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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 identity¹ that also contribute to behaviour and experiences.

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¹ 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), tailgates² (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.

² 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.

3. Theoretical framework

Throughout this paper, we discuss multiple in-groups in relation to consumer experiences prior to, during, and after a team's matches. The term consumer defines an individual that: (1) spends time, money, or effort to interact with a sport organisation's products or services at some level; and (2) may or may not identify with the superordinate identity. Conceptualising consumers in this manner provides us with flexibility to consider how sub or relational groups satisfy social needs and foster loyalty in addition to, or aside from, superordinate identification. The groups we present play varying roles in consumption, dependent on their centrality and importance in an individual's self-concept.

Fig. 1 displays the three levels of the MIIF. The largest circle in Fig. 1 represents the superordinate identity: the most abstract group with which a consumer may identify (i.e., team, brand, or organisational identity). The superordinate identity contains all consumers of a sport team. As such, it is the most inclusive level of the framework. Subgroups exist within the superordinate identity and consist of a sub-section of team consumers. We list the different terms used to describe subgroups in previous work in Section 3.2. There is evidence that subgroups draw ideological content from, and interact with, external communities (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2011; Tyler, 2013). We illustrate this point with the subgroup slightly overlapping the superordinate identity. At the least inclusive level are relational groups, including friends, family, work, and category groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice et al., 1994). Fig. 1 displays the three forms of relational group: A, B and C. Circle A represents *external socialisation*, which involves a relational group that exists aside from the superordinate identity and socialises a person into (1) superordinate identification, (2) subgroup identification, or (3) a combination of both. Circle B depicts *subgroup relationships*, which develop through sharing membership of a sub-section of consumers. Finally, Circle C displays *superordinate relationships*, which emerge through a common identification with a sport organisation (cf. Wann, 2006).

The perforated circles distinguishing the three levels of the MIIF illustrate that the boundaries of each group level are dynamic and permeable. As such, consumers may move between levels in order to satisfy different social needs. The perforated lines imply that group size, type, and structure may fluctuate and change over time. This may involve the addition of new members to an existing group or the genesis of a relational group into a distinctive subgroup. For example, Dan Blatch attended the 1998 State of Origin series (an annual Australian Rugby League three-game series between New South Wales and Queensland) to celebrate his birthday with a relational group of two dozen friends that all wore blue afro wigs and shirts (Walshaw, 2014). Blatch's friendship group existed aside from support for the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) team, thus it represented an example of relational group A at its inception. After a sustained marketing effort from the NSWRL and National Rugby League, using Blatch as a consultant, 15,000 New South Wales supporters wore the blue afro

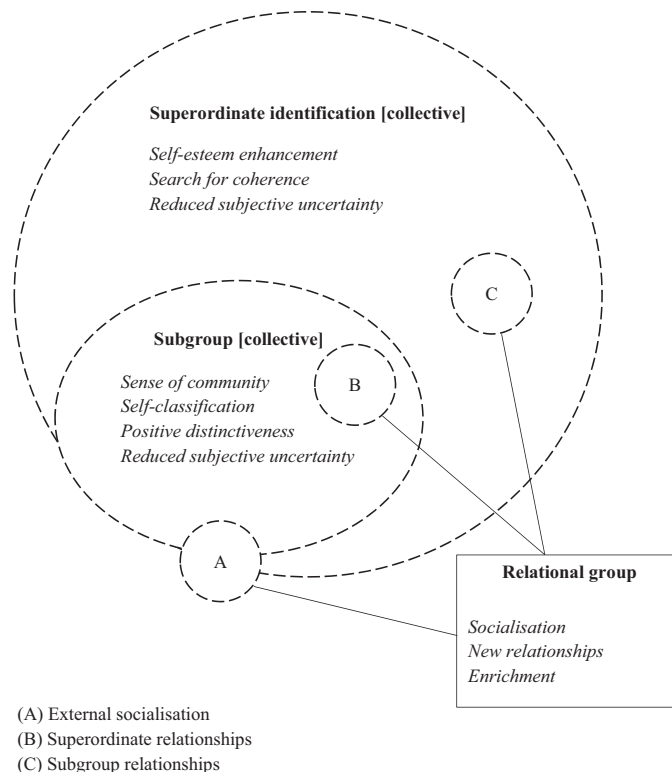


Fig. 1. MIIF: superordinate, subgroup and relational group representation.

wigs and shirts in 2014 as part of a specially ticketed subgroup named Blatchy's Blues. The example of Blatchy's Blues illustrates that a relational group may transition into subgroup that people seek out due to its totems, symbols, and values (i.e., cheaper tickets, fanaticism, plus blue wig and shirt). In the MIIF, we classify each level based on what attracts a person to identify at a point in time. We acknowledge that this may shift temporally.

