Basking in Reflected Glory and Blasting : Differences in identity management strategies between two groups of highly identified soccer fans

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Abstract

This study examines in soccer *fanzine* two identity management strategies – BIRGing and *blasting* -- of two groups of highly identified soccer fans with allegiance to the same team. Results showed strong support for the BIRG phenomenon among both ultra fans groups but little evidence of the *blasting* phenomenon among either group. The implications of these findings are discussed in regards to social identity management among sport fans.

Keywords: ultra fans, identity management strategies, BIRGing, Blasting

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From the perspective of contemporary sport-psychology, sport team identification, which reflects the extent to which an individual feels a psychological connection to a particular team or athlete (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), is a strong predictor of spectators' reaction to their team performance (for a review, see Wann, 2006). Furthermore, Social Identity (SIT) Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Self-Categorization (SCT) Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) represent useful framework to better understand the behavior of people who avidly follow sports--sport fans--whose behavior might otherwise seem quite irrational or pointless. According to both SIT and SCT, individuals (1) define themselves to a large extent in terms of their social group memberships, and (2) seek to develop a positive social identity. Generally, a positive social identity is achieved by comparing one's own group to other groups to establish a positively valued psychological distinctiveness for the ingroup in relation to the outgroup. For sport fans, one of the most relevant dimensions for social comparison and consequently one of the most relevant dimensions of group threat value is their team's performance. In order to deal with the team performance, SIT research on sport fans has identified several different *identity management strategies* which sport fans may employ in regard to their team identification. Concerning this research, we will focus on two classical strategies: BIRG and *blast*.

First, following a team victory, sport fans can accentuate their connection with their team. This phenomenon, has been referred to as Basking in Reflected Glory. The classic study of BIRGing was conducted by Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman and Sloan (1976), who found that after a victory by a university football team, students were more likely to wear affiliate attire and reference themselves as part of the victorious group

by using the pronoun "we" when discussing their team's victory than they were following their team's defeat. In this fashion, BIRGing can serve a self-enhancing function for sport fans. In regard to team identification, Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that fans with high levels of team identification were more likely to BIRG after their team's victory than fans with low levels of team identification.

Research also suggested that sport fans may use strategies to restore a positive social identity following team defeat, including derogating the opponent, and particularly, outgroup fans. Branscombe & Wann (1994) showed that highly identified sport fans were more likely to use this strategy, labeled *blasting*, than lowly identified sport fans.

Although previous psychosocial research on sport fans indicated that the level of team identification is a critical factor in determining which strategy will be adopted, it provided few explanatory elements on the diversity of highly identified fans' reactions to their team performances. For instance, in contrast to the casual or traditional US sport fans, soccer fans so-called "ultra fans" represent different sub-groups following the same team, mainly composed by very highly identified members[1] (Bodin, 1999; Roumestan, 1998). The main specificity of this form of sport fandom is that these highly identified groups possess their own culture and identity construction mode which seem to explain why they do not get along even though they are "fighting" for the same team (Roumestan, 1998). Consequently, this form of sport fandom implies a lower level of inclusiveness as traditional sport fandom, which can accentuate the need for intergroup distinctiveness at the intermediate level (Turner et al., 1987), and therefore can lead to different reactions following team's victory or defeat.

The present study had two main objectives: (1) to replicate previous BIRGing and *blasting* studies in a natural setting; (2) to compare for the first time the identity

management strategies of two different very highly identified ultra fan group's

supporting the same team, with different socio-historical backgrounds.

To this end, the two principal ultra fan groups, called "Commando Ultra" (CU) and

"South Winner" (SW), of a single professional soccer team--the Olympic of Marseille

(OM)--located in Marseille, a city in the south of France, were studied.

The oldest of both groups is the CU which started the Ultra fan movement in

Marseille and in France. The CU was founded in 1984 on the model of the big Italian

groups which are comprised largely of people mainly belonging to middle classes. The

CU fan group is very clearly characterized by a desire to distance itself from tempestuous

and immigrant population segments of Marseille. The CU's independence is reflected in a

very strict and well equipped organizational infrastructure. This group is strongly

influenced by the corporate culture which dominates the city to the point that they became

a company. The CU prioritizes its own group, almost exclusively, and avoids integrating

with the more inclusive category of "Marseille fans". In this way, the identity construction

of the CU seems to occur in isolation, as if no other fan groups existed who were able to

join it, either in the hierarchy of the Marseille "ultras" or elsewhere.

