CHAPTER 3

They Said What? Investigating Fan Online Commentary in Politics and Sport

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Abstract The study addressed the phenomenon of group membership and how group members engage in online commentary. Specifically, the paper investigated comments left in online chatrooms during the three presidential debates in 2016 and three prominent college football rivalry games. Findings showed that people choosing to leave comments in an online chatroom did so to (1) comment on the nature of the rivalry or relationship, (2) comment on the game itself, or (3) to derogate the out-group. Further, a higher proportion of comments left in the political chatrooms were negative toward the out-group compared to the sport setting. Implications are discussed, and the paper presents directions for future inquiry and ideas for addressing out-group negativity in political fandom.

Keywords Rivalry · Fandom · Politics · Sport · Group membership · Online communication

When groups of supporters, or fans of a chosen product or genre interact, we see intergroup relations (Sherif, 1966) which often leads to some form of in-group bias (Tajfel, 1978). In-group bias is the tendency of people

C. T. Havard, *Rivalry and Group Behavior Among Consumers and Brands*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85245-0_3

to show favoritism toward members of their chosen in-group and derogation toward members of a competing out-group. The prevalence of group member relations and in-group bias exists in almost all settings, whether it be politics, religion, social makeup, consumer goods, or sport team competition.

The current study set out to better understand how fans who participated in online chatrooms behaved toward an in-group and out-group. Specifically, the investigation carried two foci that will help investigate fan chatroom engagement with rival and/or favorite groups in two settings which allow rival supporters to directly or indirectly compare. First, the current study analyzed comments left in online chatrooms during the three 2016 presidential debates and three prominent rivalry games in college football during the 2016 season. Second, comments in politics and sport were compared to determine if differences existed regarding the prevalence of online comments.

Before proceeding further, it warrants identifying why we chose to focus on sport and politics in the current paper. Fans in both sport and politics like to express their public affiliation with a team or candidate (Bolce et al., 1996; Kimble & Cooper, 1992), celebrate when their favorite groups experience success (Cialdini et al., 1976; Dean, 2017), and some experience joy when their rivals experience failure (Havard, 2014; Miller & Conover, 2015). These behaviors can be found within consumer products as well (e.g., iPhone vs. Android, Coke vs. Pepsi). Whereas competition and rivalry present themselves in deciding which brand to purchase,[1] sport and politics is different in an important way. Both sport and politics affords fans the opportunity to compare directly with another group vicariously through their associations with a favored group (Bandura, 1977). For example, sport fans are awarded the opportunity to compare directly with rival supporters when their favorite teams play. Likewise, in the United States, the vast majority of political fans typically fall into one of two categories (e.g., Democrat/Republican, conservative/liberal), and therefore are able to compare directly with supporters of the rival candidate or ideology. This common characteristic makes the relationship unique and therefore makes the sport setting a good source to draw comparison to politics to explain fandom and ways

[1] Consumer purchasing decisions among rival brands may also represent one born more of convenience than loyal support (e.g., someone may prefer one brand over another, but will consume a competitors brand based on a number of factors).

to alleviate out-group negativity. As the findings from the study seek to illuminate the importance of comparing rivalry within the sport setting and political setting.

Therefore, the current study also offers an overview of how group relations, and specifically rivalry, influence fandom within sport and politics. Further, the authors seek to begin a dialogue regarding the ways that fans view and interact with rival groups and identify potential ways to decrease negativity among in-group and out-group members.

Background

Fandom in Sport and Politics

Fandom is following a team, personality, product, or brand, and feeling some level of attachment with that group or individual (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011; Wann et al., 2001). In sport, fans can identify with a team, along with the athletes and coaches on that team, and with individual athletes in sports such as golf or tennis where team makeup is not readily present. Likewise, in politics, people can identify with a group or individual candidate. For example, someone in the United States may identify as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent, among many other classifications. Individuals also tend to identify with, assimilate into a group, and display positive behavior toward a specific candidate running for office (Ledgerwood & Chaiken, 2007). In this regard, a candidate can be viewed by fans similar to the way a team or individual personality is in the sport setting (e.g., team sport setting vs. individual sport setting).

