'I was there from the start': The identity-maintenance strategies used by fans to combat the threat of losing

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ABSTRACT

On-field performances are a key, yet uncontrollable, determinant of team identification. In this research, we explore how fans of a new team, with an overwhelming loss to win ratio, maintain a positive social identity. Qualitative data gathered from 20 semi-structured interviews were used to address this research objective. Our findings indicated fans use social creativity and social mobility strategies to help preserve a positive and distinctive group identity. In the absence of success, fans evaluated the group on dimensions that reflected positively on, and emphasised the distinctiveness of, group membership. Fans also sought to increase their status in the group to increase the positivity of this association. We use these findings to extend understanding of social identity theory and provide recommendations for sport organisations with unfavourable performance records. Recommendations are themed around highlighting the unique nature of the group and favourable status comparisons between members of the in-group.

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The success and sustainability of professional sport organisations largely depends on attracting and maintaining a sufficient number of fans (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). Fans support teams and leagues via direct and indirect consumption activities, which include attending games, purchasing merchandise and enhancing the organisation's appeal to advertisers (Mason, 1999; McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013). Industry statistics estimate global sport industry revenues now exceed $145 billion, illustrating the impact and cultural prominence of sport in society (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). To leverage the general population's interest in athletic contests, sport organisations invest heavily in programmes designed to establish, maintain, and develop identification with their consumers (Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014).

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Achieving this objective is difficult for two reasons. First, the emergence of new teams and leagues, coupled with access to overseas leagues and teams via advancements in technology, has created an increasingly competitive sport marketplace (Kim & Trail, 2010, 2011; McDonald & Stavros, 2012). Sport organisations, therefore, require a better understanding of the factors that facilitate the attraction, retention, and development of fans (James et al., 2002). Second, in most sport leagues, including the Australian Football League (AFL), only half of the teams involved can retain a winning record. As such, there is a need for sport organisations to develop and maintain team identification during periods of poor performance. This is crucial, as success is an important, yet largely uncontrollable determinant of team identification (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). Furthermore, team identification is shaped by the context in which the team operates (Jones, 1997). Although researchers have started to direct attention to understanding this phenomenon, opportunities remain to better understand how sport consumer behaviour manifests in challenging and undesirable circumstances (Jones, 2015). Specifically, in this research, we examine how fans maintain team identification in the face of ongoing losses.

In the present study, we focus on fans of a new sport team, building on an emergent body of literature (e.g., Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2011; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012; Lock et al., 2014; McDonald, Leckie, Karg, Zubcevic-Basic, & Lock, 2015; Shapiro, Ridinger, & Trail, 2013). In contrast to established teams, which are able to leverage nostalgic moments and past achievements in times of poor performance, new team support is characterised by affiliations with groups that lack established histories, past successes, and strong brand identities. Research in this domain has provided insights into the processes that govern the maintenance and development of identification in the new team context, but has thus far focused on immediately successful teams (Lock et al., 2011, 2012).

In this manuscript, we explore how fans, defined as individuals with psychological connections to a sport team (e.g., Funk & James, 2001), maintain a positive group identity in circumstances where the team performs poorly. This addresses a call from the literature to examine contexts where teams are not immediately successful (Lock et al., 2012). To address this opportunity, we sampled fans of a new AFL team with an overwhelming loss to win ratio who remained fans despite the ongoing losses. We specifically examined the identity-maintenance strategies these fans used to maintain a positive social identity in the absence of success or past achievements. We utilised social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), reviewed next, as the theoretical framework to guide this investigation.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Social identity theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory is used to explain how social group affiliations help individuals understand their place in society and provide sources of positive self-esteem. In this research, social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Social identity theory posits that individuals seek to join social groups they deem to be equal to, or better than their own self-concept. This raises an important question pertaining to how individuals maintain identification with unsuccessful groups, a phenomenon observed extensively across spectator sport worldwide where even perennially unsuccessful teams maintain large fan bases (e.g., Bristow & Sebastian, 2001; Bristow, Schneider, & Sebastian, 2010; Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997).

Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) outlined three propositions that explain the social identity process and address how an individual may seek to preserve his or her social identity in instances where the status of a group is threatened. First, all individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, an individual will only join and maintain links with groups that reflect positively on his or her self-concept. Second, a positive in-group identity relies upon perceptions that the group is positively distinct from relevant out-groups. While favourable comparisons seek to reaffirm an individual's group membership, unfavourable comparisons (e.g., group threats) create subjective uncertainty and dissonance, which he or she will seek to reduce (Turner, 1985). Third, and most pertinent to this research, when an individual recognises an unsatisfactory in-group evaluation, he or she may leave the group or employ identity-maintenance strategies to enhance in-group status (e.g., Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Collectively, these propositions highlight the importance of intergroup comparisons, which guide the individual's group evaluations and status relative to other group members (Tajfel, 1982).

2. Team identification

Sport researchers have utilised social identity theory in a number of settings to explain the attitudes and behaviours of fans (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Madrigal, 1995; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005; Wakefield, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and to examine how and why individuals maintain connections with sport teams (e.g., Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009; Lock et al., 2012). In this body of research, social identification is commonly referred to as team identification, although sport consumers may develop connections with a range of sport entities, including players, coaches, communities, universities, leagues, and sports (e.g., Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Heere & James, 2007; Katz & Heere, 2013; Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013; Lock & Funk, 2016; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). In this manuscript, we focus on a fan's identification with a specific team, which we define as the extent to which an individual derives part of his or her