

From Rivalry to Violence: Understanding Sports Fan Aggression Through Social Learning Theory

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Abstract—Sport has a diverse background it helps to unite people from different background to share their experiences, emotions and sense of achievement for max audience, supporting their favourite team is an enjoyable and important experience. However, the approach to show favouritism to their teams sometimes leads to aggressive behaviour, verbal abuse, threatening behaviour, physical fights, defacement, and other forms of violence have been reported in different sporting contexts. This paper investigates the fan-based aggression from the perspective of Social Learning Theory. Social learning theory states that people learn new behaviours, values, and attitudes by observing others.

Elite teams notice threats from the crowd or from the audience which can be advantageous for another team. At this time, some factors such as alcohol, crowd abuse, controversial decisions, and the emotional instability of a match may increase the likelihood that learned aggressive responses will be shown. The paper tells that it must not be considered only the spectator violence but also a learned behaviour. Instead, it should be considered within the wider social environment in which fans learn, observe, imitate, and reinforce particular behaviours. Knowledge of these processes can assist sporting organizations in developing more effective strategies for preventing aggression and for fostering healthy forms of sporting rivalry.

Index Terms—Sports psychology, Aggression, Spectator violence, Rivalry, Social learning theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sport is not about competition between two teams. For people it's their emotion, feelings aggression in the form of sports. A spectator can follow their team for several years, view their matches experience the victory and defeats. This emotional attachment is

generally optimistic and contributes to the social and cultural importance of sport.

This emotion will not be same or not always be positive. In some situations, rivalry between supporters can turn into hostility, and hostility can sometimes develop into aggression or violence. Aggressive behaviour among sports fans can take different forms, from insulting chants and abusive gestures to threats, physical fights, throwing objects, vandalism, and pitch invasions. Although such incidents involve only a minority of spectators, they can have serious consequences for athletes, officials, other spectators, sports organizations, and the wider community.

Social Learning Theory provides a useful psychological point of view when looking at this matter. Bandura (1978) claimed that aggressive behaviour could be learned by observing it, imitating it, and being reinforced. It is not necessary for people to go through aggression themselves in order to learn it; they can see how other people behave, notice the consequences of that behaviour, and then form expectations as to whether similar behaviour is acceptable or rewarding.

This shows that spectators learn violent or aggressive behaviour through observation that can create disturbance in the enjoyment of the game or sports environment and it is not only about that they are showing aggressive behaviour to other spectator only they also show that to players and also disturb the playing environment by the throwing the things inside the ground while playing.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main causes that why spectators are becoming more violent day by day with the perspective of social learning and what are the preventive measures can be taken that it can decrease the violent behaviour that can lead to the safe and more enjoyable environment

II. UNDERSTANDING SPORTS FAN AGGRESSION

Sports fan aggression refers to behaviour by spectators that is intended to threaten, intimidate, harm, or negatively affect another person or group in a sporting context. The target may be an opposing supporter, athlete, coach, referee, security official, or even another member of the same fan group.

Not all aggressive behaviour is physical. It can begin with relatively subtle actions such as insulting language, hostile gestures, abusive chanting, or provocative online comments. In more serious cases, it may involve pushing, fighting, throwing objects, damaging property, or entering restricted areas of a stadium.

This distinction is important because aggressive behaviour does not necessarily begin with physical violence. In some circumstances, hostility develops gradually. A provocative comment may be followed by an insult, an insult by a confrontation, and a confrontation by physical aggression. The social environment surrounding the supporters can influence whether this escalation continues or is stopped.

Research on sports crowd violence has emphasized that there is no single explanation for these incidents. Spaaij (2014) noted that crowd violence needs to be understood through an interdisciplinary and multi-level perspective. Similarly, research concerning sports fans, alcohol, and violence has identified the importance of sociocultural, event-related, policing, and crowd factors (Ostrowsky, 2018).

Therefore, the behaviour of fan must not be considered as demand of the situation or just a supporting gesture. Support does not mean to be violent or showing just the aggressive behaviour, they also have to respect the sports and the environment aggression should not be equated with simply being a passionate supporter.

III. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory explains how people learn behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses by observing others. In sport psychology, this theory is highly relevant because athletes often learn skills, develop motivation, and shape their behaviour by watching role models, coaches, teammates, or even opponents. Rather than learning solely through direct experience, athletes frequently adopt new techniques or behaviours by imitating what they see, especially when those behaviours appear to be successful or rewarded.