In both the political and sport settings, people display their fandom through wearing identifying clothing or branding their vehicles with affiliated insignia. Identifying with a group or individual creates a way for people to display their identification as a fan, therefore garnering the important outcome associate with fandom such as being part of a group (Festinger, 1954; Wann, 2006), vicarious competition and achievement (Bandura, 1977), and feeling as though they are part of something *larger than oneself* (Mullin et al., 2014). For instance, when a sport team wins, fans of that team can experience joy and vicarious achievement from the victory, and the opposite is true when a sport team loses a contest. This behavior is present in politics as well when supporters display their affiliation with a campaign after a victory either through clothing, car stickers, or yard signs. This type of fan behavior is also an outcome of promotional

strategy for practitioners. For example, someone displaying a sticker or shirt of a team or political figure works as advertising helping to promote the favored product to potential consumers.

Investigations within sport show that individuals will choose to identify with a successful brand in order to garner vicarious achievement (Cialdini et al., 1976). People will use words such as *us* and *we* to describe positive outcomes involving a successful team. On the other hand, when a team experiences failure, people can distance from the brand, using words such as *they* to describe negative outcomes, in an attempt to protect their self and public image (Madrigal, 1995; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Snyder et al., 1986). In politics, this group of individuals seem to represent those that may vote for candidates and platforms based on the trends currently unfolding.

Sport and politics are also filled with what can be referred to as *highly identified* fans (James et al., 2019; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). These are fans that identify strongly with a favorite team or athlete, and multiple studies have asserted that such identification can influence feelings of acceptance and social-psychological health (Wann et al., 2008), likelihood of consumption (Funk, 2008), and evaluation of out-group fan behavior (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Grieve, 2005) and participant effort (Wann et al., 2006). An interesting note about highly identified political fans deals with situations when they are faced with failure, either because their chosen candidate lost or embroiled in controversy. In sport, a fan of a team that experiences failure can choose to either justify the loss by blaming/blasting officials and/or the opposing team (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), or finding ways outside of direct athletic competition to derogate their rival, thereby making their favorite team appear favorable (Havard, 2014). It is not difficult to see that the same type of behavior exists for political fans of candidates that experience some form of failure (e.g., claiming elections are rigged). In fact, fans in the political setting will react in ways that protect their favored candidate or party when the group is faced with potentially negative outcomes (Westen et al., 2006). Finally, the vocal minority, or a group of dedicated users that tend to generate large amounts of conversation (Mustafaraj et al., 2011), exist in both sport and politics, and it can be argued that someone who participates in this type of behavior is highly identified with their favorite team or candidate. Because engaging with others online can carry benefits to individuals (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015), many people participate in online social networking, even if they choose not to create any

content (e.g., post, blog, vlog, etc.). The people that choose to create content online do so for many reasons, which can range from trying to provide information to persuading others of their views. These people can be considered members of the vocal minority. Finally, because they generate large amounts of conversation online, these individuals can influence perceptions of the silent majority (Bolce et al., 1996; Xie et al., 2011).

Rivalry in Spectator Sport and Politics

Rivalry within the context of sport and politics can resemble one another, and even blend together at times, because the two settings provide fans the ability to compare against the other online and offline, ultimately leading to a direct competition between identified favorite teams and politicians. In fact, Miller and Conover (2015) argue that elections resemble sport competitions for supporters of candidates and parties. Rivalry in sport has been defined as "a fluctuating adversarial relationship, existing between two teams, players, fans, or groups of fans, gaining significance through on-field competition, on-field or off-field incidences, proximity, demographic makeup, and/or historical occurrences" (Havard, Gray et al., 2013, p. 51). Further, a rival group has been defined as a "highly salient out-group that poses an acute threat to the identity of the in-group or to the in-group members' ability to make positive comparisons between their group and the out-group" (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015, p. 230).

