

Success interrupted: Exploring how supporters interpret their team's success in a postponed competition.

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Abstract

Research purpose: This study has two aims: (1) to explore how supporters evaluate success when their team's objective performance record does not change but subjective features of the context do change (e.g., competition format, potential league cancellation); and (2) to explore why winning a championship is important to evaluations of in-group status – in addition to a large points advantage.

Research methods: We conducted a netnographic study of Liverpool Football Club supporters during the COVID-19 postponement of the English Premier League. In total, we analysed 15,193 forum posts added between March 11th – June 3rd, 2020, using a theoretical thematic analysis.

Results and Findings: Three themes emerged from our interpretations of the data. First, winning the championship had value—in addition to the club's 25-point advantage—because supporters felt it would *immortalise their status* as the best team in 2019-2020 *permanently*. Second, supporters' perceptions of success reduced when it was perceived to occur in a structure that did not conform to shared expectations for league completion. Third, supporters perceived that winning the championship would enable a moment at which players, coaches, and supporters could experience complete solidarity as their shared goal became reality.

Implications: Our analysis shed new light on the ways in which context relates to the evaluation of intergroup status in sport. Furthermore, we reveal why winning championships adds value beyond objective advantages.

Success interrupted: Exploring how supporters interpret their team's success in a postponed competition

On March 13th, 2020, the English Premier League (PL)—like most competitions—was postponed. At the time of postponement—having played 29 of 38 matches—Liverpool Football Club (LFC) led Manchester City by 25-points, having played one more game (LFC were the most successful team based on points and goal difference). League postponement is rare in professional sport, but it creates social and psychological challenges we know little about. In 1994, Montreal Expos supporters experienced a similarly challenging scenario. They led the Major League Baseball (MLB) National League East by six games when the competition was postponed and subsequently cancelled because of a labour dispute. Although the Expos objective superiority did not change, Keri (2015) reported that supporters experienced *negative emotions* about the season. This point is theoretically surprising, because research on success tends to associate success and objective advantages (i.e., points or winning percentages) with positive outcomes for organisations and supporters. Yet, postponements create uncertainty for supporters (e.g., whether administrators would cancel the league), which exposed gaps in research about how supporters interpret success and intergroup status.

There is consistent evidence that supporters gravitate towards successful teams and distance themselves from unsuccessful ones (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Trail et al., 2012; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Moreover, researchers have investigated how supporters respond to different game outcomes based on: team performance level (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), identification strength (Kwon et al., 2008; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), or level of sport (Greenwood et al., 2006). Less is known about how supporters interpret team successes when the circumstances surrounding their team's performance change (i.e., a league

postponement). The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to shed new light on how the context relates to supporters' evaluations of their team's success. Therefore, our first aim is: to explore how supporters evaluate success when their team's objective performance record does not change (i.e., points advantage), but subjective features of the context do change (i.e., competition format). Addressing this aim will extend social identity theorising, contributing new insights about the relationship between performance, context, and supporter evaluations of success.

Despite its prevalence in popular culture (e.g., winning The Super Bowl), researchers have spent minimal time exploring the subjective differences between objective superiority in competitions (e.g., a 25-point lead in the PL) and the conferral of titles or championships. There is evidence that winning major tournaments correlates with collective trust, national identification (Bravo et al., 2020), pride (Bravo et al., 2020; Shibli et al., 2021), subjective well-being (Unanue et al., 2020), and coping after a tragedy (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021). Aside from Keri (2015), however, we know little about why supporters with an objective competition advantage—and no real change in their superiority compared to rivals—would experience negative emotions when a title is not subsequently awarded. Our second aim is to explore why winning a championship—in addition to a large points advantage—is important to evaluations of in-group status. This will illuminate why supporters perceive competition victories to enhance status in relation to rivals.

We address our aims through a three-month netnography (Kozinets, 2019) of LFC supporters *during the COVID-19 induced postponement* of the PL. During the postponement, supporters discussed (a) their success before COVID-19, (b) the value of winning the championship in an interrupted competition, and (c) LFC's status in relation to other groups.

Theoretical framework

In this section we focus on three bodies of research. First, we introduce early research into how *individuals* navigate success and failure. Second, we situate our focus at the *group-level*, and introduce social identity theory as our overarching framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Third, we review evidence on social and contextual factors that influence evaluations of team success.