In simple terms, people watch what others do, remember what they observe, and consider whether the behaviour appears to be rewarded or punished. If a particular behaviour appears to produce desirable consequences, the observer may be more likely to reproduce it.

This process is particularly relevant in sport because spectators are surrounded by social models. Fans observe fellow supporters, fan leaders, athletes, coaches, commentators, and increasingly, people communicating through social media. These individuals can influence what a supporter considers normal or acceptable behaviour.

Four processes are particularly relevant to the present discussion: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

3.1 Attention

Attention is the cognitive process of selectively focusing on specific information in your environment while ignoring other distractions. An opponent who is support their favourite team can become the main source of attention while cheering.

It can be aggressive or can be learned from the other situation or the spectator

3.2 Retention

Retention in sports means keeping players active in a team, club, or sport over time instead of letting them quit

Observing the opponent is not enough they have to show aggressive approach to the previous behaviour to show their loyalty towards their favourite team along with that to maintain social context

3.3 Reproduction

To observe or to pretend the behaviours is not enough now they have to show a reproductive way. Group settings can make this process particularly powerful. When several people are performing the same behaviour simultaneously, an individual may feel encouraged to participate rather than remain separate from the group.

3.4 Motivation and Reinforcement

Perhaps the most important part of the learning process is the consequence that follows the behaviour.

Imagine a supporter confronting an opposing fan and then receiving cheers, laughter, recognition, or admiration from fellow supporters. The reaction of the group can act as a social reward. The supporter may therefore be more likely to behave similarly in the future.

This creates a simple cycle:

Observation → Imitation → Social response → Reinforcement → Repetition

The same process can also work in a positive direction. If a supporter attempts to calm a confrontation and receives approval from peers, peaceful behaviour may also be reinforced.

IV. THE ROLE OF RIVALRY

Rivalry is one of the most exciting aspects of competitive sport. Traditional rivalries create anticipation, emotional involvement, and a strong sense of occasion. Rivalry itself, therefore, should not be treated as a cause of violence.

The problem arises when competition develops into hostility toward the opposing group.

Strong team identification can make the boundary between “us” and “them” particularly meaningful. A supporter may begin to view an attack on the team as an attack on the group to which they belong. In these circumstances, criticism from opposing supporters may be interpreted as a threat that needs to be answered.

More recent research has also drawn attention to extreme forms of fan identity. Newson et al. (2024) reported substantially greater antisocial behaviour among ultras than among general fans in research

involving soccer supporters in Indonesia and Australia.

These findings do not mean that strong team identification automatically produces violence. Millions of highly committed fans support their teams without engaging in aggression. Instead, they suggest that the meaning attached to group membership and the behavioural norms within the group deserve attention.

From a Social Learning Theory perspective, rivalry can provide a setting in which supporters repeatedly observe how group members respond to perceived threats. If aggressive responses are consistently presented as evidence of loyalty, younger or less experienced supporters may learn to associate aggression with being a “real” supporter.

V. FANS AS THEIR SOCIAL LEARNING

A fan or group of fan is not just about some people watching the the match but they develop the emotions observe each other and react and make groups accordingly to show their aggressive behaviour towards others. This creates the learning behaviour to make their place into the group

A fan that is new to the group will learn how to chant differently for their teams what are the slogans and tries to get into that group so that can achieve the place and react accordingly.

If that group is toward aggressive or violent behaviour more than it can lead to learn and adjustable for that new fan but this scenario can be different if the environment of group is totally nonviolent and non-aggressive that can lead to a positive outcome.

A respected supporter who discourages violence can become a positive model. Similarly, a group that praises sportsmanship and condemns abusive behaviour can make peaceful conduct socially rewarding.

It clearly defines that social learning theory not only deals with the negative perspective of the situation but also on the positive way to convert that into a beneficial thing that can improve the overall experience.

VI. REINFORCEMENT AND THE NORMALIZATION OF AGGRESSION

Reward is the main concern for the aggressive behaviour. When aggressive behaviour is rewarded, it reinforces the action and leads to several significant negative psychological and social consequences. People tend to avoid individuals who act aggressively, leading to rejection, the loss of friendships, and exclusion from peer or community groups. It can directly lead to broken bonds just because of not controlling the aggressive behaviour.