To illustrate our underlying approach, consumers of the Portland Timbers in Major League Soccer (MLS), maintain varying degrees of superordinate identification (cf. [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)). In turn, all members of the superordinate identity understand that the Seattle Sounders is a traditional rival, Timber Joey is the team mascot, and that Providence Park is the 'best' venue in the MLS. However, within the superordinate identity, a smaller subgroup called The Timbers exists. The Timbers attracts consumers due to its expressive symbols and values. Not all consumers belong to The Timbers; hence, it is less inclusive than the superordinate identity and more homogeneous (i.e., consumers share two identities: Portland Timbers and The Timbers; cf. [Turner, 1985](#)). Finally, Portland Timbers consumers, in many instances, attend games or interact with relational groups comprised of friends, family, workmates, or fellow social category members. Such groups form through external, superordinate, or subgroup socialisation. These small groups provide consumers with opportunities for social interaction and interpersonal attachment within the more inclusive superordinate and subgroup identities.

Although stipulating three levels of the MIIF to which a consumer might belong, we acknowledge that not all individuals identify with all groups. It is entirely plausible that an individual will attend games on his or her own, identifying only at the superordinate level. An individual may also identify with a superordinate and relational group, but not a subgroup. Another individual may attend with members of a relational or subgroup with no superordinate identification whatsoever. Finally, a consumer may use the full suite of superordinate, sub and relational group identities to satiate his or her social needs (cf. [Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)). The following sections review literature published on the three levels of group to which a consumer may belong.

3.1. Superordinate identification

The term team identification, taken literally, refers to a consumer's identification with the group of players who compete for an organisation in a sporting contest. Yet, studies exploring team identification generally approach the subject with a broader focus ([Boyle & Magnusson, 2007](#); [Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014](#); [Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001](#)). We use the term superordinate identification to describe those aspects of the team, organisation and brand that consumers assimilate into an overall image of a sport organisation. Much research on superordinate identification investigates the causes ([Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002](#); [Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996](#)) or consequences of identification ([Boyle & Magnusson, 2007](#); [Wann & Branscombe, 1993](#)). From this body of knowledge, three main self-concept benefits emerge in relation to the superordinate identity: self-esteem enhancement, a search for coherence, and subjective uncertainty reduction.

First, individuals associate with groups that they evaluate to be distinct from defined outgroups, which leads to the accrual of self-esteem benefits from positive intergroup comparisons ([Turner, 1975](#)). The propensity of sport consumers to bask in the reflected glory (BIRG) of winning teams provides a salient example of this phenomenon ([Cialdini et al., 1976](#); [Delia, 2015](#); [Fink et al., 2002](#); [Fisher & Wakefield, 1998](#); [Trail et al., 2012](#)). However, sport consumers also support unsuccessful teams ([Fisher & Wakefield, 1998](#); [Wann & Branscombe, 1990](#)). In these cases, individuals achieve positive intergroup comparisons after losses by employing creative image maintenance strategies ([Cialdini et al., 1976](#); [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)). These include blasting opposing teams and players ([Cialdini & Richardson, 1980](#)), boosting the in-group's chances of success ([Bernache-Assollant, Lacassagne, & Braddock, 2007](#)), or displaying unrealistic optimism in relation to future performances ([Jones, 2000](#)). Each tactic allows consumers to evaluate their in-group identity positively and maintain or enhance self-esteem.

Second, superordinate identification contributes to the formation of a coherent self-concept ([Deaux, 1993](#); [Tajfel, 1969](#)), based on an individual having a consistent and explainable set of group memberships (e.g., human rights activists are unlikely to identify with the National Rifle Association). Researchers have explored individuals' identification with, and disidentification from, organisations with congruent or incongruent values to their own ([Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001](#); [Foster & Hyatt, 2007](#); [Lock & Filo, 2012](#)). Identifying with a superordinate group that embodies values and characteristics deemed important by a consumer leads to a benefit as it reinforces and extends his or her self-image. Examples of desirable organisational traits uncovered in previous literature include an overt community orientation ([Heere & James, 2007](#); [Lock et al., 2014](#)) or the representation of socially conscious values (e.g., environmental corporate social responsibility; [Walker, 2013](#)).

Third, superordinate identification can reduce a consumer's subjective uncertainty ([Hogg, 2000](#); [Hogg & Mullin, 1988](#); [Turner, 1985](#)). Subjective uncertainty occurs when a person feels that his or her beliefs in relation to a topic, object or issue vary from others in a given social context ([Turner, 1985](#)). [Dimmock and Grove \(2006\)](#) found that attempts to reduce subjective uncertainty influenced team preference in a sample of students. Specifically, students emulated the preferences of friends and family to reduce personal doubt when choosing a team to support. [Dimmock and Grove](#) also found that students sought to replicate the behaviour of friends and family when deemed to be prototypical (i.e., an ideal representation of an authentic consumer).

3.1.1. Limitation

The current literature on team, organisational, or brand identification outlines three basic self-concept benefits. These are (1) self-esteem through positive status comparisons, (2) a coherent self-concept, and (3) reduced subjective uncertainty.

