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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **The Rivalry Effect: the Influence of Emotional Intensity and Confrontational Interactions on Purchase Intentions**

Diego Alvarado-Karste, Utah Valley University

Blair Kidwell, University of North Texas

The authors examine how and why brand rivalries influence consumer choices. We propose and test a novel conceptual framework demonstrating that emotional intensity and confrontational interactions are the main factors of a rivalry. Also, brand rivalries are found to foster brand interest, which in turn increases purchase intentions.

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# The Rivalry Effect: The Influence of Emotional Intensity and Confrontational Interactions on Purchase Intentions

Diego Alvarado-Karste, Utah Valley University, USA  
Blair Kidwell, University of North Texas, USA

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Rivalries are common among consumer brands and companies. Classic brand rivalries include Coke vs. Pepsi, General Motors vs. Ford, Apple vs. Microsoft, Canon vs. Nikon, and Visa vs. MasterCard. In recent years, new rivalries have emerged, such as Apple vs. Samsung, or Dunkin vs. Starbucks. Notably, rivalries are prevalent across industries and countries. Yet, despite their prevalence, surprisingly, little research has examined how brand rivalries are formed, how they differ from comparative strategies and their subsequent impact on consumer perceptions and choices.

This article explores the dimensions of rivalries and their influence on consumer choices. We make five main contributions. First, we introduce rivalries and its consequences in marketing research. Second, we provide a novel definition of a rivalry and conceptualize it using a model with two dimensions: emotional intensity and confrontational interactions. Third, we develop unique measures for testing rivalries. Fourth, we reveal critical downstream effects of rivalries on consumer decisions. Finally, we uncover the process explanation for the rivalry effects. We show that the rivalry effect on purchase intentions is greater for consumers who have higher needs for external stimulation (NES) and fully attenuated for consumers who have lower NES. These findings suggest that brand rivalries are persuasive because they appeal to consumers' optimum stimulation needs (Raju 1980).

## Rivalries

Rivalries have been explored in a variety of fields. However, while past research has attempted to conceptualize and define rivalries, perhaps due to the diversity of research fields, different researchers use a diversity of factors to accomplish their goal. Similarly, there has been little agreement on the dimensions or essential precursors of a rivalry. Due to the lack of a clear understanding of rivalries and their definition, as well as the absence of consistency across researchers of its theorization, in this research, we take a unified approach to provide a parsimonious and operational definition of the construct by exploring its dimensions. Toward this end, a pilot study using an open-ended elicitation procedure was conducted to define a rivalry from a consumer standpoint and develop a brand rivalry scale. We first reviewed rivalries in films and sports and identified the characteristics of rivalries. Then, 119 were asked to define what a rivalry is in their own terms. From their responses, two independent coders blinded to this study chose the responses that were most prevalent among participants. We clustered these items into two dimensions:

*Confrontational interactions (CI)*. That is every event in which one entity engages with an adversary in aims to gain an advantage. CI can have the form of comparative advertising, social media interactions, or point of purchase placement, among others. Thompson (1995) suggests that rivalry confrontations are more predisposed to conflict escalations, which could, in turn, reinforce the rivalry. Furthermore, research demonstrates that narrowly decided conflicts increase rumination, counterfactual thinking, and emotional reactions (Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich 1995; Medvec and Savitsky 1997).

*Emotional Intensity (EI)*. Competition, confrontations, and social comparison have been found to elicit several negative emotions such as anger, resentment, envy and *Schadenfreude* (Feather and Nairn 2005; Feather and Sherman 2002), as well of feelings of threat to social identity (Wann and Grieve 2005), that often result from perceptions of

dominance and unfairness within a rivalry (Ambrose and Schnitzlein 2017; Tyler and Cobbs 2015). Other research finds that there are also positive emotions related to competitive relationships, such as pleasure (Converse and Reinhard 2016), and achievement (Abrams and Hogg 1988, 2006). Also, research in sport and political sciences finds that joy (Goldstein 2012; Havard et al. 2013), admiration (Oren 2003), and excitement (Ambrose and Schnitzlein 2017; Tyler and Cobbs 2015) are universal emotions among confrontational relationships.

In this research rivalries are defined as a competitive relationship between two actors built on emotionally intense confrontational interactions. We examine CI, EI and their interaction as possible dimensions of a rivalry. These two factors defining a rivalry can be configured to yield four cells in a 2 x 2 matrix, contained in Figure 1.

## Downstream Effects

Rivalries may have an effect on consumers' interest in the rival brands. Luellen and Wann (2010) suggest that sport managers increase rivalry perceptions as a way to increase fan interest and media exposure. Also, according to Madeiro (2007), sport rivalries increase media attention and fan interest, which ultimately leads to more fan expenditure and even changes in stock prices. Moreover, research shows that conflicts and confrontations foster seeking information behavior (Lowry and Johnson 1981), due to increased curiosity, interest and controversy (Berlyne 1960; Chen and Berger 2013).