When some people encourage for aggressive behaviour and they get emotional reward because all the time it is not the financial benefits that are going to develop negative perspective there are some other factors are also there.

This helps explain how occasional aggression can gradually become normalized. If an individual repeatedly sees aggressive supporters receiving positive responses, the behaviour may begin to appear less extreme.

The reverse process is equally important. If aggression consistently leads to criticism, rejection, removal from the group, or other meaningful consequences, the behaviour may become less attractive.

This can only be prevented when we can change the social settings and also create an environment that does not influence the aggressive and violent behaviour.

VII. THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In today's environment stadium are the not the only places where these types of behaviour are being influenced it the social media and media that also play a major role. As nowadays it is very easy for everyone to be in contact with the sport and sports environment with the help of social media.

Although social media also influence the violent and aggressive behaviour as it the place where people are socialising with each other nowadays more. It can be used either to be used positively or negatively and this the main source of influence nowadays.

An aggressive post may attract large numbers of comments, shares, or reactions. Although online

attention does not necessarily mean approval, users may interpret high engagement as social recognition. Over time, repeated exposure to hostile communication can make such behaviour appear normal within a particular online community.

It would nevertheless be inaccurate to claim that social media directly causes physical violence. Online aggression and physical aggression are different behaviours. However, digital environments can contribute to the social learning process by increasing exposure to aggressive models and providing new forms of social reinforcement.

VIII. ALCOHOL AND SITUATIONAL INFLUENCES

Social learning does not operate in isolation. The circumstances surrounding a sporting event can influence whether learned behaviour is expressed.

Alcohol consumption is one factor that has received considerable attention in research on sports-related violence. Ostrowsky (2018) reviewed the relationship between sports fans, alcohol use, and violent behaviour and highlighted the importance of social, cultural, venue-related, policing, and crowd factors.

Alcohol may reduce inhibition and make it more difficult for some individuals to control aggressive impulses. However, it should not be treated as a complete explanation. A person who has consumed alcohol may still behave differently depending on the social environment around them.

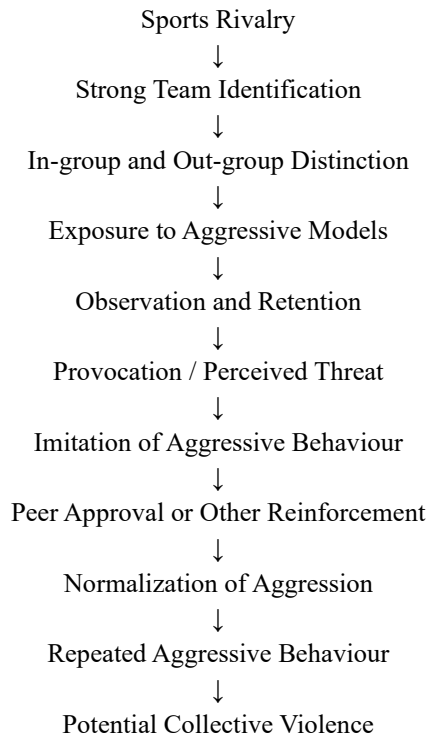
Other situational factors may include:

- an important or high-stakes match;
- controversial officiating decisions;
- perceived unfair treatment;
- provocation from rival supporters;
- crowd density;
- poor crowd management;
- previous history of rivalry; and
- the presence of highly emotional fan groups.

These factors may interact with learned behavioural patterns. A supporter who has already learned that confrontation is an acceptable response may be particularly likely to express that behaviour when provoked.

IX. AN INTEGRATED SOCIAL LEARNING MODEL OF FAN AGGRESSION

The relationship between rivalry, learning, and aggression can be represented through the following conceptual model:



This model is not intended to suggest that every supporter follows the same pathway. In reality, several points in the process can interrupt aggression.

X. PREVENTION THROUGH SOCIAL LEARNING

Social learning theory not only explains that how it is transferred to repeated by the time. It also helps us to prevent the unwanted behaviour and can help in changing the behaviour also

Positive role models

This explains that influential figures such as star players their role model can set a good example to keep intense rivalry peaceful.

Changing the meaning of loyalty

Sports organizations can actively promote the idea that loyalty does not require hostility. Being a committed supporter can be associated with enthusiasm, respect, responsible behaviour, and positive representation of the team.

Reinforcing positive behaviour

Supporters who demonstrate sportsmanship and help prevent conflicts can be recognized by clubs and fan organizations.