In contrast, the "South Winner" (SW), created in 1987 by high school students, is

considerably younger, and more cosmopolitan than the CU. The SW are steeped in

working culture and values, many live on the edge of the north districts of the city and

arose from various waves of immigration which happened in Marseille during the last

century. Because of their youth, the SW tend to be more anti-authority than the CU. SW

fans are proud to be *of Marseille* and sometimes refuse to identify themselves French.

This distinction is manifest with various symbols of the city which are represented on

gadgets, or in their fanzine. Moreover, the cosmopolitanism claimed by SW is bound to

their desire to build the identity of Marseille. Consequently, the categorical structure

which emerges for the SW is a *regional* identity type.

Based on previous research, we hypothesized that like other highly identified sport

fans, CU and SW would BIRG following their team victory (Hypothesis 1) and *blast*

against outgroup fans following a loss by their team (Hypothesis 2). The formulation of

direct differences between the two groups with respect to identity management strategies

was not possible *a priori*.

Articles covering the same 32 major soccer contests (16 winning and 16 losing

games) in two soccer *fanzines* between 1997 and 2003 were analyzed. A *fanzine* is a small

home-made newspaper and the name represents a contraction of the words *fan* and a

magazine (for the particular context of appearance of this type of press, see Haynes,

1995). *Fanzines* were used in this study because they provide an interesting point of

access into the identity management strategies of ultras' fans[2]. Indeed, in these *fanzines*,

ultra groups are able to express their own conceptions of fans, soccer and society in

general (Haynes, 1995; Roumestan, 1998). This identity object, created by the groups

themselves, enables them, therefore, to effectively differentiate themselves from one

another *a priori*. More specifically, game narratives were selected, consisting, in general,

of a segment dealing with group life and another segment linked more to the actual

description of the game. This discursive space represented the most "neutral" section of

these magazines as opposed to the "Editorial" or "Critic" sections. Focusing our analyses

on the games account section of the *fanzines* represented a more conservative test and

placed us under the least favorable conditions to find support for our hypothesis.

Moreover, the selected study period spanned 7 years and took account of changes in the

editorial staff. Approximately 5500 words were obtained for the SW and 7500 for the CU,

which were treated according to a specific methodology stemming from speech analysis.

The works on language in social psychology provided the basis of this investigation which postulates that linguistic choices reflect socio-cognitive processes (Ghiglione, Matalon, & Bacri, 1985) activated by the subject who speaks. Focusing on specific referents enables one to determine their importance and representation for the speaker (Castel & Lacassagne, 2005). Thus, certain behavioral aspects can be reflected in the way humans express themselves. Since the *fanzines* are a group product, one would expect them to be representative of what the group expresses and of the way that they deal with information.

In order to perform our investigation, the methodology required two types of measures. First, we located the existence or the absence of relationship to others, through the "referents cores" representing the various human groups. The notion of referents cores return to "the whole of the terms indicating in a speech the same object" (Ghiglione, Matalon, & Bacri, 1985). The purpose of this meticulous collection of data was to determine whether or not the SW and CU ultra fan groups were more likely in the *fanzine* to refer to the different ingroups and outgroups after a victory than after a defeat. From an operational point of view, the first dependent variable was tested by selecting in each text the number of occurrences of the referents cores representing the team supported and outgroup fans, and dividing it by the number of words of the ingroup and the outgroup respectively.

Secondly, for testing the BIRG phenomenon, referring to Cialdini et al. (1976), we identified the sentences where OM was viewed as their own group. The indicator here was the ultra fans use of the term *we* to describe their team performance, and four implicit expressions where the identification with their team players were marked by an appropriation of the actions. Texts were coded as BIRGing if they contained at least one explicit/implicit *we* term. To examine the *blasting* effect, we analyzed the terms used by

ultra fan groups to describe outgroup fans and teams. Texts were coded as *blasting* if they contained at least one explicit negative term (i.e., the "truffes", the "mastres", Marseille's expressions which mean "people without qualities") in characterizing outgroup fans.

