

Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Empirical – Sport

Standing Out While Fitting In: Exploring the Differential Roles of Belonging and Distinctiveness in Team Choice

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Abstract

Belonging and distinctiveness are considered innate motivators for human behavior and decision making. Satisfaction of both needs is often associated with increased levels of well-being and personal agency. Both belonging and distinctiveness have been examined as successful motivators for sport fandom, but research is needed to determine the differential roles of either trait in choosing a specific team or sport to follow. The current study asked participants to

report their needs for belonging and distinctiveness and to choose a fictional sport team to cheer for upon moving to a new country. One team was described as being the “mainstream” team with a significantly larger number of fans than the “outsider” team (otherwise, the descriptions were identical). Individuals who reported a greater need for belonging typically chose to follow the more popular team, while those with higher desires for distinctiveness aligned with the less popular team. These results provide evidence that belonging and distinctiveness play a role in decision making regarding sport fandom team choices. Future studies should further explore this phenomenon, while also examining the role of belonging and distinctiveness in alternate methods of media consumption and consumer decision making.

Keywords: Belonging, Distinctiveness, Team Choice, Group Identity, Experiment

Belonging and distinctiveness are innate human desires and motivators for behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1993). These needs are related to choices in media consumption, product purchases, and group identification (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Leary & Baumeister, 2017). Furthermore, satisfying the needs for belonging and distinctiveness is typically related to increased levels of subjective well-being (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002).

There are a variety of methods utilized to fulfill the need to belong. For example, individuals can alter their appearance, behaviors, and beliefs to appear similar to others (Schlenker, 1980). Another common pathway is group identification, which also provides social protection from derogation and a sense of abnormality (Hornsey & Hogg, 1999). A greater sense of belonging is associated with greater levels of life satisfaction (Mellor et al., 2008) and self-efficacy (DeRossett et al., 2021) suggesting that belonging is positively associated with subjective well-being and personal agency.

Individuals also seek distinctiveness, which helps to develop one's sense of self and attract others (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; Lynn & Snyder, 2002). The desire for uniqueness can drive financial and economic decisions, too, as marketers often advertise the rarity and distinctiveness of their products to increase consumerism (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010; Costello & Fairhurst, 2002; Franke & Schreier, 2008). The consumption of media and consumer goods provides a tangible pathway for individuals to express their uniqueness without violating social norms (Ruvio, 2008). Distinctiveness has been considered an evolutionary preference with evidence of unique jewelry dating back over 100,000 years (Balter, 2006). Much like belonging, a sense of distinctiveness is related to increased levels well-being (Mengers, 2014; Leonardelli et al., 2010; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1993), the needs for belonging and distinctiveness are not inherently oppositional and may be simultaneously satisfied through group identification. The core of optimal distinctiveness theory is based in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which emphasizes group memberships as an extension of the self. In short, when one identifies with a group (e.g., race, religion, fandom), they are satisfying their need for belonging due to group membership and perceived commonalities with other members. Additionally, through the act of identifying with a specific social group, individuals are declaring their distinctiveness from alternative identities. For example, Abrams (2009) found that

many young adults utilize music and media fandom to achieve optimal distinctiveness. If someone is a fan of a specific artist or genre, then they have a sense of comradery with fellow fans. However, they also develop a differentiation between themselves and fans of other media or music.

The outcomes associated with a greater sense of identification with social groups provide ample opportunity for researchers to apply and test optimal distinctiveness theory. There is not much known regarding the role of optimal distinctiveness theory as an antecedent to group identification, though. Most studies have examined the outcomes of identification (e.g., Hornsey & Hogg, 1999), but the roles of the needs for belonging and distinctiveness as predictors of group identification remains relatively unexplored.

The Current Study

The current study was designed to explore the role of the needs for belonging and distinctiveness in sport fandom. Specifically, this study was designed to explore how differential levels of the needs for belonging and distinctiveness may be predictive of sport team choices. Research indicates that there are a wide range of factors that influence fans' decisions to follow a specific sport team (Wann et al., 1996). To simplify the understanding of these origins, Wann (2006) developed a typology classifying them as either environmental, team-related, or psychological. Environmental origins include the socialization process (Funk & James, 2001) and the geographic nearness of the team to the fan (Aiken & Koch, 2009). Team-related antecedents include factors such as team performance (Bass et al., 2013) and player characteristics (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).

A third set of origins were labeled psychological origins. Although there are a variety of psychological origins in becoming a sport fan (e.g., the desire to reduce uncertainty, Dimmock & Grove, 2006, and be recognized as a fan of a specific team, Koch & Wann, 2016), belonging and distinctiveness may play a unique role. Because most individuals identify as sport fans (Jones, 2019; Wann & James, 2019), they represent an accessible group that spans race, gender, sexuality, and nationality (Wann, et al., 2004; Melnick & Wann, 2011; Wann et al., 1999) for studying social identity and optimal distinctiveness. Furthermore, similar to the satisfaction of optimal distinctiveness, identifying as a sport fan has been associated with greater levels of subjective well-being (Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017; Kesler & Wann, 2020; Wann & Pierce, 2005). Due to the shared outcome of increased well-being for both optimal distinctiveness and sport

fandom, one may infer that these constructs also share antecedents.

