Basking in Our Glory (and Their Failure): Toward a Holistic Conceptualization of the Team

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Basking in reflected glory (BIRGing; Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) is notably prevalent in sport, with sport fans frequently displaying connections to their favorite teams or athletes through consumption of sport merchandise or public affiliation with a particular sport entity. As such, scholars have examined BIRGing in relation to a variety of sport-related topics, however they have assessed the motives of fans without deeply engaging with them to ascertain their rationale for such actions. For scholars and sport industry professionals striving to obtain a deeper understanding of fans’ motives and/or reasons for associating themselves with sport entities, this missing piece (i.e., the ‘why’ of behaviors) in the BIRGing literature may bolster development and deployment of theory and strategy. Specifically, why do sport fans tend to celebrate the achievements of a team as if they are truly a part of it? More critically, why have we—as scholars—allowed ourselves to speculate about the BIRGing phenomenon without venturing to obtain a deep understanding of and rationale for such behaviors from the perspective of the fan? In acknowledging the dearth of research aimed at understanding sport fans’ rationale for BIRGing in conjunction with the team(s) they support, the purpose of this study was to better understand why sport fans associate themselves with a sport entity based on its accomplishments.

Scholars have attempted to explain why fans associate themselves with a sport team through Heider’s (1958) balance theory (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder, Lassgard, & Ford, 1986), vicarious achievement (e.g., Trail, Kim, Kwon, Harrolle, Braunstein-Minkove, & Dick, 2012), and Maslow’s (1970) needs hierarchy (e.g., McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002). However, largely a result in scholars’ failure to engage with individuals to understand why they associate themselves with a sport team, limitations within each of these theoretical frameworks are apparent. As such, I posed the following research objective:

Research Aim 1: To examine the extent to which fans intentionally BIRG to be positively evaluated by others, to enhance self-esteem, and/or to fulfill other needs.

Scholars have also examined BIRGing through the theory of intergroup relations (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2008; Madrigal, 1995; Trail et al., 2012; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), including social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Sloan (1989) offered support of social identity theory as a theoretical framework for BIRGing, noting that if fans “actually feel they are a part of the team, then their freedom to associate or not could no longer be absolute” (p. 194). Based on this speculation, I developed the following objective:

Research Aim 2: To understand how intergroup relations influence basking and/or blasting tendencies among fans. Considering social identity theory, scholars have suggested that team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1990), mediates the relationship between vicarious achievement and BIRGing/CORFing (Kwon et al., 2008; Trail et al., 2012), such that highly identified fans are more likely to BIRG and less likely to CORF than lower identified fans (Madrigal, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Cialdini and Richardson (1980) noted that individuals who BIRG do so indirectly, “by making the observer aware of their often meaningless connections with some other person who possesses positive qualities” (p. 407). Although such ‘meaningless connections’ appear to be indirect associations with successful others, this notion is called into question when one considers social identity theory, and the extent to which an individual has truly embraced her membership in a particular social group (e.g., the team). In contrast to Cialdini and Richardson’s assertions, if an individual perceives herself as belonging to and derives a sense of self from a particular sport entity (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), such meaningless, indirect connections could possibly be perceived as direct connections.

Thus, I sought to examine the following objective:

Research Aim 3: To understand the extent to which fans perceive their association with or connection to the team as indirect or direct.
In pursuit of the research aims, I conducted interviews and focus groups with undergraduate students at Florida State University. Interviews and focus groups allow the researcher to engage in conversation to obtain a rich understanding of individuals’ experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interviews and focus groups were conducted in October and November 2013 regarding students’ tendency and rationale for publicly affiliating themselves with Florida State’s National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football program. Fifteen students participated in the research; all participants had been to a Florida State football game that season. Upon conclusion of each session, I summarized the conversation with participants to ensure communicative validation (Flick, 2009; Kvale, 1995); as well, I frequently engaged in peer debriefing to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted interviews and focus groups until commonalities emerged and no additional themes were found (McCracken, 1988). Empirical material for analysis consisted of 48 pages of single-spaced transcripts and 230 minutes of recorded conversation; I used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to discover themes among students in regard to the research aims.

Overall, four themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups. First, there is a distinction between conscious and subconscious manifestations of basking, whereby the underlying motives for each may vary. Specifically, fans appear to bask without giving it much thought when they are in familiar environments (e.g., the Florida State campus), however basking becomes a much more conscious behavior when fans find themselves in external, or what one student explained as “hostile,” environments. Second, basking is not only enacted to enhance or stabilize self-esteem, but also—and perhaps more prominently—to reinforce feelings of belongingness. Cialdini et al. (1976) grounded BIRGing with balance theory, however the findings of the current study imply that such a theory may not offer a complete understanding of basking motives; if fans have truly embraced a sport team’s accomplishments as their own, they are not necessarily concerned with what others think of them—it is who they are, or part of their “extended self” (Belk, 1988). Third, blasting is a central component to feelings of belongingness realized through basking. Students’ tendency to publicly convey negative sentiments toward rival university students illustrates an almost teamcentric phenomenon. Considering Tajfel’s (1982) ‘continuum of social interaction’ (p. 13), teamcentric tendencies may push an individual away from the interpersonal polar of the continuum toward the intergroup polar. Fourth, for those who are identified with the team, basking is not perceived as a celebration of vicarious or indirect achievement, but rather direct, communal accomplishment. Essentially, for identified fans, there is no reflection—no ‘R’—in BIRGing; the glory is perceived and experienced as their own, as fans perceive themselves as part of the team. Scholars should consider the idea of a convergence of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) as an alternative, holistic conceptualization of the team.

Collectively, the findings of the current study allowed me to provide breadth and depth to the BIRGing literature, and highlight potential theoretical and managerial implications for the future study and understanding of fan behavior. An in-depth discussion of the research findings, potential implications for scholars and sport industry professionals, and limitations of the current study will be discussed.