In their study of Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing), Cialdini et al. (1976), advanced a theory of impression management that linked success and failure with the associative (dissociative) behaviours of *individuals*. They conducted three field studies, which taken together, show spectators are more (less) likely to display affiliation—physically and verbally—with a team following successes (failures). Follow-up studies confirm this finding in physical and virtual environments (Boen et al., 2002; Jensen et al., 2016). For example, Boen et al. (2002) found a significant increase (decrease) in the number of visitors to 34 football club websites in the Netherlands and Belgium after wins (losses). Combined, these studies illustrate that BIRGing has benefits for supporters self-image (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980).

Researchers have since applied social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)—a *group-level framework*—to develop knowledge about the collective dimensions of success (Kwon et al., 2008; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). In this theory, Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that people join social groups perceived to be desirable or self-enhancing (Jetten et al., 2004). The degree to which a person evaluates their group positively results from intergroup comparison (Turner, 1975), which involves members comparing features of their group (e.g., team performance) with a salient out-group (Turner et al., 1994). Out-groups become salient in context. As such, while teams typically have fervent rivals, out-groups can change when the contextual environment presents new stimuli (e.g., a new opponent, or dimension of

comparison; Turner, 1975). When in-group members perceive the status of their group to be positively (negatively) distinct from rivals, identification enhances (diminishes) self-image (Jetten et al., 2004).

Winning matches and championships are, arguably, the most prevalent source of status enhancement in sport. Yet, there is minimal understanding about the temporality of ingroup status enhancements after a match or competition victory. One perspective is that distinctiveness boosts after victory[ies] are purely performance based. Therefore, intergroup status evaluations *would not change* until a *future performance* outcome. A second perspective is that distinctiveness is maintained until the context in which supporters evaluate success changes (e.g., win/loss, postponement, change in league structure). We know little about how changes in context affect supporter [re]evaluations of distinctiveness. LFC's performance record did not change when the PL was postponed; however, the context in which supporters evaluated their success changed dramatically. Social identity theory provides a rich framework to explain supporters' group-level evaluative processes as the social and contextual changes created by the PL postponement developed.

Team success

Work on success has frequently operationalised vicarious achievement (i.e., associating oneself with an outcome in which one was not instrumental) as a motive influencing behaviour (e.g., Fink et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Kim et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers have tested the relationship between vicarious achievement, and BIRGing and Cutting Off Reflected Failure following game outcomes (Kwon et al., 2008; Madrigal, 1995; Trail et al., 2012; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Supporters reporting higher (lower) team identification are more (less) likely to BIRG. This has emerged from between-group testing based on identity strength (Wann & Branscombe, 1990), and when team identification is modelled as a mediator between vicarious achievement and BIRGing (Kwon

et al., 2008; Trail et al., 2012). This work illustrates that responses to success are not homogeneous across individuals; more identified supporters display stronger responses following victories than other fans.

Adding further nuance to evaluations of success, rivalry researchers show that some matches have greater psychological importance for supporters than others (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Beating a salient rival confers a greater status boost than success against other out-groups. Neuro-imaging research supports this perspective, showing patterns of pleasure (pain) when a team is successful (unsuccessful) against its most salient rivals (Cikara et al., 2011). Therefore, it is already established that some successes contribute more to identity distinctiveness and status than others.

For supporters, winning tournaments or championships is, arguably, the ultimate marker of status enhancement in sport. Yet, only a few studies explore experiences of, or feelings about, winning championships. Using a pre, and post-tournament win survey design, Bravo et al. (2020) and Unanue et al. (2020) assessed the social and psychological effects of Chile's Copa America victory. Bravo et al. (2020) found significant increases in collective trust, national identification, and pride for Chileans. Unanue et al. (2020) show increases in global and evaluated subjective well-being after the win. Shibli et al. (2021) supports this work observing increases in 'sportive nationalism' and pride after British sporting successes. Lastly, in the context of disasters, Erlichman and Harrison (2021) found a correlation between supporters BIRGing after the Houston Astros' World Series win and their ability to cope in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