Looking at these definitions, one can see numerous similarities between rivalry and rival groups in the sport and political settings. For example, the rival group presents a form of threat to in-group members, and the relationships are adversarial, at times more so than others. To this end, one can argue that we have grown accustomed to witnessing, and even celebrating stark contrasts between individuals that identify with opposing political parties or report different political views (Karnacki, 2018). In fact, the simple use of the colors red and blue to distinguish between Republicans and Democrats influenced study participants in one study to view the United States as more divided and stereotype group members (Rutchick et al., 2009). Further, antecedents and characteristics of rivalry in sport such as historical competition, perceived unfairness, along with cultural differences and similarities can also carry over to the political setting (Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015).

Rivalry in sport influences many ways that fans view and react to their respective out-group. For example, the presence of rivalry influences fans' public displays of group affiliation (Kimble & Cooper, 1992), views of the out-group and out-group members (Havard, Gray et al., 2013), consumption of the sport product (Havard, Shapiro et al., 2016; Mahony & Moorman, 1999), views and support of league-wide messaging (Nichols et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2019), and willingness to help others in emergency situations (Levine et al., 2005). Additionally, the presence of a rival encourages cohesion with ones in-group (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Delia, 2015; Smith & Schwartz, 2003). Rivalry in sport can be influenced by variables such as gender (Havard, Achen et al., 2020; Havard, Eddy et al., 2016), geographic location (Cobbs et al., 2019), changes in competition alignment (Havard, Wann et al., 2013, 2017). Many of these findings would also be found related to rivalry of political fans. For instance, it should be expected that someone identifying as a Republican would react differently to television political ads than a self-identified Democrat.[2]

Delving into the darker side of rivalry in sport, mediated stories about fan fights before a rivalry game lead fans to report more negative perceptions of both favorite and rival brands (Havard, Ferrcurri et al., 2021), and rivalry can influence the way that individuals evaluate the actions and indiscretions of rival groups (Havard & Eddy, 2019). The way rivalries are promoted through advertisements and messaging also lead to more negative views toward the rival team (Havard, Wann et al., 2018). Fans also experience joy or satisfaction when their rival team experiences some form of indirect failure (Cikara et al., 2012; Havard, 2014). Further, people tend to seek and hope for areas where an out-group experiences failure (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Finally, the presence of the phenomenon influences fans' likelihood to consider committing anonymous acts of aggression toward the out-group (Havard, Wann et al., 2013, 2017; Wann et al., 1999, 2003; Wann & Waddill, 2013). In fact, over numerous samples collected using different collection methods (e.g., in-person, on-site, online), one to two percent of participants reported they *definitely would* consider committing the most heinous acts of anonymous aggression toward out-group members (e.g., either physical harm or murder). These three situations can also be

[2] Politics within the United States also differs based on geographic location (Longo, 2018).

present in political fandom, where we regularly see fans of political parties verbalizing and sharing negative views and stories of the out-group, take pleasure seeing a political rival or group fail, and some fans unfortunately displaying signs of aggression, deviance, and violence toward out-groups based on rivalry.

The Current Study

The current study investigated what types of comments group members leave in online chatrooms in the political and sport setting. Specifically, comments left in chatrooms during the three presidential debates during the 2016 election cycle and surrounding three college football rivalry games were analyzed. The following two research questions guided the investigation:

> RQ1: What types of comments do group members leave in online chatrooms during the 2016 presidential debate schedule and college football season?

> RQ2: Do the comments left in online chatrooms differ between group members in a political and sport setting?