Superordinate identification, however, fails to satisfy two important social needs. First, if a sport consumer belongs to the superordinate group, only, he or she must identify with a homogeneous set of organisational characteristics. In optimal distinctiveness theory, Brewer (1991) posits that if an individual perceives a superordinate group to be too inclusive, he or she will seek out less inclusive subgroups with more specific symbols and characteristics to achieve an ideal state. Studies of university students (Hornsey & Hogg, 1999), Linux users (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b), and music consumers endorse this premise (Abrams, 2009).

Second, superordinate identification – in the majority of cases – involves membership of large abstract entities (Tajfel, 1969). Such groups do not require interpersonal contact between members. Therefore, individuals may use relational groups – premised on interpersonal contact – to satiate social needs for meaningful interpersonal attachment (Tajfel, 1969). Research on social-psychological health demonstrates that team identification correlates with the number of temporary and enduring social connections a person shares with other consumers (Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011). However, this involves the formation of embedded relational groups within the superordinate identification. We contend that these two social limitations of superordinate identification activate a need in some consumers to pursue membership of smaller and less inclusive groups.

3.2. Subgroup identification

Researchers use various terms to label groups that exist within a superordinate identity. For example, researchers have used subculture (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), small group (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a), user-group (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b), nested sub-community (Brody & Marx, 2001), and fan group (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2011). The term subgroup delineates that an entity exists within a superordinate group (see Fig. 1). Given our theoretical focus on social-psychological research, we use this term to denote the second level of the MIIF (Brewer, 1991; Hornsey & Hogg, 1999). The subgroups we describe in the MIIF operate symbiotically with the superordinate identity (Brody & Marx, 2001). That is, without a sport organisation to direct time and emotion towards, consumer subgroups would not exist.

Identification with a subgroup can satisfy an individual's needs for distinctiveness, especially if he or she perceives a superordinate identity to be overly inclusive or nebulous (Brewer, 1991; Hornsey & Hogg, 1999). Forming smaller and more homogeneous subgroups brings consumers with similar ideologies or behaviours together, within the superordinate identity (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Notable examples of subgroups include The Barmy Army (England cricket), The Kop (Liverpool Football Club), and Blatchy's Blues (New South Wales State of Origin Rugby League). In the MIIF, a subgroup must be large enough so that (a) individuals identify to associate with group symbols, motifs and characteristics, and (b) not purely because of interpersonal attachments to other people. Much of the research on subgroups concerns fanatics (e.g., Bernache-Assollant et al., 2011). However, consumers with varying levels of identification may associate with the subgroups we discuss in order to access a range of self-concept benefits. The main self-concept benefits emerging from existing research include: (1) a sense of community (Tyler, 2013), (2) self-classification (Giulianotti, 2002; Holt, 1995), (3) subgroup distinctiveness (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2011), and (4) reduced subjective uncertainty (Hornsey & Hogg, 1999; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). These benefits feature within the subgroup illustration within Fig. 1. We discuss these self-concept benefits in relation to three contexts: satellite, stadium sections, and contrasting subgroups.

3.2.1. Satellite subgroups

As depicted in Fig. 1, satellite subgroups exist within the superordinate identification (cf. Kerr & Gladden, 2008). The term satellite subgroup reflects sub-sections of consumers that come together in different regions to consume a team from afar. There are two primary examples of satellite subgroups that emerge in previous literature, both of which stem from an initial identification with a superordinate entity (Tyler, 2013). First, Kerr and Gladden (2008), and Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006b) discuss subgroups that bring consumers together in one country to consume a global brand (e.g., Manchester United or Liverpool consumers in Australia). Second, Tyler (2013) explored identification with the American Outlaws (AO), and its regional chapters, which provided a forum for supporters of the U.S. men's national soccer team across America.

Existing literature posits two benefits stemming from identification with satellite subgroups: sense of community and reduced subjective uncertainty. Noting the importance of chapter membership, Tyler (2013, p. 90) observed, "the local subgroup is the most frequent source of engagement for members." Accordingly, he observed how the satellite subgroup fostered a sense of community with other AO members from a member's home region. The placement of AO chapters in specific cities and regions led to the genesis of unique norms and rituals influenced by the members and local culture of each subgroup. Tyler (2013) argued that the emergence of norms and rituals provided common ground and belonging for members. In turn, this reduced member uncertainty in relation to the superordinate AO national group.

The sense of community and belonging experienced by AO chapter members also fostered participation in purposeful behaviours to support the subgroup and superordinate entity. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006b) illustrated that Linux User Group members took part in mundane tasks to benefit the Open Source Software movement (superordinate identity) and their own satellite subgroup. Similarly, Tyler (2013) observed how AO chapter members constructed banners to display local subgroup identities at U.S. men's soccer games. These behaviours took place due to identification with the satellite subgroup and superordinate group in complement.