Fanzines were separately coded by two coders trained with this type of analysis and blind of the researcher' expectations, to estimate inter-rater reliability. The scores of the different indicators obtained in each text were then compared through correlational analyses to determine the degree of agreement between raters. Analyses revealed a good homogeneity inter-rater (M = .90).

In regard to the BIRG phenomenon, a 2 (groups' fans: SW *vs* CU) x 2 (game results: success *vs* defeat) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the terms referring to the OM (i.e., team supported). The results showed a significant game outcome main effect, $F(1, 60) = 4.51$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .16$. OM was more mentioned when the team won ($M = .30$, $SD = .20$) than when the team lost ($M = .21$, $SD = .15$). The second main effect of target group was not significant, $F(1, 60) = .69$, $p = .40$, $\eta^2 = .02$ and no interaction effect was found, $F(1, 60) = .41$, $p = .52$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Secondly, to test the hypothesis that ultra fans BIRG[3], *we* usage was tested by performing a Fisher's exact test[4] between winning games and losing games. The results showed a significant main effect of game outcome, $p < .004$. Ultra fans used more the term *we* after a victory (17/32 = 53.125%) than after a defeat (6/32 = 18.75%). Indeed, within groups results reached significant levels, respectively for the SW, $p < .03$, and for the CU $p < .03$. So the SW and the CU used more the term *we* after a victory (6/16 = 37.5% and 11/16 = 53.125% respectively*)* than after a defeat (1/16 = 6.25% and 5/16 = 31.25% respectively).

Concerning the presentation of outgroup fans, we first performed Fisher's exact test in order to see if ultra fans spoke more about outgroup fans when team lose than when

team won. The results showed that the two groups spoke more of outgroup fans when the game was lost (17/32 = 53.125%) that when the game was won (5/32 = 15.625%), p <.0004. The between-groups measurement main effect was also significant, $p < .01$.The SW spoke more of outgroup fans (16/32 = 50%) than the CU (6/32 = 18.75%). The within groups measurement effect was significant for the SW, $p < .006$, but only marginally significant for the CU, $p = .08$. So the SW spoke more of outgroup fans after a defeat of the team (12/16 = 75%) than after a victory (4/16 = 25%).

Secondly, in order to determine if OM ultra groups *blast* outgroup fans, we analyzed the terms used by them to refer to outgroup fans. The results showed that in 5/16 (31.25%) of losing games, the SW employed explicitly negative term to mention outgroup fans, against 0/16 for winning games, $p <.02$, Fisher's exact test. The same analysis was conducted for the CU and no negative term was found for both winning and losing games.

This investigation first revealed, as expected, that successful outcomes were described in "we" terms more often than losses by both the CU and SW ultra fan groups, confirming previous works on this topic. These patterns, observed in soccer *fanzines*, offer strong support for the BIRG phenomenon. Specifically, the findings suggest that BIRGing may be a robust identity management strategy used by diverse sport fans in response to their team's victories. However, contrary to our expectations, the results showed that not all ultra fans react in exactly in the same ways to their team's defeats.

With regard to the *blasting* phenomenon, the findings only partially confirmed our hypothesis and the results reported in prior research on this topic. Overall, the two fans groups did not blast very often, perhaps they may moderate their negative outgroup comments in their published *fanzines* in order to avoid the stereotype of vulgar and violent soccer fans. As Roumestan (1998, p.116) pointed out "Fanzines are for ultra fans one of the main means to show that they are capable of intelligent initiatives and that they

deserve the respect". Nevertheless, our results revealed that the SW ultra fans used more explicit negative terms in commenting about outgroups' fans following an OM defeat than following an OM victory. Thus, SW ultra fans seem to function in accord with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) classical proposition that the desire to achieve or maintain positive feeling about one's own social identity may motivate outgroup derogation. This kind of group functioning can be explained by sociologists researches (Bodin, 1999; Roumestan, 1998) which highlight the SW identity construction. Indeed, it seems that the SW ultra fans have built their group identity on a deep need to defend Marseille against the "other French cities". This identity structure based on a "classical" ingroup *versus* outgroup opposition --Marseille against "all the others"-- is reinforced by the fact that the SW ultra fan group is mainly composed of activist, anti-authority youth who often seek confrontation with groups of supporters of rival teams (Roumestan, 1998).