Method

To examine how fans and supporters behaved toward in-group and out-group members, we collected and compared comments posted in online chat rooms during the three 2016 Presidential Debates (September 26, October 9, October 19) with three high-profile college football rivalry games (Ohio State vs. Wisconsin; October 15, Alabama vs. Auburn; Novomber 26, Ohio State vs. Michigan; Novomber 26). For the three presidential debates measured in the current study between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, we compiled comments from the *Yahoo! Politics* online discussion forums. The majority of comments were left during the televised debates, with some being left before and after the debates as well. To ensure we compiled a representative sample of comments, we randomly pulled approximately 600 comments from each debate. A total of 1,868 comments were compiled for the three presidential debates.

With comments from the three presidential debates compiled, we were next tasked with choosing three high-profile college football games

with which to analyze comments. To do so, we employed a three-step approach. Following the 2016 college football season, we first consulted with the list of 25 Most Intense Fan Rivalries in NCAA on www.sportrivalry.com[3]. From the 25 rivalries included in the list, we next consulted the Neilsen Rating in order to ensure that the chosen games were consumed by a large audience, similar to the presidential debates. Finally, we consulted the *Associated Press* Top 25 Ranking list. In particular, we considered games in which both teams were ranked at the time of the game. Taking this approach, we identified Ohio State vs. Wisconsin played on October 15th, Alabama vs. Auburn and Ohio State vs. Michigan, both played on November 26th. We then compiled comments from the *ESPN* game summaries and threads. If comments for any of the three college football rivalry games exceeded 600, we employed the same method used with the Presidential Debate comments to randomly compile 600 comments[4].

Coding

Using nine themes from college football rivalries identified by Havard and Inoue (2012), we coded the compiled list of comments for first-order codes.[5] The original codes were categorized into three main themes (Acknowledgment, Comment on Game; Rival Derogation) and nine codes (Acknowledgment: Good, Neutral, Bad; Comment on Game: Support Rival, Favorite Team Support, Favorite Team Pessimism; Rival Derogation: Low, Moderate, High). During the current study, we added one code based on comments left in both the political and sport settings. In particular, we added *Statement of Faction*, in which a commenter made a statement in a somewhat neutral manner[6]. The reliability of the

[3] Top 25 Most Intense Fan Rivalries in NCAA available at http://www.sportrivalry.com/research-on-rivalry/rivalry-in-ncaa-athletics/.

[4] However, within the college football setting, comments in any game did not exceed 600, therefore, all comments from each game were used for analysis.

[5] Individual investigators analyzed comments for the overarching code(s) for chosen responses. In instances where more than one code was identified, the first author chose the code that best represented the sentiment of the commenters message. This approach was chosen to help provide more-parsimonious data.

[6] Based on the amount of *misinformation* or incorrect statements in both settings, the work *Faction* was chosen to reflect the point that statements did not need to be verified as accurate.

comment is irrelevant, only the sentiment that the person leaving the comment believed they were stating a fact[7]. An overview of the identified codes are available in Table 3.1.

During coding, the authors each analyzed two presidential debates and two college football rivalry games[8]. We categorized a total of 3,416 comments left in online political and sport chatrooms (i.e., 1,848 comments during the 2016 Presidential Debates, 1,548 comments regarding the college rivalry games) into themes regarding how fans felt about the rivalry or competitive relationships, their support for favorite and rival teams or politicians, and the level of derogation they showed toward the relevant out-group.

Findings

Our analysis of the ten comment codes found that participants in the political and college football rivalry game chatrooms were active in showing their support for their favorite candidates/teams, and finding ways to derogate the rival group. Research Question 1 investigated the types of comments fans left in online message boards regarding presidential politics and college football rivalry games. Our analysis revealed that comments left in online chatrooms during the three presidential debates and three college football rivalry games fell into three main themes and ten categories or codes. Table 3.2 displays the codes and *n* for each.

Regarding the Acknowledgment theme (College Football—10.09%; Presidential Debates—12.57%), most comments in college football fell into acknowledging the good or positive benefits of the rivalry (6.27%), followed by comments acknowledging the neutral (2.33%) and negative nature (1.49%) of the rivalry. Acknowledgment comments left during the presidential debates fell into those commenting on the negative nature of the rivalry (10.22%), followed by neutral comments (2.03%), and those discussing the positive nature of the competition (0.32%).