3.2.2. Stadium sections

A consumer may also identify with specific cohorts, or behaviours, to self-classify as a knowledgeable and authentic spectator. Blatchy's Blues, The Timbers, and The Kop are each notable examples of stadium sections that add colour and noise to venues. Holt (1995) conducted an 18-month ethnographic study of Chicago Cubs spectators in the U.S., which underpinned the development of a typology of consumption practices. He observed that consumers participated in actions to demonstrate affiliation with the Cubs and "distinction from other spectators at varying levels" (Holt, 1995, p. 12). The spectators sought distinctiveness from other spectators through sitting in the bleachers. Sitting in this section provided consumers with a means to self-classify with a subgroup defined by its place in the stadium and status as a location for knowledgeable, raucous, and involved spectators.

A seat in the bleachers or an equivalent stadium section does not assure a consumer's status or prowess as a knowledgeable spectator (Giulianotti, 2002). Neophyte consumers may sit in the bleachers to obtain image-related benefits in a similar manner to basking in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976). Holt (1995) observed how experienced spectators distinguished themselves from neophyte consumers who were seeking such benefits by participating in conventions and rituals to demonstrate status. Consistent with this observation, Tyler (2013) found that neophyte AO members quickly learned norms and rituals when attending U.S. men's soccer team matches to legitimate their identity. Self-classification reduces uncertainty in terms of prototypical behaviours through conformity to conventions that are common to experienced spectators. In turn, this provides a source of distinctiveness in relation to less involved or knowledgeable consumers.

3.2.3. Contrasting subgroups

Political identification offers a useful example of how members of one party (e.g., U.S. Democrats) form subgroups based on differing ideologies and value systems (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). In this example, subgroups assimilate individuals with similar beliefs in relation to the superordinate group (e.g., centre-right versus liberal Democratic politics). Illustrating a similar process, Bernache-Assollant et al. (2011) traced the socio-historical genesis of two Marseille Football Club (MFC) subgroups. The Commando Ultras converged around a conservative and nationalistic group identity, based on enthusiastic support for MFC. In contrast, the South Winners sought to champion MFC fan-ship and identification with the city of Marseille. Pertinently, each group used external communities in the construction of its identity, which extends the argument of Heere and James (2007) to subgroup formation. The Commando Ultras drew on nationalistic values, while the South Winners aligned closely with the local identity of the Marseille region. This contribution aligns with Tyler's (2013) argument that subgroup members identify with multiple targets (e.g., U.S. national team, AO national, AO regional). Because of the ideological differences between the Commando Ultras and the South Winners, consumers merged into subgroups that most closely aligned with their own values. By converging with other spectators that shared similar values, membership of each group reduced subjective uncertainty in relation to prototypical expressions of MFC support (Hogg, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg, 1999; Tyler, 2013).

3.2.4. Limitation

The literature we have reviewed endorses Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness argument. Belonging to a satellite, stadium section, or contrasting subgroup provides consumers with additional content to furnish their self-concept. Yet, such subgroups exist without the necessity for interpersonal attachments between all members. Therefore, the superordinate and subgroup levels of our framework do not satisfy the need for meaningful interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Identification at superordinate and subgroup levels, however, might lead to the formation of meaningful interpersonal attachments, which we discuss in Section 3.3.

3.3. Relational groups

The least inclusive level of the MIIF includes groups that require face-to-face interaction and some degree of interpersonal attachment between individuals (Prentice et al., 1994). We use the term relational group, instead of relational subgroup, as the interpersonal attachments that exist in family, friendship, vocational, or social categories may form outside the superordinate identity and operate in other circumstances aside from team support (e.g., James, 2001; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010).

Fig. 1 depicts the relational level with the three smallest circles. Each circle (A, B, and C) denotes a different path to relational group formation. Aveni (1977) noted the prevalence of relational groups in collective behaviour following observations of sport crowds in Ohio. He observed that, "people moved together in groups, yelled or shouted obscenities in groups and disbanded in groups" (Aveni, 1977, p. 97). Sluss and Ashforth (2008) argued that relational groups provide behavioural scripts and social influence, which anthropomorphise an organisation's identity. Translating these findings to a sport setting, membership of relational groups educates consumers on key in-group rituals and norms (i.e., behavioural scripts), and brings the abstract superordinate identity to life through interpersonal interactions (i.e., anthropomorphises). It also provides consumers with opportunities to satisfy the human need for meaningful relationships and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The structure of relational groups ranges from simple to complex. For example, two individuals might attend a game as best friends, sharing a common definition of their interpersonal attachment as mates. In a more complex scenario, Katz and Heere (2013) elucidated how different relational groups came together to form tailgating groups, based on the

leaders existing social networks. Both examples illustrate groups of different sizes and complexity, which formed through interpersonal attraction, not because of an attraction to group totems, symbols, or characteristics (Prentice et al., 1994).