Similarly, activities that are emotionally loaded are also found to sparkle people's interest (Izard 1977). For example, Allport (1961) suggests that interest and creativity are accompanied by tension and excitement. Furthermore, Koo and Ju (2010) find that emotions such as pleasure and arousal, are correlated with curiosity and interest, which ultimately has an effect on intentions. Also, Oosterwijk (2017) demonstrates that emotional events, especially those high in arousal and negative in valence, increase attention, curiosity and interest, while other research found that disturbing events intensify unpleasant emotions, but at the same time, make people more interested (Turner Jr and Silvia 2006).

Thus, we predict that brand rivalries will increase consumers' interest in the rival brands. Likewise, since interest is the most frequently experienced positive emotion as well as the most prevalent motivational condition (Izard 1977), it is likely that as consumers become more interested in rival brands, their purchase intentions for both brands in the relationship will also surge.

## Optimum Stimulation Level

We propose that rivalry effects are driven by consumers' needs to regulate their optimal stimulation level (OSL) (Hebb 1955; Leuba 1955). Raju (1980) suggests that people prefer a certain level of stimulation, which they may find in their environment. When the environmental stimulation is below optimal, individuals will attempt to increase stimulation, and when it is above optimal, they will strive to reduce it (Hebb 1955; Leuba 1955). Therefore, when consumers feel less internally stimulated, they might engage in exploratory behavior with hopes of finding something optimally stimulating.

## Overview Of Studies

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Three studies examine the effect of brand rivalries on brand interest and purchase in-

tentions. Study 1 demonstrates the power of the two dimensions in constructing a rivalry and provides support for the mediating role of brand interest in fostering purchase intentions. Study 2 decomposes brand rivalries into its two components - confrontational interactions (vs. non-confrontational) and emotional intensity (vs. lack of emotions) and demonstrates their individual and joint effects on consumer choices. Finally, study 3 investigates the moderating effect of OSL in the effects of brand rivalries on brand interest and purchase intentions.

### Study 1

*Participants, Design, and Procedure.* 115 participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (rivalry, indifferent). After answering the brand rivalry scale (6 items,  $\alpha$  .96), participants answered questions about their perceived rivalry (3 items,  $\alpha$  .98). Then, participants were asked about their interest (3 items,  $\alpha$  .89) and purchase intentions (4 items  $\alpha$  .93). Finally, participants filled some demographic questions.

*Results.* A t-test confirmed that the manipulations were successful. A linear regression was performed with confrontational interactions and emotional intensity as independent variables and the perceived rivalry items as the dependent variable. Both factors were significant predictors of rivalries ( $p < .001$ ) and provided a strong explanation power for rivalries ( $R^2 = .85$ ,  $F(2, 114) = 322.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A t-test also confirmed that the rivalry manipulation, which included explicit high emotional intensity and confrontational interactions, fostered greater perceptions of a rivalry than the indifferent manipulation, which contained low emotional intensity and confrontational interactions ( $M_{\text{rival}} = 5.88$ ,  $SD = .93$ ;  $M_{\text{indifferent}} = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ;  $t = 11.82$ ;  $p < .001$ ). A one-way ANOVA was conducted with brand interest as the dependent variable. As predicted, the results indicate that the manipulation is significant ( $M_{\text{rival}} = 5.05$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ;  $M_{\text{indifferent}} = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ;  $F(1, 113) = 4.85$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

### Study 2

*Participants, Design, and Procedure.* 237 participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions about a relationship between two brands (rivalry, plain competition, non-confrontational relationship, and indifference). The manipulations were similar to those in study 1 but included two more quadrants that result from the two rivalry dimensions.

After answering the brand rivalry scale (6 items – 3 for confrontational interaction,  $\alpha$  .95; and 3 for emotional intensity,  $\alpha$  .94), participants also answered questions about their perceived rivalry (3 items  $\alpha$  .97). Then, participants were asked about their interest (3 items  $\alpha$  .86) and purchase intentions (4 items  $\alpha$  .95). Finally, participants filled demographic questions.

*Results.* Manipulation checks on confrontational interactions and emotional intensity were significant in the predicted direction. Ratings of perceived rivalry were analyzed using a two-way between-subjects ANOVA with confrontational interactions and emotional intensity as the independent factors. The overall model was significant ( $R^2 = .59$ ). The analysis revealed a significant main effect for both confrontational interactions ( $F(1, 233) = 249.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and emotional intensity ( $F(1, 233) = 68.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as a significant interaction of both dimensions ( $F(1, 233) = 6.48$ ,  $p = .01$ ). These results provide additional support about how rivalries are formed by both dimensions and their interaction. Also one way ANOVA was conducted with brand interest as the dependent variable, the rivalry condition as the dependent factor. As predicted, the results indicate that the manipulation was significant ( $F(3, 233) = 9.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Then, a post-hoc analysis with Tukey revealed that brand interest for rivalries ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) is significantly higher than the non-confrontational relationship ( $M =$

4.79,  $SD = 1.25$ ;  $p = .03$ ), plain competition ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and indifferent ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $p < .001$ ) conditions.