[7] Many participants Statement of Factions showed support for one candidate/team over the other.

[8] A system was used to ensure all researchers analyzed at least one debate and one rivalry game with the other two authors. (e.g., Debate/Rivalry Game #1—A&B, Debate/Rivalry Game #2—A&C, Debate/Rivalry Game—B&C).

Table 3.1 Codes of comments

Category	*Code*	*Definition*	*Example*
Acknowledgment Good	AG	Stating enjoyment or positive aspect of rivalry/relationship	"Fun, energizing, stimulating, symbiotic"
Acknowledgment Neutral	AN	Simply acknowledging the rivalry without mentioning positive of negative attributes of relationship	"It isn't what it used to be" "Same as any other rivalry"
Acknowledgment Bad	AB	See the rivalry as too intense/inappropriate fan/supporter behavior on both sides	"The rivalry has become increasingly acrimonious over the past few years, with fans on both sides using victories as a springboard to denigrate fans of the others school's base. This has taken a lot of the fund out of the rivalry (for me at least)"
Support Rival	SR	Fan displaying a form of support for the rival team	"When we played in the same conference I felt some desire for the Utes to do well for the good of the conference. I never wanted them to beat BYU, but having them win added prestige to the conference, which in turn helped BYU"
Favorite Team Support	FTS	Choose to cheer for favorite team rather than derogate rival or acknowledge the relationship	"Go BYU" "Gig 'em"
Favorite Team Pessimism	FTP	Showing some form of pessimism about the favorite team's performance	– We are doing well now, but I am sure they will find a way to lose

Category	*Code*	*Definition*	*Example*
Statement of Faction	SF	Fan trying to state a fact in a somewhat neutral manner. The reliability is irrelevant. What is important is that the fan believes they are stating a fact	– The other team/candidate cheated to win their last game/election
Derogation 3—Low	D3	Mostly playful jokes at rival team	"Saw Varsity's Horns Off" "USC Trojan fans are obnoxious"
Derogation 2—Moderate	D2	Use of stronger language or curse words to describe rival team, allege rival of inappropriate behavior	"Alabama is a bunch of cheaters" "Utes suck!"
Derogation 1—High	D1	Use of threatening words (e.g., hate) or wishing physical harm (e.g., death) to describe the rival and fan/supporter base	"I would don a turban if the (rival team) were playing the Taliban" "If an atomic bomb went off and destroyed the entire university and killed everyone enrolled in it as well as their coaches, I would rejoice"

Table 3.2 Comparison between college football fans and presidential debate commenters

Category	*College football (n = 1,548^)*		*Presidential debates (n = 1,868^)*	
	n	%	n	%
*Acknowledge theme** $z = -2.28$, $p = 0.023$	*136*	*10.09*	*235*	*12.57*
Acknowledgment good (AG)*** $z = 10.20$, $p < 0.001$	97	6.27	6	0.32
Acknowledgement neutral (AN) $z = 0.60$, $p = 0.54$	36	2.33	38	2.03
Acknowledgment Bad (AB)*** $z = -0.45$, $p < 0.001$	23	1.49	191	10.22
*Game theme**** $z = 6.22$, $p < 0.001$	*1,070*	*69.12*	*1,098*	*58.78*
Support Rival (SR) $z = 6.34$, $p < 0.001$	42	2.71	3	0.16
Favorite Team Support (FTS)*** $z = 3.82$, $p < 0.001$	204	13.18	169	9.05
Favorite Team Pessimism (FTP)*** $z = 6.70$, $p < 0.001$	50	3.23	5	0.27
Statement of Faction (SF) $z = 0.41$, $p = 0.68$	774	50	921	49.3
*Derogation**** $z = -5.24$, $p < 0.001$	*322*	*20.80*	*535*	*28.64*
Derogation 3—Low (D3)** $z = 2.57$, $p < 0.01$	230	14.86	222	11.88
Derogation 2—Moderate (D2)*** $z = -6.73$, $p < 0.001$	68	4.39	197	10.55
Derogation 1—High (D1)*** $z = 9.52$, $p < 0.001$	24	1.55	116	6.21

