

# Rivalry And Fan Aggression: Why Acknowledging Conflict Reduces Tension Between Rival Fans And Downplaying Makes Things Worse

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## **Aim of the research**

With fan violence mounting across the globe, team sport organizations often try to placate fans by downplaying the importance of rivalry games (e.g., “the derby is not a war”). While such statements appear to be intuitively useful, their effects on fan aggression are unclear. Drawing on intergroup conflict theory, this research derives and empirically examines dual identity statements, an alternative approach to reducing fan aggression. Specifically, our studies compare dual identity statements with the managerial practice of downplaying and examine the underlying mechanisms and a boundary condition of the statements’ effects.

## **Theoretical background**

We conceptualise rivalry as an intractable identity-based conflict. Conflicts are labelled intractable when they are protracted and chronically salient, resist resolution, and feature mutual disidentification as well as simplifying stereotypes and zero-sum conceptualizations (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009; Northrup, 1989). The outgroup is downgraded, criticized and attacked to maintain a positive social identity — behaviours that can often be observed between groups of rival fans in team sports (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). To avoid excessive hostility, a widespread managerial approach is to downplay the importance of the rivalry game prior to the clash. However, such statements ignore that the segregation between the groups is desired. Scholars suggest that if identity is part of the problem in an intergroup conflict, it should be part of the solution (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009). A potential remedy is the promotion of dual identities by “maintaining, not weakening, subgroup identities and locating them within the context of a binding superordinate identity” (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000, p. 143). Dual identity statements enhance supporters’ unique identity (as fans of a team) while at the same time facilitating identification with the rival at a superordinate level (e.g., as joint fans of a region). We hypothesize that H1) a dual identity statement reduces fan aggressiveness compared to a downplay statement, H2) this effect only occurs if the statement comes from an ingroup (versus outgroup) member, H3) a dual identity statement increases superordinate identity strength compared to a downplay statement, H4) superordinate identity strength is negatively related to fan aggressiveness and H5) superordinate identity strength mediates the effect of a dual identity (versus downplay) statement on fan aggressiveness.

## **Methodology, research design, and data analysis**

Three field experimental studies among supporters of Borussia Dortmund (N = 419), Eintracht Brunswick (949) and FC Nuremberg (329) tested the hypotheses. Studies 1 and 3 used a twofactorial (type of statement: dual identity vs. downplay vs. control: neutral statement x source of statement: players of favourite team vs. rival team’s players vs. players of both teams together) between-subjects design. Study 2 used a one-factorial (type of statement: dual identity vs. downplay vs. control) between-subjects design. Participants received a fictitious press article featuring either a dual identity statement (e.g., “Either club has its own distinct identity. But there are also important similarities. We both stand for tradition and the Ruhr Valley.”), a statement that deemphasized the importance of the game (downplay condition) or statistical information instead of a statement (control). Established measures captured the mediator superordinate fan identity strength, the controls team identification and dispositional aggression and the dependent variable aggressiveness (e.g. “When thinking about [rival] supporters, I feel hate/anger/disgust”; “I feel the desire to hurt/inflict pain on fans of [rival]”).

## **Results, discussion, and implications**

All studies provide empirical support for H1, H3, H4 and H5. Type of statement had a significant main effect on fan aggressiveness. Post-hoc tests show that a dual identity statement significantly reduced aggressiveness compared to downplay (studies 1, 2 and 3) and the control condition (studies 2 and 3). The effect of dual identity (versus downplay) statements rests on higher levels of superordinate fan identity strength, as indicated by a negative and significant indirect effect. Interestingly, the downplay condition produced significantly higher levels of aggressiveness than the control condition, suggesting that attempts to play down the rivalry are even worse than saying nothing. Downplaying is counterproductive because it increases reactance, which was included as mediator in studies 2 and 3. Fans get upset when the club do not appreciate the conflict with the rival, which is a crucial part of their identity. Rather than playing down rivalries, man-

agers should focus on the creation of a superordinate identity to reduce aggression. Surprisingly, source of statement (ingroup, outgroup or both groups together) did not have an influence. Limitations of our field experimental approach are a higher degree of noise and limited control over the procedures compared to laboratory settings.

## References

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