their favorite team, so as to minimize the disruption to the identity of the in-group. It makes sense that once a school administration makes a decision, fans can do nothing but adapt to the change and make the best of the opportunity, much as was the case with current students at a university that chose to reclassify their athletic program to compete at a higher NCAA level (Dwyer, Eddy, Havard, & Braa, 2010). Additionally, fans were already looking forward to competing in the new conference even as their favorite teams still belonged to the current conference, even going so far as to readily identify teams they believed would

become rivals of the favorite team in the new conference. For some fans, joining a new conference could represent a new challenge for their favorite team while others may see it as a *fresh start* and way for their teams to display athletic superiority.

The collective action of looking forward to competition in the new conference also contributed to the derogation on the rival being left behind. Further, some participants chose to derogate the rival by indicating the team was being left in an inferior conference. Participants also indicated they believed the traditional rivalry would diminish over time the longer the two teams did not regularly play. This sentiment could be a realistic representation of the rivalry, but also could reflect a form of further derogation toward the traditional rival. A general observation is that fans of teams that owned a historical win lead in the traditional rivalry seemed to indicate that a rivalry should be formed from both teams winning a similar number of games. For example, the Texas Longhorns own a 76-37-5 record over the Texas A&M Aggies, and the Nebraska Cornhuskers own a 49-18-2 record over the Colorado Buffaloes. Fans of teams that did not own a historical win lead stated they felt their favorite team was joining a superior conference and interestingly did not comment on the competitive balance, or lack thereof, between rival teams. This could indicate that fans of teams that owned the historical win lead felt they were too good for the traditional rival and it was time to move on to a more difficult challenge. Further, for fans of teams not owning the historical win lead, conference realignment could represent a chance for their favorite team to separate from the traditional rival and prove they can be successful. The exception is the Border War, in which Missouri owns a 56-55-9 record over the Kansas Jayhawks, however the close series record lends support to Missouri fans' observation that a rivals should be even competitively.

Although participants indicated they believed the rivalry would diminish over time, they also stated they would continue to support their favorite team and would consume a contest between the traditional rival teams in the future if the opportunity presented itself. In sum, it seems as though fans felt they needed a sense of rivalry with another team to add excitement to consuming their favorite team, however would support the favorite team regardless of conference realignment.

Implications

The current study carries implications for both academics and practitioners regarding fan perceptions of conference realignment. Currently there is limited research on conference realignment, so the current study helps to fill this void. Further, the current study adds to the literature regarding social identity theory and social categorization theory, as these two theories can help explain how fans may react when their rival group is removed and the triadic relationship breaks down. The research here also adds to the literature regarding rivalry, and the need for people to identify and disidentify with groups. Having a better understanding of fan reactions to rivalry and conference realignment can provide researchers with avenues to foster new theory in the area. Since fans need to have an out-group with which to positively compare and feel distinct from, the current study asserts that when faced with the loss of such a group fans will attempt to find another group to take its place.

Practitioners also need to pay attention to findings in the current study to better engage their fan bases. The knowledge of teams identified as potential rivals in the new conference can help school and conference administrators make the transition as smooth as possible for fans. Specifically, this can help school administrators drive excitement surrounding athletic

competitions with the identified team. Conference administrators can use the information to better promote games between new rival teams to fans, and help drive television scheduling and sponsorship negotiations. Participants in the current study displayed excitement that their favorite team was joining a new conference, and administrators should use this information to develop opportunities to engage fans of new teams. The ceremonies conferences hold to welcome new teams into the league are a good start for this engagement, and institution and conference administrators should work to prolong this excitement throughout the initial transition period and beyond. On this note, fans of teams joining new conferences may be experiencing a *honeymoon effect*. Just as a newer stadium caused a peak in Major League Baseball fan attendance (McEvoy, Nagel, DeSchriver, & Brown, 2005), fans of intercollegiate athletics' support for their favorite team could likewise increase during the first few years of competing in a new conference due to novelty excitement. If a team begins to experience perceived failure in the new conference, then fans' excitement may begin to dissipate. For this reason, it is important for conference administrators to continue attempts to engage fans of new schools, and rivalry is one way that conference administrators can accomplish this goal. As indicated in the current study, participants were looking forward to creating or recreating rivalries with schools in the new conference. If a fan base can find a group to identify as a rival, then it is possible that they will focus on their favorite team's performance relative to that team in times of perceived failure, thus keeping fans engaged throughout difficult periods.