Despite prior work showing success to be more complex than supporters gravitating towards success and away from failure, there are only two studies that use qualitative methods to explore its subjectivities. Delia (2015) found that supporters BIRG as a form of in-group confirmation and self-esteem enhancement. Supporters also blast rival fans to

increase feelings of in-group belonging. Furthermore, group boundaries shift and change during matches creating more exclusive groups than the typically inclusive groups associated with fans' university or hometown. Decrop and Derbaix (2010) immersed themselves with Belgian and French football supporters to explore the conceptual relationships between achievement and pride. Criticising work on success, they wrote: "pride should not be limited to a monolithic feeling of satisfaction or delight resulting from a well-defined achievement, such as often described in the psychological literature, but is a multidimensional construct involving complex identity processes" (p. 593). Addressing this critique, they advance three forms of achievement that spectators experience as antecedents to collective forms of pride. First, pride flows from spectator reactions to current achievements (e.g., winning a match). Second, spectators experience pride because of past achievements (e.g., former championship wins). Third, spectators develop pride in their team, because of its relationship to a place that is meaningful (Rooney, 1969).

To summarise, there are a range of factors that affect supporter construal of success (e.g., Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Rather than a reaction to game outcomes or plays, interpretations of success relate to: a supporter's degree of identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1990), the 'stakes' in particular games (e.g., Tyler & Cobbs, 2015), time (Delia, 2015), and current and past achievements (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). The situation faced by LFC presented an opportunity to extend this work in two ways. Our first aim is: *To explore how supporters evaluate success when their team's objective performance record does not change (i.e., points advantage), but subjective features of the context do change (e.g., how the PL chose to complete the competition).* Our second aim is: *To explore why winning the PL title – in addition to the team's objective points advantage – is important to supporters.*

Method

We designed a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2002, 2019) in which we sampled naturalistic discussions between LFC supporters as COVID-19 invoked the spectre of PL postponement. Netnography is an increasingly prevalent method in sport management, which provides naturalistic insights into online groups and communities (e.g., Naess, 2017; Stavros et al., 2014). We approached the study abductively because existing work does not make clear: (i) how supporters evaluate success when the context changes, or (ii) why winning a championship is more psychologically important than a large objective advantage.

Study context

Despite dominating the 2019-2020 season, LFC required six points to win the PL title with nine games remaining. Although LFC had won two UEFA Champions League titles in the intervening years, they had not won a top-flight title since 1990¹. *At the time of the postponement*, LFC had won 18 league titles, a *cumulative* record beaten only by Manchester United (20). Against this backdrop, LFC supporters experienced uncertainty because of four *possible* outcomes: (1) the PL may have resumed and LFC may (not) have won the title after playing all planned fixtures; (2) the PL may have awarded LFC the title without playing all fixtures; (3) the league might have been completed with shortened or modified fixtures held in neutral venues (Taylor, 2020) or without supporters; or (4) most threatening to supporters, the PL might have been voided and LFC's status as league leaders expunged from records.

The timeline of events following the outbreak of COVID-19 spanned more than four months. On Friday 13th of March 2020, the PL, Football Association (FA), Football League,

¹ In 2014, Steven Gerrard slipped, gifting Chelsea a goal, which eventually led to Manchester City winning the league. Graphics Interchange Formats clips, videos, and images of this moment have been shared with glee by rival supporters ever since. In 2018-2019, LFC secured 97-points to finish second to Manchester City with the highest points tally of any team not to win the league in PL history.

and Women's Soccer League suspended all competitions (Premier League, 2020a). This decision was scheduled for review on the 4th of April; however, the group issued another statement on the 19th of March—following the Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) decision to postpone EURO2020—provisionally extending the adjournment until the 30th of April (Premier League, 2020b). On the 3rd of April, the PL was suspended indefinitely (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). Beforehand, the FA abrogated its rule that competitions must conclude by the 1st of June to allow league completion over summer (Premier League, 2020b). The PL released a statement about 'Project Restart' on the 28th of May, stating fixtures would resume on 17th of June; subject to "safety requirements" (Premier League, 2020c). In this statement, the PL confirmed that the 92 remaining fixtures would be broadcast live, but *all matches would be played behind closed doors* (Harris, 2020). The 2019-2020 PL season restarted on the 17th of June. LFC were awarded the title on June 25th after their nearest rival, Manchester City, lost 2-1 to Chelsea Football Club. The PL season finished on the 26th of July 2020.