^Codes Used in Analysis
*Significant at 0.05 level
**Significant at 0.01 level
***Significant at 0.001 level
Source https://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/ztest/default2.aspx

Regarding the Game theme, most comments in both college football and the presidential debates were coded into what was known as a Statement of Faction (College Football—50%; Presidential Debates (49.3%). By far the most frequently identified code, it seems about half of all comments were believe to be facts by the individual posting. Regarding college football rivalry games, other Game theme comments fell into supporting the favorite team (13.18%), favorite team pessimism (3.23%), and support for the rival (2.71%). Regarding the presidential debates, other Game theme comments were coded into being supportive for the favorite candidate (9.05%), followed by displaying pessimism for the favorite candidate (0.27%), and support for the rival (0.16%).

Finally, college football comments coded into the Derogation theme fell into low derogation or making funny jokes about the rival team (14.86%), moderate derogation or making stronger statements about the rival team (4.39%), and those that were highly derogative of the rival team (e.g., making threatening statements about the rival team (1.55%). Derogatory comments made during the presidential debates fell into low derogation (11.88%), moderate derogation (10.55%), and high derogation (6.21%).

Research Question 2 investigated whether the comments left in online chatrooms regarding college football rivalry games or presidential debates differed in frequency, and if so, which group of commenters left significantly more comment types. To analyze this question, a test of two population proportions was run for each comment and theme type. Regarding the Acknowledge theme, there were a significantly larger proportion left in political chatrooms (12.57%) than in college football chatrooms (10.09%). Regarding comments falling into the Game theme, there were significantly more left in chatrooms surrounding college football games (69.12%) than during the presidential debates (58.78%). Considering the Derogation theme, comments left during the presidential debates (28.64%) were proportionally higher than in college football games (20.80%).

Looking at individual comment codes, there were significant differences regarding seven categories. Comments left in college football chatrooms were of significantly higher proportion when acknowledging

the good nature of the rivalry (College Football—6.27%; Presidential Debates—0.32%), along with showing support (College Football—2.71%; Presidential Debates—0.16%) and pessimism (College Football—3.23%; Presidential Debates—0.27%) about the favorite team, and playfully derogating (Low D3) the rival team (College Football—14.86%; Presidential Debates—11.88%). Comments left during the presidential debates were significantly higher when acknowledging the negative nature of the rivalry (Presidential Debates—10.22%; College Football—1.49%); moderate (D2) derogation (Presidential Debates—10.55%; College Football—4.39%), and highly derogating (High D1) the rival or opponent (Presidential Debates—6.21%; College Football—1.55%).

Discussion

The current study investigated the types of comments left in online chatrooms during the three presidential debates and three college football rivalry games. Results showed that comments either acknowledged the nature of the rivalry, commented on the contest (i.e., game/rivalry or debate/political rivalry), or found a way to derogate the rival group—ranging from playful jokes to wishing harm on out-group members.

The current study also found that the proportion of types of comments significantly differed between the political and sport setting. Specifically, a higher proportion of comments left in the sport setting tended to be more positive than in the political setting. For example, the comments more likely to show up in a chatroom about a college football game wither acknowledged the good nature of the rivalry, expressed support or concern about the favorite team, or made playful jokes at the rival team's expense. On the other hand, comments left during the three presidential debates tended to be more negative in nature, either through discussing the negative nature of the competition or rivalry, or using strong language to derogate a rival, and even wishing ill will or harm upon out-group members.

To recap, fans in both the sport and political setting are in a position where they can directly compare to another group vicariously through their favorite teams or political candidates and parties. Further, the comparison of chat room comments left in both sport and politics point to a willingness of fans to engage in comparison by highlighting their in-groups positive attributes and their out-groups perceived failures. Finally, people participating in chatrooms during the three presidential debates

tended to leave more negative comments about the competition/rivalry, or the out-group than people participating in chatrooms about college football.