We sought to determine the impact of subjective needs for belonging and distinctiveness in a novel situation wherein an individual must choose a sport team to become a fan of when only the popularity of the two teams varied. Popularity was operationally defined as the number of people who identify as fans of a given fictional team. Although other indicators are often used to denote popularity in sport fandom (e.g., ticket sales, number of games on television, international appeal), the current operationalization was designed to mitigate any potential confounding factors.

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were developed for the current study:

H1. Individuals who choose a more popular team will have higher needs for belonging than those choosing the less popular team.

H2. Individuals who choose a less popular team will have higher needs for uniqueness than those choosing the more popular team.

Method

Participants

A total of 178 undergraduate students were recruited via an online participant database at a mid-sized regional university in the mid-south. One participant was dropped from analyses for failing to complete the survey, leaving a final sample of 177 participants for the analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 ($M = 19.02$, $SD = 2.01$). There were 133 females, 43 males, and one participant who chose not to disclose gender. A debriefing form was provided after completion of the survey.

Materials

Vignette. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four versions of a vignette specifically designed for this study (see Appendix A for the stimulus). The fictional vignettes described a situation in which the participant was moving to Perth, Australia where the population consisted of 2.04 million citizens. Participants were told that the most popular sport in Perth is cricket, played in the fictional Australian National Cricket League (ANCL). The vignette then described two teams located in Perth: The Tornadoes and the Storm.

The two teams were described as exhibiting parity in resources, financial backing, facilities, and player talent. Only team popularity varied such that the popular

team reported an estimated fan base of 975,000 fans, whereas the less popular team had 225,000 fans. Participants were randomly assigned to a counterbalanced presentation of the vignettes in an attempt to control for team name preference and effortless responding. Therefore, there were instances where the Storm (Tornadoes) were presented first (second) as the more (less) popular team. Participants were evenly distributed across the four potential presentations.

Along with the presentation of the team names, brief testimonials were provided from fans of the fictional teams. These differed per popularity status of the two teams. The team with 225,000 fans was described as the “outsider” team within a “tight-knit” community. Meanwhile, the team with 975,000 fans were described as the “insider” team with a quote reinforcing the ubiquity of the team’s popularity.

Choice. Participants were then asked to select which team they would be more likely to support as a fan. The choices always followed the order of the vignette. For example, if the Perth Storm were the first team described and were the more popular team the choices would read:

A. Perth Storm (“Insider” Team)

B. Perth Tornadoes (“Outsider” Team)

After reading the assigned vignette and choosing their preferred sport team, participants completed a series of measures assessing belonging, distinctiveness, and demographic information.

Need to Belong Scale (NBS; Leary et al., 2013). This scale was used to measure participants’ need to belong through a series of 10 questions. They were instructed to answer on a Likert-type scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). An example of an item from this scale is: “I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.”

Self-Attributed Need for Uniqueness Scale (SANU; Lynn & Harris, 1997). This scale asked participants to rate their need for uniqueness. Items were scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). An example of an item from this scale is: “I prefer being different from other people.”

Demographics. Finally, participants completed a demographics section measuring sex, age, and race. Upon completion of the demographic section participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Acceptable reliabilities were observed for both the NBS ($\alpha = 0.82$; Leary et al., 2013) and the SANU ($\alpha = 0.78$; Lynn & Harris, 1997). Team choice was coded such that a value of “1” represented a participant choosing the more popular team, and “2” the less popular team.

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson’s correlations were calculated for variables of interest (Table 1). No significant correlations were found between demographic information (i.e., age, sex, and ethnicity) and the independent or dependent variables, therefore all subsequent analyses were conducted across the entire sample.

Tests of Hypotheses

A pair of *t*-tests were conducted to elucidate the relationship between team choice and the needs for both belonging and distinctiveness (see Table 2). In support of both hypotheses, individuals with a higher need for belonging were more likely to choose the more popular team ($t(175) = 2.97, d = -0.45, p < 0.001$) while those reporting a greater need for distinctiveness more often chose the less popular team ($t(175) = -3.31, d = 0.50, p < 0.001$).

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	19.05	2.01					
2. Sex	1.76	0.43	-.12 [-.27, .02]				
3. Race	1.24	0.95	-.02 [-.16, .13]	-.11 [-.25, .04]			
4. Belonging	3.35	0.70	-.09 [-.23, .06]	.14 [-.01, .28]	-.06 [-.21, .09]		
5. Distinctiveness	2.96	0.70	.18* [.03, .31]	-.13 [-.28, .01]	-.02 [-.17, .13]	-.02 [-.17, .12]	
6. Team Choice	1.55	0.50	.13 [-.02, .27]	-.16* [-.30, -.02]	.11 [-.04, .25]	-.21** [-.35, -.07]	.24** [.10, .37]

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014). * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. Team Choice is coded such that 1 = the more popular team and 2 = the less popular team.