Sample and procedure

Author one perused a range of LFC forums to gauge discussion intensity, richness of supporter posts, and accessibility. From this process, we selected a *supporter-owned* forum, which included a high quality and quantity of discussions related to our aims (Kozinets, 2019). Four threads were relevant to our aims: two that supporters created at the start of the COVID-19 crisis (Threads 1 and 2); and two that emerged after Project Restart (Threads 3 & 4). Author one's institution granted ethical clearance. Netnographic research is ethically challenging, because forum users did not post knowing we would analyse their contributions (e.g., Delia, 2017). Therefore, we included four protections: (1) we sample a site that permitted third-party data use; (2) for confidentiality, we do not disclose details about the forum (Franzke et al., 2019); (3) we pseudonymise all participants' names; and (4) before

submission, we conducted Google searches (pages 1-10) for quotes shown in the manuscript. If the search led to the forum, we paraphrased posts until it did not (Franzke et al., 2019).

Author one executed a custom web scraper to download Threads one and two in June 2020. We scraped threads three and four in July, after LFC were awarded the PL trophy. In total, we downloaded and analysed 19,996 posts added between March 11th, 2020 – July 22nd, 2020. After coding all data, we focussed on 15,193 posts added between March 11th – June 3rd (before Project Restart was confirmed) from Threads one and two only. This period included the greatest contextual uncertainty about LFC's status as potential champions. We focussed on this data as it yielded the most intense discussions in relation to our research aims. After Project Restart was confirmed, supporters reverted to more typical discussions of success as it became clear all games would be completed (e.g., excitement, expectation, celebration). These discussions were beyond our scope. During the sampling period, 573 supporters contributed to the discussions with an average post frequency of 23.

Data analysis

We conducted three rounds of theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) focussed on data that was relevant to our aims. This provided flexibility to integrate existing theory into our analysis, whilst giving space for new concepts to emerge from our interpretations of post content. Our analytical process occurred in four stages. First, Author one coded 1,500 posts and shared the codes, and code definitions with Authors two—four. All authors then negotiated codes, coding, and initial theories before further analysis by Authors one and two (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When round one coding ceased, we had recorded 197 news and social media articles posted by users to inform our understanding of how the context changed for supporters during the postponement. Second, Authors one and two split the remaining posts (i.e., ~13,600 posts) to expedite the coding process. Third, Author one sorted the dataset by posts related to the study aims (using round one codes) and

conducted a second round of coding to look for commonalities and inconsistencies on these posts only (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth, Author one conducted a final round of coding with two goals. Initially, Author one looked for relationships between themes. Next, by ordering the posts by code and date, Author one analysed whether there had been subjective changes in supporters' discussions during the sampling period. Once completed, Author one shared the themes and data with Authors two-four for negotiation and finalisation.

Throughout the coding process we used Kozinets' (2019) analytical processes of reconnoitering, recording, researching, and reflecting to supplement our theoretical thematic analysis. By way of *reconnoitering*, we wrote a comprehensive literature review before the analysis to unearth relevant concepts and ideas. As analysis progressed, we created maps of the coding in our two aims. *Recording* involved journaling and note taking. In round one coding, Authors one and two exchanged notes in a 'comments' column in a shared Excel datafile and regularly debriefed about emerging ideas and coding. In the second and third coding rounds, Author one curated a detailed immersive journal to clarify confusion and observations about coding. This process enabled *reflection* and Author one's sensemaking attempts, which they discussed with Author two. *Researching* involved considering what we interpreted from the data in relation to existing knowledge, concepts, and theories.

Results

Our interpretations of the data produced three themes: (i) *Immortalisation of status*, (ii) *The asterisk*, and (iii) *Moments of celebration*. The asterisk related to our first aim, while immortalisation of status, and moments of celebration shed light on aim two. We present immortalisation of status first, because parts of the asterisk are contingent on this theme (e.g., recognition by rivals). As mentioned, LFC had not won the top-flight of English football since 1990. From the start of our observation period, supporters evaluated the postponement, and its consequences for LFC's success, negatively. Alluding to prior failures to win the

championship, Redcollective quipped: “Our quest for the title is like a fucking Greek tragedy” (Thread 1, Redcollective, March 12th). It is in this context that LFC supporters discussed the team’s success and the interruption.

