



The exclusiveness of group identity in celebrations of team success



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ABSTRACT

Basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) describes individuals' tendency to publicly affiliate themselves with successful others. Within sport, scholars have provided foundational knowledge pertaining to BIRGing; however, they have not deeply engaged with sport fans to understand the influence of multiple group identities in celebrating team success. Using social identity theory and social identity complexity as theoretical frameworks in the current study, I conduct qualitative research with sport fans to understand how multiple group identities influence fan behaviours in response to team performance. I discover that fans (1) BIRG and blast for an enhanced sense of inclusiveness and distinctiveness, and (2) possess multiple, ordinarily inclusive group identities, which converge into a highly exclusive social identity structure immediately before, during, and after games against rivals. I conclude by discussing the potential theoretical and managerial implications regarding multiple group identities in sport contexts, as well as directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Basking in reflected glory (BIRGing; [Cialdini et al., 1976](#)) is notably prevalent in sport, with sport fans frequently displaying connections to their favourite teams or athletes through consumption of sport merchandise or public affiliation with a particular sport entity; following balance theory ([Heider, 1958](#)), such behaviours allow individuals to affiliate themselves with the success of others to enhance their own self-esteem ([Cialdini et al., 1976](#)). The BIRGing phenomenon can be considered foundational to subsequent contributions to the sport consumer behaviour literature, including the conceptualization of team identification, the degree of one's psychological connection to a sport entity ([Wann & Branscombe, 1993](#)). Grounded in social identity theory ([Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)), scholars have used team identification as a variable to understand individuals' tendency to BIRG or cut off reflected failure (CORF) in various sport settings (e.g., [Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999](#); [Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2008](#); [Madrigal, 1995](#); [Madrigal & Chen, 2008](#); [Trail et al., 2012](#); [Wann & Branscombe, 1990](#); [Wann, Hamlet, Wilson, & Hodges, 1995](#)).

Despite scholars' attention to and progression in the study of BIRGing in conjunction with social identity theory, scholars have not deeply engaged with sport fans to ascertain the potential influence of *multiple* group identities in such settings. Scholars have suggested that the "multiplicity of identity is a crucial issue for investigators of collective identification to

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address" (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, p. 84). Within sport, scholars have discussed the notion of individuals' multiple group identities (e.g., Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003); however, such considerations are absent from the BIRGing literature. Recognizing the influence of multiple group identities in fans' celebrations of team success may bolster our understanding of the BIRGing phenomenon. Specifically, the concept of social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), the idea that individuals may have overlapping group identities, might be informative in such considerations.

Acknowledging the dearth of research aimed at understanding the influence of multiple group identities in BIRGing, the purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals' multiple group identities are influential in associating themselves with a sport entity based on its accomplishments. Specifically, I conducted qualitative research with sport fans to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: How does perceived ingroup membership influence fans' celebration of team success (i.e., BIRGing, blasting)?

RQ2: How does fans' structuring of multiple group identities influence their celebrations of team success (i.e., BIRGing, blasting)?

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. First, I review social identity theory and social identity complexity; in reviewing these theories, I consider how scholars have utilized them within sport consumer behaviour. Second, I discuss the method for the current study. Third, I present the themes emerging from the current study. Fourth, I discuss the results with implications and future research directions for both academicians and professionals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social identity theory

Social identity theory scholars have posited that group membership contributes to an individual's overall self-concept as a result of the derived awareness, value, and emotional significance with being a member of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory is guided by three fundamental principles. First, individuals seek to maintain a positive social identity. Second, positive social identity is derived from favourable comparisons between ingroups and outgroups. Thus, an individual's acknowledgement of a group's existence requires at least one other group, distinct from the group to which he/she belongs. The process of self-categorization allows for the emphasis of perceived similarities between the self and ingroup members (i.e., prototypicality, see Ashmore et al., 2004; Hogg, 2001; Tajfel, 1982), and perceived differences between the self and the outgroup members (Tajfel, 1982). Third, when social identity is unfavourable, individuals either strive to make their existing ingroup more positive, or leave the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Within broader conceptualizations of intergroup relations, Tajfel (1982) explained a 'continuum of social interaction' (p. 13), with interpersonal behaviour and intergroup behaviour as its extremes. As one moves further from the interpersonal extreme towards the intergroup extreme of the continuum, interactions between individuals are based on the social groups to which they belong. This normalization of individuals based on group membership illustrates the depersonalization that occurs as a result of intergroup behaviour. Normalized intergroup behaviour is largely driven by: the distinctiveness of the ingroup and relevant outgroup(s); conflict between the ingroup and relevant outgroup(s); and relative ease in which an individual is able to move from one group to another (Tajfel, 1974).

2.1.1. Sport rivalry and social identity

Sport consumer behaviour scholars have utilized social identity theory in examining the behaviours of sport fans; an interesting area of application has been the study of rivalries in sport. Havard, Gray, Gould, Sharp, and Schaffer (2013) defined a sport rivalry as "a fluctuating adversarial relationship existing between two teams, players, or groups of fans, gaining significance through on-field competition, on-field or off-field incidences, proximity, demographic makeup, and/or historical occurrence(s)" (p. 51). Scholars have increasingly argued that in studying consumers' sport-related group identities, rivalries are of critical importance (Havard, 2014; Havard et al., 2013; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). Indeed, scholars have established that rivalry is often an essential thought among fans in regard to sport teams they support (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006).

Within an intergroup relations framework, fans of rival sport teams can be considered outgroup members which ingroup members compare themselves to; for example, a New York Yankees fan (ingroup member) might compare him/herself to a (rival) Boston Red Sox fan (outgroup member). Thus, while scholars' examinations of team identification often focus on perceptions of the ingroup, examinations of sport rivalry in tandem with team identification can provide a more robust understanding of not only social identity theory, but more broadly, intergroup relations and the dynamic between groups of opposing fans. For example, in conducting research with students at a large Midwest university, Smith and Schwarz (2003) found that students' perceived similarity with students at a rival university decreased during the week of a football game against the rival university. Levine, Prosser, Evans, and Reicher (2005) conducted experimental studies with Manchester United fans and reported that fans' likelihood to help another individual was contingent on the salience of a particular group identity; when Manchester United team identity was salient, fans were less likely to help a (rival) Liverpool FC fan than

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