Know who you’re up against: Counterpart identifiability enhances competitive behavior

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ABSTRACT

Research on competition highlights the role of certain attributes of competitors and their relationships as determinants of competition intensity. In this paper, we show that competition intensity can increase even in the case of anonymous competitors who are merely identifiable, that is, their identities have been determined but are not revealed. Whereas previous research found that identifiable targets elicit enhanced pro-social behavior relative to unspecified targets, we suggest that mere identifiability can also influence competitive behaviors. Data from three experiments show that providing arbitrary, non-identifying information about one’s competition enhances one’s goal-driven behavior: in competitive tasks, participants competing against merely identifiable counterparts displayed greater perseverance and performed better than participants whose counterparts were undetermined; in a dyadic bid setting, participants offered more money to outbid an identifiable counterpart for an auctioned product than an unspecified counterpart. The effects of identifiability on competitors’ behavior were associated more strongly with the motivation not to lose than with the desire to win.

Keywords: Competitiveness; Identifiability; Social Comparison; Rivalry; Motivation