

Team Success, Club Growth, and Long-Term Supporter Identity Threat

Thomson, Ted; Lock, Daniel and Jones, Ian

Bournemouth University, United Kingdom

tedthomson96@outlook.com

Aim

This study explores how club success and growth creates challenges for long-term supporters of a Premier League football club. Extant literature focusing on team identification has focussed on strength of identification and behaviour (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1990); status threats (e.g., Fink et al. 2009); and the development of fan-team relationships (e.g., Lock et al., 2014). However, there is minimal understanding of how shifts in the identity of a club created by success and growth challenge or threaten elements of the shared team identity.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Since Cialdini et al. (1976) contributed the Basking In Reflected Glory (BIRG) hypothesis, there have been a stream of studies demonstrating a positive relationship between team success and team identification (e.g., Fink et al., 2002). Using a social identity approach (e.g., Turner et al., 1987), we explore how successive promotions from League One to the English Premier League (EPL) have challenged shared understandings of AFC Bournemouth and potentially *threatened* aspects of the shared team identity. The social identity approach advances a perspective whereby the groups an individual identifies with are important expressions of self (Turner et al., 1987). Groups are important expressions of self as they create convergence around thoughts and actions that are *meaningful* to members. It follows that when shared understandings of a group develop or change due to shifts in group status and circumstances (e.g., through promotion) it has the potential to be detrimental to an individual's identification with a team.

Research Design and Data Analysis

We used an exploratory qualitative research design which included two components. First, the lead author conducted eight in-depth interviews (Duration ranged from 30-90 minutes) with supporters of AFC Bournemouth that been fans for 10 or more years ($N = 8$). Second, the lead author conducted a netnographic element to the design in which he trawled the club forum to retrieve problems, issues, and challenges supporters discussed in relation to the growth of the club. Data from each source were analysed iteratively through a three-stage process of open, axial, and reflective coding. The quality of data was interrogated using the steps advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results and Discussion

Two overarching themes emerged from the process of interpretive data analysis: Club growth and shared on-field identity. Commercial pressures from broadcasters, the EPL, and satisfying corporate clients led some supporters to express a sense that the club was “being taken away from supporters” in favour of new markets and more ‘financially attractive’ audiences. Of note, supporter narratives frequently described commercial actions as behaviours that ‘they’ had undertaken, which implied that the commercial team were, in the eyes of fans, becoming a salient out-group.

Shared on-field identity included supporter comments that discussed the continuity of the management and squad on the maintenance of one facet of the club's identity. Eddie Howe has led AFC Bournemouth from 2012 to present, overseeing promotion from League One to

the EPL. Supporters discussed Howe as the prototypical exemplar (cf. Turner et al., 1987) of the *enduring* AFC identity that was internalised and meaningful to study participants. The identity continuity this provided was valued by supporters in a time of identity threat and change.

Conclusion and Implications

There are two main contributions from this work. First, building on the BIRG hypothesis (Cialdini et al., 1976), we have looked beyond the relationship of individual supporters and success to look at how promotion and growth create certain issues for the identity shared by fans. While success and promotion were valued by supporters, it also presented identity threats. Rather than a small club that had relationships between the managers and supporters, promotion has created a need to satisfy new audiences. Supporters felt like this was developing the club in a way that distanced it from long-term supporters which caused tension. Second, while the corporate and organisational development of the club had created issues, the continuity in the management and playing group from League One to the present day gave supporters an important continuity to the shared identity that helped to mitigate the threats described in relation to commercial pressures.

The implications of this work acknowledge that promotion and success yield new opportunities to diversify into new markets, attract new consumers, and achieve new commercial opportunities as shown in prior work. However, the present study provides an initial indication that such developments can create tension between the commercialisation of clubs and supporters that have the potential to alienate long-term supporters.

References

- Cialdini, R., Borden, R., Thorne, A., Walker, M., Freeman, S., & Sloan, L. (1976). Basking in reflected glory: Three (football) field studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34, 366–375.
- Fink, J., Trail, G., & Anderson, D. (2002). An examination of team identification: which motives are most salient to its existence? *International Sports Journal*, 6, 195–207.
- Lock, D., Funk, D., Doyle, J., & McDonald, H. (2014). Examining the structural composition and longitudinal change of team identification. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28, 119–135.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Turner, J., Hogg, M., Oakes, P., Reicher, S., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. London: Blackwell.
- Wann, D., & Branscombe, N. (1990). Die-hard and fair-weather fans: Effects of identification on BIRGing and CORFing tendencies. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 14, 103–117.