The online comments posted in chatrooms surrounding the 2016 Presidential Debates and three college football rivalry games indicates that the amount of negativity toward a rival group may be more negative in the political spectrum than the sport setting. These findings suggest that future inquiry and analysis be conducted regarding fan negativity toward rival groups in various settings. For instance, based on findings to this point, one could hypothesize that rivalry in sport is associated with more negativity toward out-groups than in other popular culture settings. However, one area where rivalry could lead to more negativity toward out-groups than the sport setting is the political spectrum. Therefore, we call for researchers to pursue this thread of inquiry. Doing so can not only add to our knowledge of rivalry, but also suggest potential ways to decrease negativity between rival group members.

Implications and Future Directions for Investigation

The current study carries important implications and areas for researchers engaged in investigating group members and competing group dynamics. First, of paramount importance is gaining further understanding and attempting to decrease negativity among groups. The findings first illustrated what types of comments people leave in online chatrooms when they are competing with or being compared to a rival group. People choose to provide commentary on the nature of the competition, on the competition itself, or find ways to derogate the rival group. This extends literature in both the sport and political settings, especially considering the types of comments about the nature of competition and rivalry. In the current landscape within sport and politics, it is important to know that some people choosing to engage in online commentary are not necessarily *only* choosing one side over the other; instead leaving comments about the general nature of the competition in focus. This finding also provides practitioners better understand group members, and provides respite to beliefs that people participate in online communication to voice derogatory information about and out-group. In fact, the comments most frequently left in both setting (50% in sport, 49.3% in politics) voiced support for their in-group. However, this does not necessarily suggest that these commenters chose not to derogate a rival group, as the current

analysis pulled first-order themes and categories[9]. This provides areas for future investigation to better understand whether people choose to praise an in-group over derogating and out-group, or if in fact people do both simultaneously. Additionally, in this vein, future research could focus on understanding what type of people leave comments focused on supporting a favorite group, derogating a rival group, or participating in both practices.

The current study added to the literature on social media's role in group member discourse (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), and negativity among rival groups (Dalakas et al., 2015; Ewing et al., 2013; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014; Tucker, 2017), by comparing the sport context to the political context. Doing so, the current study illustrated that comments left in online chatrooms were proportionally more negative to overall comments made than in the sport setting. This important finding may suggest that political discourse has the ability to foster more negativity among supporters and participants than sport does. One potential reason for this could be the divisive nature of political new sources (e.g., right-leaning Fox News, left-leaning MSNBC vs. more-neutral CNN). While contrary to research involving sport and other entertainment options (Havard, Grieve et al., 2020; Havard, Wann et al., 2020), it is understandable considering the importance people assign to politics.

People also vote for their chosen candidates in politics, so they build a strong affiliation with the individual that represents their group, and that individual becomes *Our Choice*. Because of the voting process, and the strong affiliation with a chosen candidate, people may feel more of need to even responsibility to show derogation toward their political candidate to help their chosen individual elected. This is not present in the sport setting, as people do not weigh in on personnel decisions to the same extent as in the political landscape (e.g., at the ballot box). Further, as previously discussed, the people posting in online chatrooms, or the vocal minority (Bolce et al., 1996), are highly engaged supporting their candidate or team, and because social media plays a significant role in society, the messages they leave and items they share can go a long way to further promoting ideas and views to other consumers of online content (Xie, et al., 2011). For this reason, people who would otherwise not post or share stories online may choose to do so in politics because they see the

[9] Comments were coded into a single category that represented the overall sentiment perceived by the investigators.

stakes as high. Further, as the 2020 United States election cycle ramps up in intensity, and with the current knowledge that content shared during the 2016, 2018, *and now 2020* elections were not all accurate, the current studies' findings are very important in (1) understanding how the vocal minority, and therefore, agents hoping to spread messages supporting certain positions can influence the general public, and (2) appreciating the need for disseminating accurate information via the Internet, chat rooms, and social networking in the public sphere.