Immortalisation of status

This theme represents our interpretations of why the PL awarding the title to LFC—in addition to the team’s objective points advantage—was subjectively important to supporters. We did not interpret any sub-themes within this theme. Because of the pandemic—and league postponement—supporters experienced uncertainty about how league organisers would conclude the competition until the restart was confirmed.

Supporters used terms like confirmed or official when discussing how winning the league would immortalise in-group status. Twiglet (Thread 2, 12th March 2020), explained why the PL awarding LFC the title—in addition to the team’s objective points advantage—was important: “I won’t relax until we are *confirmed* as champions”. Greenfingers (Thread 1, March 13th, 2020) used similar language: “As long as its *official* that we are awarded it, that’s all that matters”. Although LFC were objectively superior to rivals—and this did not change during our sampling period—supporters perceived the title as additive because it would *permanently ratify* their status as the best team in the 2019-2020 season.

Greenfingers (Thread 1, March 28th, 2020) referred to ratification in relation to the total number of titles LFC have won: “We have effectively won the league.... Once that 18 count turns to 19 then that is all that matters to me”. They highlighted the relationship between ratification of the PL title and LFC’s *cumulative success*, which was important for two reasons. First, supporters could *symbolise* LFC’s 19th title as an objective feature of club history. The following quote developed this idea, discussing ‘number 19’ in a broader lineage of LFC’s achievements:

.... most importantly...it will say 19 [league titles] on the Champion's Wall instead of 18. And 19 means the next one can be 20, and then 21 and so on. Each win will usher in the next.” (Thread 2, Quiet Time, March 30th, 2020)

Supporters frequently discussed adding the achievement to LFC’s trophy wall, emblazoned on team shirts and merchandise, printed in record books, engraved on the trophy, and displayed on in-stadium banners to reinforce their cumulative achievement of winning 19 titles. These forms of symbolisation would have been impossible, or illegitimate, if LFC had finished with *only* a 25-point objective advantage.

Second, supporters discussed winning their 19th title in relation to cumulative intergroup status comparisons with rivals. In this instance, the salient out-group used for comparison shifted from LFC’s closest rival in 2019-2020 (i.e., Manchester City), to Manchester United. Out-groups become more (less) salient in context (Turner, 1975). As LFC supporters evaluated their cumulative success, Manchester City became a less useful out-group and discussions emphasis switched to Manchester United. Intergroup comparisons about the most successful English team are contentious; however, if LFC were awarded the 2019-2020 title it would have increased their cumulative count to 49 trophies (19 English league titles, 6 European Championships, 1 FIFA Club World Cup, 3 UEFA Cups, 4 UEFA Super Cups, 7 FA Cups, & 9 League Cups), usurping Manchester United’s 45 (excluding Community Shield wins)). Furry Jacket (Thread 2, April 24th, 2020) compared LFC’s cumulative success with Manchester United (Utd in their language): “when our title is *confirmed* it's going to be glorious. And please let's never hear an argument about who's bigger out of us and Utd again”. Despite a perceived inevitability that LFC *would* win the title, its ratification was important to enhance the club’s cumulative status in relation to Manchester United.

Supporters also discussed how cumulative performance records protected them against the identity threat created by rival fans questioning the legitimacy of LFC's success. During the postponement, rival fans often posted comments on social media using the #taintedtitle hashtag to diminish LFC's achievements. First used to diminish LFC's success in October 2019, because of Video Assisted Refereeing decisions, rival supporters reinvigorated #taintedtitle in relation to COVID-19. Consequently, LFC supporters discussed how the title would preserve distinctiveness:

Do we really need the validation of opposition fans or pundits? I mean to get to match day 27 and have only dropped 2 points is just staggering, 97 Pts in 18/19 [2018-2019 season], 2 CL finals & 1 victory. Finally wining the PL is really just a natural progression. (Thread 2, Auto_Red, April 23rd, 2020).

Responding to Auto_Red: Couldn't care less what they think. It'll be No.19.

And in a few years' time when we've won 22 or 24, it'll just be a number in the pile like 1947 or 1964 or 1982 was. (Thread 2, The Red One, April 23rd, 2020)

Responding to The Red One: Exactly. As long as that trophy is sitting in our trophy room with those lovely red ribbons and our champions wall has '19' below the league titles heading then I think I could just about handle that... (Thread 2, Take me home, April 23rd, 2020)

In this exchange, The Red One and Take me home discussed the ratification of the PL title as a way of offsetting rival fans evaluations that LFC's success was 'tainted'.