In contrast, we did not observe the same pattern with the CU ultra fan group, which seems to indicate that using the *blasting* strategy to restore damaged self-esteem may be more contextual and less universal than the BIRGing phenomenon. This pattern seems compatible with Allport (1954) conception of ingroup/outgroup relations, which recognizes that attachment to the ingroup does not necessarily require hostility toward the outgroup. Indeed, ingroup love can be compatible with a range of attitudes toward corresponding outgroups, including mild positivity, hatred, disdain or indifference (for more theoretical details, see Brewer, 1999). Perhaps the best explanation for this unexpected finding could be found in the fact that, according to sociologists works, the CU is the first ultra group appeared in France and Marseille. Consequently, it may have built its group identity on a *minority* mode which can affect outgroups relations (Castel & Lacassagne, 2005). This original partition "We are different from all the others" was maintained by CU throughout its history. This ultra group seems to function without

regard for the existence of the other groups of spectators, and projects an aura that the CU ranks at the top of the hierarchy of the ultra of Marseille, or from everywhere in France. The CU ultra fans frequently raise a banner on which is inscribed "For ever the first ones", as much in reference to the victory of the OM in Champions league (first French club to have won one) as in their own age at the velodrome stadium (Roumestan, 1998). Thus, the CU does not need to engage in confrontation because it seems that they do not acknowledge the other ultra groups existence. "Blasting" would grant the outgroup too much importance.

To summarize, the present study contributes to the current literature in a number of ways. Firstly, this investigation showed for the first time that sport fan behaviors can be examined through *fanzine* analysis. Secondly, by taking into account sociological information about each groups which enabled us to highlight group identity construction, we found that *blasting* the opposition, contrary to BIRG strategy, does not seem to be automatic for all highly identified fans, and that ingroup positivity does not lead inevitably to outgroup derogation, confirming previous works on intergroup relations. Thus, focusing only on team identification level is not always the more appropriate way for explaining which strategy will be adopted, especially in the case of highly identified sub-groups such as ultra fan groups. Nevertheless, within the framework of the present study, we are aware that our analysis may be relatively superficial and focus only on two specific groups, and more in-depth investigations may be needed. In addition to examining sport fans' use of soccer *fanzines*, future research should directly observe these two ultra fans groups in order to see if the psychological mechanisms which appeared in this research are reflected in actual behaviors, in context. Alternatively, it is essential that group members from different ultra groups complete psychometric scales measuring the level of team identification and identity management strategies in order to obtain the

greatest possible scientific understanding of fan group behaviors. A research program is

currently being conducted on recent ultra rugby groups to try to highlight this social

dynamics of intergroup relations.

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Footnotes

[1] Previous studies, using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS, Wann & Branscombe, 1993) confirmed that ultra groups (Bernache-Assollant, 2006) are very highly identified to their local team.

[2] Concerning our research, the CU and SW publish their *fanzine* every month. Consequently, and given that in the French soccer championship, a team play an average of one game a week, each published *fanzine* contains about four games accounts. Consequently, some of them could be published about one month after the end of the game. Nevertheless, one important element makes us think that it does not raise problem within the framework of this study. Indeed, the people in charge of the *fanzine* publication explained us that the game account was directly drafted further to the end of the game (see also Roumestan, 1998). Consequently, it seems likely that ultra fans develop identity management strategies in their *fanzine*.

[3] Readers could ask if the authors measure BIRG phenomenon or the complementary tendency, CORF (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) which consists in the case of sport fandom to dissociate oneself from unsuccessful team (i.e., following team defeat) to protect self-ego. In order to address more truly this question, a control (baseline) percent of "we" statements in the absence of an outcome (e.g., how many times ultra fans say "we" before a game) was computed. It seems reasonable to argue that if the baseline, non-outcome involved percent is 50, then ultra fans CORF and not BIRG (i.e., percents are going down after a loss but not going up after a win). If the baseline percent are 25, then one would have evidence for BIRGing. If it is something like 33%, one would have evidence for both BIRGing and CORFing. This complementary analysis revealed that ultra fans BIRG and not CORF in their *fanzine*. Further statistical details can be obtained from the first author.

[4] We took into account the size when less than 10% of the texts contained the studied indicator [i.e. Fisher exact test is a better choice than Chi-square when there is a small value in one of the cells (less than five commonly)], the mean not being then relevant to compare.

Biographical Notes

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