When considering steps to decrease negativity among rival group members, theories and hypotheses from social psychology can provide potential avenues. First, identity foreclosure, or identifying with one group, can lead fans to exhibit more negativity toward an out-group (Beamon, 2012). This occurs because when a person only has one group or interest in which to derive vicarious experiences, when that group is unsuccessful, the individual has little other outlets he/she can look to in order to feel better. Therefore, when experiencing a form of failure, someone that experiences identity foreclosure may take out their disappointment through negativity toward an out-group, which is a common human practice (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). It is recommended that individuals diversify the groups in which they seek membership or identity. To help with this endeavor, practitioners can implement promotions that highlight the need for individuals to identify with multiple groups. For example, an advertisement featuring political candidates and supporters participating in multiple activities could help relay a message that people should have multiple interests and groups in which they belong. Doing so not only attracts more supporters based on interests and activities, but also suggests supporters diversify their group memberships, which can help group members cope with vicarious perceived failure without having to explicitly stating this point.

On this note, a potential avenue for decreasing out-group negativity is to use the common in-group model (Gaertner et al., 1993). This in turn asserts that the more groups in which someone has membership, the more positive their interactions with out-group members can be. Recent comparisons of rivalry in sport and other popular culture settings revealed that people identified as fans of multiple genres reported more positive views toward all relevant rival groups. This further supports the need for individuals to seek membership in multiple groups, and practices should be implemented to encourage them to do so. Additionally, organizing events where opposing group memberships are found supporting the

same cause, such as athletic events honoring the military, cancer research, and other worthy causes can help decrease out-group derogation and negativity, even if only momentarily. Doing this in message boards, home to many members of the vocal minority, could potentially carry positive ramifications for others online and the larger society.

Extended contact hypothesis states that an individual seeing someone he/she likes or admires with an out-group member may increase empathy toward the relevant out-group (Zhou et al., 2018). Further, the more someone spends time with an out-group member, the more likely they are to build a rapport with, understand, and seek to find common ground with said out-group member. Hibbing et al. (2008) argue that attempting to understand what influences someone from a differing political party or persuasion, or a different view may not entirely bring an end to negativity toward the out-group member, but may at least allow people from different ends of a political spectrum or view to interact in more positive ways. Therefore, practitioners and the general public should seek opportunities to identify common interests between rival groups in an effort to encourage more positive interactions between group members. One example of such an opportunity is illustrating that people whom identify as Republicans/conservatives and Democrats/liberals support the same sport team. Doing so allows group members to see that even though they may find themselves in different groups in the political setting, they in fact belong to the same in-group where their favorite team is involved. The more these fans gather to support their favorite teams, the more likely they are to find other similarities, even if they will never agree on political ideology. In this way, employing the extended contact hypothesis seeks to build community within and among groups, which is the frame in which Peter Longo discusses politics in his book *Great Plains Politics* (2018).

The current study investigated the comments participants left in online sport and political chatrooms. The paper and findings suggest that people choosing to communicate their feelings about sport and political rivals online typically acknowledge the nature of the relationship, individual contests or competitions, and derogate out-group members. Further, a higher proportion of negative comments about an out-group appear in the political setting than in the sport setting. Further, the current study offers several potential avenues for decreasing negativity among rival groups and their members, and therefore our final call to action is for researchers from political science and popular culture to seek new avenues

of inquiry in an attempt to address in-group bias and out-group derogation and negativity. In conclusion, we currently sit at an important point in our culture where the steps taken to either bring together or further separate group members, whether in sport, politics, or other settings, will play a very important role in shaping the future of society and interactions among group members. The current study is meant to be a call to action for researchers and practitioners from various fields to address such a challenge, and provide further support to those interested in the endeavor.

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