Consumers attend matches in a variety of relational groups. For example, researchers discuss the importance of relational interactions with friends and family (Gibson et al., 2002; Katz & Heere, 2013; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), work groups (Katz & Heere, 2013), and social categories (e.g., religious group, ethnicity; Heere & James, 2007). We discuss the benefits of belonging to these different relational groups in three categories: external socialisation, new relationships, and enrichment.

3.3.1. External socialisation

In Fig. 1, the circle labelled A depicts the role of interpersonal attachments (e.g., friendship, family, or other relational groups) that socialise new consumers into the superordinate identity, subgroup identity, or both simultaneously. Previous research illustrates the crucial role that family and friendship groups play in the formation of attachment and identification (James, 2001; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010; Wann et al., 1996). Wann et al. (1996) found that social factors were important in the origination of team identification. James (2001) found that parents – particularly fathers – played a crucial role in the development of their children's attitudes towards sport teams. Spaaij and Anderson (2010) extended this work showing that a parent may impose sanctions on his or her offspring if they choose to support the 'wrong' team.

Relational attachments also socialise adults into tailgating groups (Katz & Heere, 2013) and towards internalised team identification (Lock et al., 2012). Katz and Heere (2013) found that the leaders of four tailgating groups brought familial, friendship, religious, and work groups together to consume a team. Through the influence of tailgate groups, individuals with no superordinate identification attended games due to the enjoyment of time spent with other tailgaters (Katz & Heere, 2015). Lock et al. (2012) observed that Sydney FC consumers with weak team identification relied on family members and friends to motivate them to attend at the beginning of the organisation's first competitive season. Over the course of one season, however, these interpersonal attachments underpinned the development of meaningful team identification.

3.3.2. New relationships

In Fig. 1, relational groups depicted in B and C form through consumers sharing a common subgroup or superordinate identity, respectively. Sharing team identification fosters an increased number of temporary and enduring social connections with other team supporters (de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2011). In a biographical study of one Australian Rules Football supporter, de Groot and Robinson (2008) noted that the study participant developed relationships with a larger network of Collingwood supporters on reaching the attachment stage of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001).

Doyle (2014) elaborated on the findings of both Wann et al. (2011) and de Groot and Robinson (2008). He conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of Gold Coast Suns consumers in Australia to explore the temporal link between team identification and social-psychological health. The consumers in his sample initially resisted the idea of forming new relationships with other supporters. As team identification strengthened, however, Doyle found that consumers displayed a greater propensity to form relationships with other spectators over time (de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Wann et al., 2011).

3.3.3. Enrichment

Relational groups that lead to external socialisation and which form through shared superordinate or subgroup memberships can enrich sport consumer experiences. Attending a match with others provides access to interpersonal interactions, shared experiences (Gibson et al., 2002), and opportunities to consume as play (Holt, 1995). As Gibson et al. (2002, p. 419) observed in a study of Florida Gators spectators: "memories... were not only centred on the successes and failures of the team, but also on the people with whom they shared these experiences." Katz and Heere (2015, p. 380) applied this idea to consumer behaviour:

... our decision to attend games is not made only as an individual; rather the presence of other fans to share our experience with might be more important to us than personal attitudes towards the team. Thus, understanding how consumers interact with each other before, during and after the game is crucial in our aim to increase or maintain attendance.

Both quotes illustrate that relational identification plays a major role in consumption. Explaining the importance of relational groups for consumers, Holt (1995) asserted that the interpersonal relationships people shared at sporting venues provided opportunities to discuss officiating decisions, player performances, transfer speculation, or aspects of day-to-day life unrelated to the actual on-field performance. For these reasons, relational identification provides an avenue for consumers to enrich the experience of consuming a team. This has important implications. The strength of ties in relationship groups, as with other entities, confers cohesive and normative behaviours on members. Therefore, belonging to relational groups exposes consumers to norms such as 'we always attend together', 'we always meet at the pub beforehand' or 'we meet every Tuesday to discuss last week's game'. Such norms create strong behavioural reference frames for relational group members, which foster positive consumer behaviours, such as attendance.

3.3.4. Limitation

Relational group identities are central to the self-concept of humans as they satisfy crucial needs for belonging, meaningful social interaction, and discussion (cf. [Lickel et al., 2000](#)). However, during sport attendance, relational groups do not place a consumer into larger collective entities through which he or she can obtain the benefits available at superordinate or subgroup level.

4. Relations between multiple in-group identities

Existing work on superordinate, sub and relational group identification illustrates that sport consumers can acquire varied self-concept benefits from membership of multiple in-groups. Superordinate identification provides intergroup distinctiveness in relation to other teams, a sense of coherence, and reduced subjective uncertainty. Subgroups provide a sense of community, opportunities to self-classify, and a source of intergroup distinctiveness, all of which reduce subjective uncertainty in relation to the superordinate identity. Relational identification socialises consumers into the superordinate identity, leads to new relationships, and enriches consumption experiences, which foster a sense of belonging. However, these benefits do not operate in isolation; rather, they contribute to a consumer's self-concept in concert.

