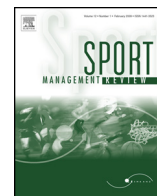




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Reviews and Theoretical Advances

## The Multiple In-group Identity Framework

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## ABSTRACT

The effects of team identification on sport consumer behaviour are well established. Recent research, however, has moved beyond this perspective to examine how groups within and beyond the team identity influence consumption. Assimilating previous research findings, we advance a Multiple In-group Identity Framework (MIIF), which consists of three levels: (1) superordinate (e.g., team identity), (2) subgroup (e.g., specific stadium area), and (3) relational group (e.g., friends or family). In the MIIF, we conceptualise the complex array of groups to which a consumer may belong within a superordinate identity. Each level includes groups with varying degrees of inclusiveness, homogeneity, and interpersonal attachment to other consumers between members. Individuals seek out sub and relational group membership because solely identifying at the superordinate level may not provide optimal distinctiveness or sufficient interpersonal attachment to other consumers. This provides self-concept benefits that nourish and operate in complement with the superordinate identification. The extent that different in-group identities influence behaviour relates to their importance in a consumer's self-concept and relevance to context. We provide implications for theory and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Since 1990, researchers have dedicated concerted attention to the causes and consequences of team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1990, 1993). As a result, we know that team identification influences a range of variables, including social-psychological health (Wann, 2006), brand equity (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007), and match attendance (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). However, consumers do not just identify with sport teams (Heere & James, 2007; Katz & Heere, 2013; Tyler, 2013). Many stadiums come alive due to the colour and noise created by sub-sections of spectators (Giulianotti, 2002; Holt, 1995). Consumers also watch and experience sport with friends, family, and colleagues (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002). Both examples illustrate that some sport consumers belong to groups within the superordinate identity<sup>1</sup> that also contribute to behaviour and experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> The term superordinate identity describes what researchers typically refer to as the team, brand or organisational identity. The term superordinate implies that an entity exists at a higher level of abstraction than the groups within it (Turner, 1985). Sub and relational groups bring people into, or operate within, the superordinate group. It subsumes definitions of team, brand, and organisational identification so that our framework might be applied to studies using each of the different terms.

For this reason, attention is diversifying from the traditional emphasis on superordinate identification (i.e., team, brand, or organisation). Researchers pioneering this shift have investigated the implications of belonging to supporter groups (Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet, Auvergne, & Lacassagne, 2011; Giulianotti, 2002; Tyler, 2013), tailgates<sup>2</sup> (James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001; Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015), and attending matches with friends and family (Gibson et al., 2002). Each study provides novel insights into the benefits and implications of belonging to groups within a superordinate identity. However, the extant research tends to focus on one type of group in-depth, which ignores the complexity and interrelationships that exist between multiple in-group identities. To address this gap in current knowledge, we advance a theoretical framework, which assimilates existing work on subgroup membership and interpersonal attachment to explain why some sport consumers use multiple in-groups to satiate different social needs. This overarching purpose frames three objectives:

- (1) Define the different levels of group to which a sport consumer may belong.
- (2) Outline the deficiencies in superordinate identification that motivate a consumer to identify with less inclusive groups.
- (3) Explain how sport consumers use multiple in-groups to achieve qualitatively distinct self-concept benefits.

As a result, this paper contributes to existing theory in three ways. First, it explains why consumers seek out multiple in-group identities. Second, it outlines how different sizes and types of groups lead to qualitatively different self-concept benefits in the sport consumption context. Third, it lays the foundation for more integrated studies of the multiple in-groups to which a sport consumer may belong in the future.

## 2. Conceptual background

In this paper, we discuss a range of groups; however, our central topic is group identification and its connotations for sport consumers and organisations. Because of our emphasis on group identification and intergroup processes, we develop the Multiple In-group Identity Framework (MIIF) using social psychological theories of self-representation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). We use Turner's (1982, p. 15) definition of a group "as two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category." Therefore, the groups we discuss here involve two or more people who cognitively realise their shared membership of a group, which might be a friendship, stadium section (e.g., bleachers), or superordinate entity. Identification, in this sense, does not require approval from other individuals or group members to exist, only recognition in a person's self-concept (Turner & Reynolds, 2008).

Group identification pertains to a sense of oneness between a person and collection of people who share a common characteristic (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It is this sense of oneness, or shared identity, which leads an individual to describe in-group actions and events using language, such as 'us' or 'we'. The use of associative pronouns illustrates the intertwining of a person's self-concept with the groups to which he or she belongs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The influence of various group memberships, from a social identity perspective, combines with an individual's unique and idiosyncratic personal identity to comprise his or her self-concept (Turner, 1985). Critiquing this perspective, Brewer and Gardner (1996) and Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale (1994) challenged the personal–social identity dualism, arguing for a more nuanced consideration of the social groups to which a person might belong (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice et al., 1994). Accordingly, Brewer and Gardner (1996) divided social groups into two types: (1) collective and (2) relational.

*Collective identification* occurs in relation to large, inclusive groups (e.g., national identity, gender or sport team) as the result of an attraction to group totems, symbols, and characteristics (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice et al., 1994). Although some members of collective groups interact, the primary attraction and attachment stem from positive evaluations of in-group characteristics. *Relational identification*, in contrast, emerges due to interpersonal attachments that also contribute to a person's self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice et al., 1994). As Prentice et al. (1994, p. 485) explained: "in these groups, the strength of group attachment depends critically on the extent to which one knows, likes and feels similar to other members of the group." The collective–relational dualism illustrates that an individual may use different group memberships to satisfy group affiliation or interpersonal objectives.

A consumer will typically identify with a constellation of collective and relational groups that relate to various aspects of his or her life (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore, these groups provide a sense of coherence and placement in society (Deaux, 1993; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Tajfel, 1969). The groups to which a person belongs need not interact. For example, an individual might belong to groups of workmates and family friends that exist completely separately. A consumer might also belong to groups that operate in conjunction (e.g., parent and sport fan) or hierarchically (e.g., team and subgroup). In the following section, we outline the three levels of the MIIF at which these collective and relational group dynamics occur in relation to sport teams.

<sup>2</sup> Tailgating groups, as studied by James et al. (2001) and Katz and Heere (2013, 2015), represent a relational group prevalent in the context of U.S. sport. Within the MIIF, we review literature published on this topic using the descriptor of tailgating. However, we stress that from a conceptual standpoint, other situations in which multiple relational groups converge based on the interpersonal connections of members (e.g., drinks in a pub before a match) provide an equivalent example, which applies to a broader array of consumer cultures.

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