Table 2

*Results of the paired-samples *t*-tests examining the individual roles of belonging and distinctiveness in team choice.*

	“Insider” Team <i>M (SD)</i>	“Outsider” Team <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	Cohen’s <i>d</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Belonging	3.52 (0.70)	3.21 (0.69)	2.97	-0.45 [-0.76, -0.15]	0.003
Distinctiveness	2.77 (0.64)	3.10 (0.71)	-3.31	0.50 [0.19, 0.80]	0.001

Discussion

As hypothesized, the needs for belonging and distinctiveness played a key role in participants' team choices. Individuals who chose the more popular team reported higher levels of the need for belonging, while those who chose the less popular team reported higher levels of need for distinctiveness. These results support optimal distinctiveness theory while also confirming the predictive validity of the needs for belonging and distinctiveness. The counterbalancing approach to data collection mitigated concern for several external variables, thus belonging and distinctiveness should be considered the primary explanation for the results.

Optimal distinctiveness theory provides a clear rationale for these results. Regardless of team choice, both the need to belong and/or the desire to be unique could be a driving force in decision making. The differential predictive outcomes also lend support to the argument for subjective measurement of these innate needs. For individuals who require greater levels of distinctiveness, they appear to prefer to choose teams with communities that reflect their "outsider" mentality. Although they are still a part of a large group, at team with 225,000 fans is certainly less than 975,000, suggesting greater differentiation within the fandom community. For those with a greater need to belonging, a larger community appeared more attractive because membership in this group would be the best option to meet their primary need (i.e., to fit in).

Sport Fandom

Like other methods of media consumption and group identification, sport satisfies the basic psychological needs for belonging and distinctiveness (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016; Dimmock & Gucciari, 2008; Wann & James, 2019). By becoming a fan of a team, not only do you belong to a group, but your group has predetermined distinctiveness due to the existence of other teams. This can be particularly useful for sport marketers and team executives when attempting to grow a fanbase. Although an individual's innate subjective need for belonging and distinctiveness will have an impact on the decision, marketers and organizations should seek to emphasize both the comradery and uniqueness one can achieve through fandom. The nature of rivalry in sport lends itself well to the emphasis of belonging to one's team, while also maintaining differentiation from others.

Music, Movies, and Theme Parks

These results may not be limited to sport and could potentially explain decisions to listen to specific

bands, watch certain movies, and attend different theme parks. For individuals high in the need to belong, they may prefer to consume media and engage in fandom for pastimes that are more "mainstream" and discussed within the general population. For those with high needs for distinctiveness, media and pastimes that are considered "underground" may be more appealing. For example, consider two individuals who are planning a vacation to Orlando, Florida. One of these individuals is particularly high in the need to belong, while the other has a high need for distinctiveness. The individual with the higher need to belong may be more likely to choose mainstream entertainment options, such as visiting Disney World. On the other hand, the person with a high need for distinctiveness may prefer lesser known, more unique entertainment options (e.g., visiting a niche museum). Thus, companies and individuals may consider measuring these variables in their fan bases to determine how to best market their offerings. Havard et al. (2021) have uncovered evidence of fan-based preference and disinterest toward media companies, and the results of the current study suggest that belonging and distinctiveness may act as predictors of initial fandom decisions. These individual differences may vary both within (i.e. Disney World vs. Disney Cruise) and between (i.e. Disney vs. Universal) companies.

Next Steps

Future studies should seek to further explore the role of belonging and distinctiveness in sport fandom and other entertainment venues. The current study provides a foundation and evidence for the needs of belonging and distinctiveness as antecedents to decision making, but that is only part of the picture. In sport, future studies should determine how well sport teams satisfy these needs, and how differences in satisfaction impacts levels of subjective wellbeing. In other areas of entertainment (e.g., theme parks, music), studies should be designed to explore the specific roles of belonging and distinctiveness in media consumption and decision making.

Limitations

To obtain the greatest potential levels of internal validity and limit confounding variables, the participants were asked to imagine moving to a new situation and presented with false information. This decision limited the potential for participants to have a favorite team in mind or predisposed preferences for one group over the other. However, this also limits the external validity of the study as this situation may be relatively rare. Still, the study is not without merit as people often relocate for work or personal reasons, and

therefore develop new identities and allegiances to local organizations. The results of this study suggest that in those instances, the needs for belonging and distinctiveness may provide a substantial role in the decision-making process.

The homogenous demographic makeup of the sample is another limitation. The sample was entirely comprised of college students, and while the ages ranged from 18 to 34, the average was roughly 19 years. The sample was also predominately white and female. However, the manipulation was clearly successful, and the results remain valid and reliable by all indications.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the needs for belonging and distinctiveness uniquely and independently predicted sport team choice in a novel situation. Individuals who reported greater needs for belonging were more likely to choose a more popular team, while those who prefer to appear unique aligned with an equally successful but less popular team. These results provide support for optimal distinctiveness theory and the role of sport fandom in the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Additionally, this study provides new evidence on the predictive abilities of the needs for belonging and distinctiveness in group identification.

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