Early intervention

There must be an early approach towards the spectator violence by the security personnel rather than waiting for physical violence. Early intervention can prevent aggressive behaviour from becoming a model for others in the crowd.

Responsible online communication

Clubs and sporting bodies can use their digital platforms to promote positive rivalry and discourage abusive communication. Positive examples of supporter behaviour can provide alternative models for online communities.

XI. DISCUSSION

Social Learning Theory provides a clear explanation for why aggression is spreading so quickly among the spectators. As it explains that it is totally a learned behaviour which can be improved with different intervention techniques.

This plays an important role in group settings. A single aggressive behaviour can influence the whole group and leads to the violent behaviour when it attracts attention or approval. If the same type of behaviour is repeated continuously it may lead to the continuous transfer of aggression among the spectators.

At the same time, the theory should not be used as a complete explanation for fan violence. Sports crowd aggression is influenced by a combination of psychological, social, situational, and environmental factors. Spaaij (2014) emphasized this multi-level nature of sports crowd violence, while research on fan identity has highlighted the role of extreme group attachment and antisocial behaviour.

Recent work has also demonstrated that intergroup criticism can produce stronger negative reactions when it comes from an out-group. Research involving Austrian national-team supporters during UEFA Euro 2024 found that criticism from out-group members produced more negative evaluations and greater costly punishment than comparable criticism from an in-group member (Braid et al., 2025).

Together, these findings suggest that fan aggression is best understood as an interaction between what supporters learn, the groups with which they identify,

the situations they encounter, and the consequences of their behaviour.

This Clearly shows simply punishing bad behaviour does not fix the underlying problem that caused it in the first place. Dealing with the individual behaviour at the time is not going to make any changes the culture that produced the behaviour. Long-term prevention requires education, awareness, role model influence etc.

XII. IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY AND SPORTS MANAGEMENT

The findings have practical implications for sports psychologists, administrators, coaches, clubs, governing bodies, and security personnel.

Sports psychologists majorly deals with the behaviour during the competition it can be of an athlete or can be of spectator which can directly contribute to develop the program which can help to identify different psychological variables and improvement in a pressurised situation.

From the perspective of management security plays a major role for everyone and that can only be improved with the help of different education based model early intervention and predetermined threats for improved security.

These clearly defines that if aggression is being awarded that it is mor likely to be happen but if sportsmanship good behaviours and positive reach will be their it can improve the overall experience

XIII. CONCLUSION

Sports rivalry is an important part of the excitement and culture of competitive sport, but rivalry does not have to result in hostility or violence. The transition from passionate support to aggressive behaviour is influenced by the social environment in which supporters learn and express their identities.

Social learning theory states that people learn new behaviours, values and attitudes by watching others for this a very famous bobo doll experiment was done.

It emphasizes that learning only through direct experience or rewards people use observational learning.

It clearly explains that you are more likely to repeat behaviours you often see or those with rewards. Observation not only leads towards negative outcome

but it can also lead towards optimistic approach if the pattern is changed. Mentoring through education, awareness and their role models.

Being aware of what you are exposed to and who you look to as examples can be a powerful step toward growth.

It defines that if we are able to understand the social environment and their behaviour during the event if will be very useful that can lead to more enjoyable and safe environment.

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readability and clarity. The authors verified and evaluated the content, and are solely responsible for accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions in the work.

Declaration

Conflict of Interest

To whomsoever it may concern

The undersigned authors hereby declare that no conflicts of interest may have influenced or been thought to have an impact on the research, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings given in the paper titled: From Rivalry to Violence: Understanding Sports Fan Aggression Through Social Learning Theory.

We attest that we have no relationships or ties or affiliations regarding financial, personal, professional that could create a conflict of interest in reference to this research. The work was conducted independently, and the authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, formulation of research problem, development of study objectives, gathering of sources, theoretical frameworks, literature evaluation and analysis, and formatting are all done by N Anakshitha Reddy¹ and Rahul Arora² is responsible for methodological review, data validation, interpretation of results, revision of manuscript and overall research process. Both together agreed to take full responsibility for the work and agreed to be accountable for final review and approval of manuscript.

Statement of Data Availability

Upon reasonable request, the corresponding author will provide the data supporting the study's conclusions, subject to pertinent institutional, ethical, and privacy limitations.

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