In a recent qualitative study, [Delia \(2015\)](#) explored how consumers used multiple external group memberships to BIRG or blast. She found that prior to, during, and after matches, the complex repertoire of group memberships to which consumers belonged combined into a simpler identity structure. This finding aligns closely with research in management, which shows that multiple in-group identities complement one another in a person's self-concept ([Sluss & Ashforth, 2008](#)). Describing this proposition, [Sluss and Ashforth \(2008, p. 817\)](#) posited: "the key [to managing multiple in-group identities] is not to promote the salience of one identity at the expense of the other." Instead, managing the potency of multiple in-group identities, appropriately, stems from conceptualising them as individually important, yet complementary facets of a person's self-concept. This argument assumes, however, that each group membership is meaningful to a consumer. Therefore, it omits a crucial facet, which contributes to the effect of superordinate, sub or relational groups on consumption: the importance of an identity in a consumer's self-concept.

[Reed \(2002\)](#) proposed a marketing theory of identity salience outlining that the (1) self-importance and (2) relevance of a group membership govern its effect on consumer behaviour³: (1) Self-importance relates to the extent that a group identification is a central (i.e., strong) or peripheral (i.e., weak) part of a consumer's self-concept. Previous research suggests that internalised group identification increases involvement and behaviour towards sport organisations ([Funk & James, 2004](#)). (2) Relevance describes the influence of social context on the activation of an identity in a person's working self-concept. For example, attending a match, discussing a team with friends or attending an organisational event each provide a relevant social context leading to the activation of a superordinate identity. Self-important group memberships relate to a broader range of contextual circumstances. As such, a high level of self-importance, in relation to any in-group identity, amplifies its relevance and the propensity that it will influence behaviour across a range of social contexts.

The duration of group membership also relates to the self-importance of a consumer's identification at superordinate, sub and relational levels. [Katz and Heere \(2015\)](#), [Bagozzi and Dholakia \(2006b\)](#), and [Lock et al. \(2012, 2014\)](#) found that the importance of identification with tailgates, subgroups, and teams increased over time. As [Funk and James \(2001, p. 121\)](#) stated: "it seems unlikely that a person wakes up one day and finds that he or she is a loyal fan." In the same sense, it seems unlikely that a person wakes up one morning and realises he or she is staunchly committed to a sub or relational group. While the duration of involvement in a sub or relational group contributes to its self-importance, we stress that different consumers will develop identification at varying rates, based on individual characteristics, personal experiences, and the nature and composition of the entity to which they belong.

Therefore, we adopt [Sluss and Ashforth's \(2008\)](#) argument in relation to the complementary benefits of membership at each level, along with a caveat, stipulating that the self-importance of different in-group memberships mediates their influence on behaviour. For this reason, we do not posit that one level or type of group exerts the strongest influence on consumer behaviour. If identification with a superordinate, sub, or relational group occupies a peripheral position in a person's self-concept, it is unlikely to be a strong reference frame for his or her decision-making. As research illustrates, weak identification relates to a lack of behavioural loyalty from consumers because it is not self-important ([Wann & Branscombe, 1990](#)). It follows, therefore, that unimportant sub and relational group identities exert a minimal effect on behaviour as well. Conversely, belonging to superordinate, sub or relational groups that occupy a central and meaningful place in a consumer's self-concept likely exerts strong normative forces on consumption. This has significant implications for the effect of multiple in-group memberships on a consumer's identification with, and behaviour towards, the superordinate group.

5. Multiple In-group Identity Framework applications

The literatures we have drawn upon to develop the MIIF illustrate that sport consumers may belong to multiple in-groups within a superordinate identity. Approaching consumer identity processes in this manner opens us to a complex series of

³ Reed (2002) also outlined a third facet relating to identity salience: diagnosticity. This concept describes the extent that in-group norms and values provide sufficient content to evaluate an object in a relevant social context. We do not discuss diagnosticity as it is beyond the scope of the MIIF.

interrelationships and interactions, which creates a conceptually and methodologically challenging task for researchers. However, the MIIF provides a framework within which to develop a more holistic picture of the way in which individuals use different groups to derive a variety of self-concept benefits, enrich sport consumption experiences, and consume sport teams. The next section explores two potential research applications of the MIIF in relation to sport consumer identity processes and social psychological health. We also advocate for researchers to probe problems, oversights, and issues with the levels and types of group underpinning the MIIF.

5.1. Consumer identity processes

Research on the effect of external groups and subgroup identification has gathered momentum (Heere & James, 2007; Katz & Heere, 2013; Tyler, 2013). Researchers have shown that consumer identity processes are more complex and multifaceted than the majority of team identification research portrays. The MIIF provides two opportunities to advance current theoretical understanding in this domain. First, researchers can probe the temporal development of consumer relationships with groups at the superordinate, sub and relational levels. Second, researchers can study the growth and management of specific consumer groups.