Practitioners should also display caution in making decisions that will directly impact fan bases. Although fans in the current study indicated they would accept conference realignment and support their favorite team regardless of opponent, administrators should show caution not to make a decision that may cause fans to decrease their consumption of the team and school. Further, it would behoove administrators to gauge their fan base for perceptions of upcoming decisions of such magnitude. A quick review of online chat rooms or hosting focus groups may reveal how fans will react to the decisions made and help identify ways to explain the importance of such decisions to fans.

Future Study

At this time, it is appropriate to discuss possible limitations to the study and introduce areas for future inquiry. The first limitation is the gender difference of participants. The gender disparity impacts the generalizability of the findings and because of this caution should be taken to avoid extending these themes to all fans of intercollegiate athletics. It is advised for future research to interview a more diverse population in regards to gender and ethnicity. Team identification was not measured in the current study and this could also impact generalizing the findings to a wide group of fans. Future research should employ an instrument to measure team identification. Another limitation could be the number of teams covered. With the current number of schools changing conferences, the opportunity to gather data from more fan groups presents itself for future study. Also, participants in the current study were all fans of teams competing at the highest level of NCAA competition. As a result of conference realignment, some schools have elected to elevate their programs to a higher level of NCAA competition, and it would be interesting to interview fans of these teams. Dwyer et al. (2010) found that fans of an institution that moved to an NCAA Division I FCS conference from Division II felt somewhat neutral to positive about the decision almost a decade after the move, but it would be of interest

to investigate perceptions of the decision while fans are living through the experience rather than reflecting after a substantial amount of time has passed.

Future researchers should also investigate the life cycle of a rivalry. For example, future research could focus on investigating how a rivalry is born, grows in intensity, and dies in some instances. As findings from the current study indicate, participants feel that a rivalry is generally born on the field, and that teams can have rivalries with multiple teams, usually depending on the success and failure of rival teams. In other words, if a favorite team beats a rival many times over a prolonged period, fans of the successful team may try to find another team to identify as a *primary* or *biggest* rival, suggesting that a rivalry can grow and stagnate depending on perceived competition equity. On the other hand, fans of teams that have lost several rivalry games over a prolonged period may hold onto the rivalry longer than fans of the more successful team.

Additionally, since participants indicated that rivalry was born on the field, it appears as though they identified teams they felt were comparable to their favorite team as previously mentioned. As teams change conferences, administrators may attempt to create a rivalry and sell it to fans. Although it seems that fans should drive a rivalry, as the current study indicates, it would be interesting to qualitatively investigate fan reactions to administration-pushed rivalries. Likewise, future research investigating administrators' decision-making processes regarding conference realignment and rivalry formation could provide academics and practitioners with interesting insight. For example, do administrators initially identify a rivalry based on proximity, or relative competitiveness as many fans in the current study chose to do? Also, how do administrators believe fans will react to decisions regarding conference realignment and new rivalry formation?

Finally, the current study interviewed participants before their favorite teams joined the new conference. As a result, participants had to speculate about their future feelings regarding the rivalry and teams that would be identified as rivals in the new conference. Additionally, fans may experience a *honeymoon effect* when anticipating a new rival and early on during the competitive relationship. For this reason, it would be interesting to investigate fans of these teams after competing in the new conference for a few years to determine if and how their perceptions changed once the *honeymoon* is over.

The current study qualitatively investigated how fans react to the impact conference realignment can have on rivalries in intercollegiate athletics. Results indicated that while participants in general displayed remorse to losing the traditional rivalries shared with other schools, they were looking forward to consuming their favorite teams in the new conferences. Conference realignment continues to impact intercollegiate athletics in a myriad of ways. The current study provides initial insight into how it can affect rivalry, and warrants the need for future research into the phenomenon.

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Appendix

Semi-structure interview questions

#	Question
1	Identify which teams you feel are your favorite teams' biggest rivals in the current Big 12.
2	Explain the feelings you get when you think about your favorite and rival schools moving to separate conferences.
3	What were your initial reactions to the announcement from the two schools?
4	What are your feelings now about the schools decisions?
5	How do you feel about the schools not playing the traditional Thanksgiving [or annual] game?
6	How do you feel about the schools not playing regular contests against established rival in the conference?
7	How do you believe conference realignment has changed/will change the nature of the rivalry or rivalries?
8	What are your feelings toward conference realignment in general?
9	Would you still attend games if it no longer carries the importance of a conference game?
10	Would you miss this game if the schools no longer played each other regularly?
11	Which team(s) do you feel will develop into a competitive rivalry in the universities new conference?