### Study 3

*Participants, Design, and Procedure.* 190 students were recruited to participate in a 4 (relation between brands: indifferent, non-confrontational relationship, plain competition, rivalry) x 2 (need for external stimulation: high vs. low) online between-subjects experiment. Participants were first randomly assigned either to the high or the low need for stimulation (NES) conditions. To create the manipulation, we relied on a technique that uses different measurement scales. Then, we measured perceived need for external stimulation by asking participants questions adapted from Raju (1980), (7 items,  $\alpha$  .86). After answering the brand rivalry scale (6 items – 3 for confrontational interaction,  $\alpha$  .68; and 3 for emotional intensity,  $\alpha$  .93), again participants answered questions about their perceived rivalry (3 items,  $\alpha$  .98), brand interest (9 items;  $\alpha$  .97), and purchase intentions (8 items;  $\alpha$  .98). Finally, participants filled demographic questions.

*Results.* Manipulation checks for confrontational interactions and emotional intensity were found significant in the predicted direction. Also, a t-test confirmed that the need for external stimulation manipulation was significant and in the direction we expected. Furthermore, ratings of brand interest were first analyzed using a two-way between-subjects ANOVA with the relationship between brands and NES as the two independent factors. The model is significant ( $F(7,176) = 4.46$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The analysis reveals a significant main effect for the relationship between brands ( $F(3,176) = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ), no significant effect for the need for external stimulation condition ( $F(1,176) = .00$ ,  $p = .96$ ), and a significant interaction between the two independent factors ( $F(3,178) = 3.54$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

Planned contrast reveals that when participants were in the High NES condition, their brand interest was significantly higher when participants were exposed to the rivalry condition ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = .28$ ) relative to participants who were exposed to the indifferent condition ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = .30$ ; 95% CI [1.38, 3.01],  $p < .001$ ), the plain competition condition ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = .31$ ; 95% CI [.59, 2.24],  $p < .01$ ), and the non-confrontational relationship condition ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = .31$ ; 95% CI [-1.54, 1.80],  $p < .01$ ). However, participants in the low NES condition, reported no significant differences in brand interest for the rivalry condition ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = .336$ ) in comparison to participants who were exposed to the indifferent ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .30$ ; 95% CI [-.57, 1.20],  $p = .48$ ), plain competition ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = .28$ ; 95% CI [-.50, 1.23],  $p = .40$ ), and non-confrontational relationship conditions ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = .27$ ; 95% CI [-.36, 1.35],  $p = .26$ ).

### General Discussion

Even though brand rivalries are prevalent across product categories, this phenomenon has yet to receive significant attention in consumer behavior literature. In this research, we explored how brand rivalries can affect consumer choices. More specifically, we show that brand rivalries could have a positive impact on consumers' interest and purchase intentions. Consumers' need for external stimulation explains this positive effect.

The results of study 1 provide initial evidence about the effect of emotional intensity and confrontational interactions on the development of rivalries. Furthermore, this study shows that rivalries, established on these two dimensions, have significant downstream effects on consumer choices, fostering brand interest, which ultimately leads to higher purchase intentions. Study 2 deconstructed the two dimensions of a rivalry to examine the individual effect of each dimension in the development of rivalries and replicate the downstream effects found in study 1. In doing so, this study finds that, even though each

dimension on its own is essential, their combination yields into a brand rivalry. Finally, this research also reveals the underlying mechanism of the rivalry effect as a way to regulate consumers' optimum stimulation level. That is, when people have high needs for external stimulation, brand rivalries yield higher interest and purchase intentions. However, when consumers have low needs for external stimulation, the rivalry effects are fully attenuated. This study also replicates the findings of the two previous studies.

### Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several contributions. First, it provides the first empirical analysis of the dimensions of a rivalry and is one of the first studies to look at brand rivalries and their effects in marketing. While rivalries have been examined in the past, surprisingly, their psychology and its effects on consumer research are limited.

Also, we demonstrate that brand rivalries have two underlying dimensions - confrontational interactions and emotional intensity - that together generate perceptions of a rivalry. Rivalries are also defined based on these two dimensions as competitive relationships between two actors built on emotionally intense confrontational interactions. This new definition of rivalries, as well as its measures, can help consumer researchers do further investigations of this phenomenon.

This work also unveils the rivalry effects on consumers' brand interest and purchase intentions. Finally, this research explains the underlying mechanisms driving the rivalry effect.

### Future Research

Several questions deserve future exploration. First, it would be helpful to understand how rivalries affect consumers in different cultures. It is possible that a past of confrontation and violence in culture may lead to increased interest in rivalries, while cultures without a violent past may have less interest in such relationships.

Research might also examine how brand interest, fostered by rivalries, changes in the future. One possibility is that a rivalry between two brands becomes too familiar and no longer increases brand interest. However, the opposite could also occur. Brand rivalries could foster new confrontations and more emotional intensity, driving consumers to seek more information about the involved brands.

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