First, there is an opportunity to explore the temporal trajectory of superordinate, sub and relational groups. There is evidence providing initial insights into the development of tailgating groups and team identification (Katz & Heere, 2015; Lock et al., 2012, 2014). However, through the MIIF, researchers can explore how a person's multiple in-group memberships interrelate, interact, and develop over time. This would allow researchers to explore how time and context influence the ways in which consumers use multiple in-groups to satisfy different self-concept needs. It would also allow researchers to investigate questions, such as:

- (a) Do sub and relational group identities become more important during periods of team failure?
- (b) During periods of success, how do sub and relational groups extend the experiences of BIRGing and vicarious achievement in relation to sport teams?
- (c) How does the stage of season influence a consumer's interactions with groups at superordinate, sub and relational levels?
- (d) To what extent do rivalries affect the manner in which consumers interact and engage with superordinate, sub and relational groups?

Such research can provide new insights into the effects of different in-group identities on consumer loyalty and behaviour. Prior research using social network analysis to explore subgroup patterns emerging via social media is a promising start for research of this kind (Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012).

Second, the example of Blatchy's Blues demonstrates that a relational group embodying an image of celebration, mate-ship, and distinctive clothing can provide an attractive proposition for other consumers. Through a ticketing package, and ongoing consultations with the group's founder, the NSWRL turned a relational group of 24 friends into an iconic subgroup consisting of 15,000 supporters. Researchers might explore the potential issues that arise from working with sub and relational groups to develop attractive identities to which other consumers aspire. Blatchy's Blues succeeded due to a marketing campaign targeted at a specific stadium section area, which evolved the distinctive symbols and ideology of a friendship group. The extent that marketing actions can influence sub and relational group development presents a fascinating agenda for future applications of the MIIF.

Tempering these recommendations, researchers might also pay attention to the way in which different sub and relational groups interact and relate to one another. Wakefield and Wann (2006) provided insight into dysfunctional sport consumers by exploring the characteristics of deviant spectators. The MIIF provides additional insights into the potential variety of identities and intergroup relations that might exist within a superordinate identity. Understanding the dynamics that exist between contrasting subgroups (e.g., Bernache-Assollant et al., 2011) and relational groups provides an important area for theoretical development in this domain.

5.2. Social-psychological health

Evidence for the positive impact of superordinate identification on social and psychological health provides strong support for the benefits of consuming team sport (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Inoue, Funk, Wann, Yoshida, & Nakazawa, 2015; Wann, 2006; Wann & Polk, 2007; Wann et al., 2011). The MIIF provides an avenue to advance the team identification–social psychological health model (TISPH). Wann and his colleagues have found considerable support for the link between team identification and multiple social psychological wellbeing indicators. Outcomes range from a sport consumer's social connectedness to his or her belief in the trustworthiness of others. Yet, to date, this research draws exclusively on the effect of superordinate identification in the formation of temporary or enduring connections.

In the MIIF, we show that people identify with sub and relational groups for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, the groups within a superordinate identity provide qualitatively different self-concept benefits for consumers. Adding the complementary effects of belonging to subgroups (i.e., sense of community, self-classification, positive distinctiveness, and subjective uncertainty reduction), and relational groups (i.e., socialisation, new relationships and enrichment), provides an avenue to examine how these different self-concept benefits correlate with the social psychological health of consumers.

It also flags a salient opportunity for researchers to start considering the role of offering social initiatives and programmes to leverage sub and relational groups as an aspect of corporate social responsibility.

6. Managerial implications

Collective and relational groups potentially influence a range of consumer behaviours. In the following section, we consider how sport organisations might implement the ideas in the MIIF to take advantage of the complexity of a consumer's multiple in-group identities. This would underpin the development of products and services geared to foster subgroup membership and interpersonal attachment, in addition to the ubiquitous campaigns designed to foster superordinate identification (e.g., 'we are red', 'we are Geelong', and 'we are football'). Each recommendation capitalises on the notion that the multiple in-group identities we have described are independently important, yet act in a complementary manner to influence consumer behaviour in relation to the superordinate entity.

6.1. Mix alterations to leverage multiple in-groups

Schemes to encourage sub and relational groups can apply to the times before, during, after, and in between consumption episodes. Sport organisations already offer packages for families to attend games. This follows the accepted logic that parents socialise children into long-term support (cf. James, 2001; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), or vice versa. Additionally, membership categories for particular stadium areas exist; however, management of these groups lacks a strong evidence base to underscore practice. Ticketing packages for friends or other relational group types do not occur frequently, which misses a strategic opportunity to capitalise on the interpersonal relationships consumers share. There is scope for sport organisations to think more expansively about the augmentation of season tickets and packages at reduced prices for consumers wishing to attend in the different forms of sub and relational groups described in this paper.

Delivering sales promotions via direct marketing channels that offer a price incentive for registration in different forms of sub and relational groups satisfies two important conditions for effective management. First, it acknowledges the caution espoused by other researchers in relation to managing entities that emerge organically (Katz & Heere, 2015; Tyler, 2013). Over-management threatens to reduce member empowerment and, in turn, weakens the groups it intended to strengthen. Second, it offers a direct value incentive for consumers to buy long-term ticket packages in sub or relational groups. Providing consumers with an enticement to sign up with friends, family or other interpersonal attachments encourages behaviour in relational groups that lead to socialisation, new relationships, and the enrichment of consumer experiences. Enticing individuals to participate in groups exposes members to in-group norms, which exert an important influence on a consumer's team related behaviour.

For sport organisations lacking financial capacity, human resources, or technological skills to implement the schemes described, managers might consider the inclusion of promotional materials delivered via existing communication channels (e.g., email, social media, websites or newsletters, etc.) that promote the positive aspects of participation in sub and relational groups. In addition, family or mate-ship days might present a useful approach to foster meaningful interactions between consumers and boost attendance figures. Offering sales promotions on food or beverage purchases to consumers attending with friends and family could provide an additional incentive.

6.2. Relationship marketing

Building on the manipulation of mix variables, organisations might use the group registrations data (using an opt-out sign-up procedure when groups purchase tickets) to build relationships that go beyond traditional customer relationship management, database, and direct marketing efforts (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Typical relationship marketing approaches concentrate on leveraging engagement between organisation and consumer, different consumers, or business-to-business. By creating database entries, which represent different sub and relational groups, sport organisations can communicate with relational and subgroup members collectively. Organisations could (a) communicate with groups through a nominated leader (cf. Katz & Heere, 2013) or (b) with group members collectively.

This moves beyond traditional consumer relationship programmes that target individuals, towards a new realm of reward-based systems aimed at sub and relational group loyalty (e.g., ticketing manipulations for group purchase). Instead of manipulating in-group norms, practices, or rituals this relationship-based approach rewards consumers for participating in sub or relational groups. In an optimal scenario, this would consist of a brief survey integrated into a database system that allows sub and relational group members to identify collective preferences (e.g., communication styles and ideal rewards, etc.). Based on these preferences, sport organisations could design niche merchandise offerings (e.g., limited edition articles, etc.), facility access (e.g., training, dressing rooms or suite access), or preferential news and information (e.g., based on preferences described above), to reward sub and relational groups for collective participation within the superordinate identity. Such incentives encourage consumers to participate in sub and relational groups. In turn, this incentivises group members to encourage one another to behave in sub and relational groups, which has potentially significant ramifications for the development of in-group norms, which are conducive to behaviour.

6.3. New subgroups

Sport organisations already make efforts to engage with members of dedicated groups, due to the level of their involvement and contribution to organisational revenues. The example provided by Bernache-Assollant et al. (2011), demonstrates that sport organisations must manage relationships with all consumer subgroups effectively. In this sense, sport organisations should consider the propensity of subgroups to influence behaviour beyond a limited focus on stadium sections. Family seating areas represent another definable part of sport stadia seating, yet minimal efforts to galvanise identity in these areas eventuates. While stadium sections play an indisputable role in adding core experiential elements, such as sound and colour, the social and psychological importance of sub and relational groups to individuals suggest benefit in seeking to recognise and leverage other collective identities in different sections.

7. Conclusion

Sport consumers belong to multiple groups, which influence and shape their behaviour. In this paper, we advanced on initial insights into this phenomenon through the delineation of the MIIF. The framework consists of three levels of group membership: superordinate, sub, and relational. The three levels reflect what attracts a person to identify with a group and its level of inclusiveness in relation to the superordinate identity. At the subgroup level, consumers seek out satellite, stadium sections, and contrasting subgroups for a sense of community, to self-classify, gain distinctiveness, or subjective uncertainty reduction. In relational groups, consumers are socialised into the superordinate identity, build social relationships through the superordinate or subgroup identity, and enrich consumption experiences through meaningful interpersonal attachments. Together, each of these benefits illustrate that, in addition to the superordinate identification, consumers maintain choice and flexibility over the social relationships and subgroups they use to advance their self-concept and consumption experiences.

The multiple in-group identities a consumer maintains play an independently important, yet complementary role in sport consumption. Identifying purely with a superordinate sport organisation cannot meet the self-concept needs of all individuals. Consumers are humans and humans are motivated to satisfy multifaceted needs for identity and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sport offers a diverse range of identity-related benefits for individuals. Ultimately, the extent that identification with a sub or relational group influences a consumer's behaviour stems from its self-importance in his or her self-concept. Managers and marketers can use the MIIF as a conceptual basis to develop product and service offerings that add value to consumer experiences as a reward for participation in sub and relational groups. Adding value for sub and relational group participation places sport consumers within groups that exert a profound influence on consumption in addition to superordinate identification.

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