The asterisk

Caparras (2020) notes that asterisks appear in league records when a competition season is completed in a *non-standard* format (e.g., curtailed season). For example, the National Basketball Association seasons in 1998-1999 (i.e., labour dispute between players and owners) and 2011-2012 (i.e., dispute between players and owners over revenue sharing

agreements and salary cap structure) led to teams playing reduced 50 (1998-1999) and 66-game (2011-2012) regular seasons. Each was marked in records with an asterisk. Our interpretations of this idea brought together discussions, debates, and evaluations about the importance of perceived competition integrity to evaluations of success. This built on immortalisation of status by exploring supporters' evaluations of winning the PL in a competition that some perceived to be [il]legitimate. We did not interpret any sub-themes; however, there were subjective changes in supporters' discussion of the asterisk during the observation period. We observed subjective changes in discussions about the asterisk at the end of March and into April as the relationship between the competition postponement and LFC's success evolved. We discuss these interpretations in two time-bound sections: integrity of victory, and evolving folklore.

Integrity of victory. Prior to the PL postponement, one supporter summarised their attitude to the competition interruption and LFC's success: "We'll have the title with a fucking asterisk. Fuck me" (Thread 2, Eat Your Tea, March 12th, 2020). In the following exchange, three supporters discussed why this was problematic:

I would also hate to have an asterisked version of the title. It needs to be won on the pitch which although close isn't yet confirmed (Thread 2, Takemeforaride, March 13th, 2020)

Responding to Takemeforaride: It has been won. It won't be viewed as a compromised league in terms of winning it because we have practically won it.... (Thread 2, Greenfingers, March 13th, 2020)

Responding to Greenfingers: There is a difference between actually winning something and practically almost there. The latter will always be a probability, even if its 99.99 percent, never a certainty... there'll

always be a niggling, incomplete feeling about it, at least for me.

(Thread 2, Outage, March 13th, 2020)

Responding to Greenfingers: It's not been won. You said it yourself, "practically". It wouldn't matter if we were a point away from winning it. Until it's mathematically certain, there is no winner." (Thread 2, Gemstone, March 13th, 2020)

This exchange provided two insights about the importance of *integrity* to evaluations of success. First, there was subjectivity in relation to how supporters interpreted the legitimacy of the competition following the interruption. Yet, there seemed to be a broader culturally based understanding that '*mathematically*' securing the PL title was important as it meant that (building on immortalisation) LFC were *definitively* the best team in the competition. Second, supporters argued that the PL 'giving' LFC the league title would reduce competition legitimacy and make the achievement *incomplete*. As Red one posted on March 31st: "I want a title that we have mathematically won. Not some token trophy out of pity." Despite having a 25-point advantage over rivals, winning the championship *and* completing all fixtures was central to supporters' evaluation of the achievement.

At the end of March, supporters shared two media articles stating the PL would be completed with shorter matches or a 'World Cup' style tournament (Delaney, 2020). This provoked discussions about the importance of winning the championship in accordance with standard league rules:

I am not in favour of a "circus" style finish - it would further devalue our season.

The season should, when it is possible, be properly played out. Games, in quick succession, without a crowd, would be ridiculous. Why not get the managers to have a PlayStation competition to finish the season? It would be just as credible (Thread 2, New shoes, April 2nd)

Responding to New shoes: At this stage I just want to win that title and have it confirmed and in the history books. I don't care if it's played in this world cup style setting or played at my local park. I don't care if they scrap VAR for a bit, allow 7 subs, allow [LFC manager, Jurgen] Klopp to play himself up front for 8 games. I want it done and dusted (Thread 2, ClubLegend, April 2nd, 2020)

Responding to New shoes: Don't be so daft. It would be little different to intense Christmas schedules. And it wouldn't devalue anything; on the contrary it would be historic. Another chapter in our amazing history, with all its twists and turns... Far better a compromise that sees all games played, albeit in a restricted time format, than a curtailment. And far better a curtailment than a voided league situation (Thread 2, Quiet Time, April 2nd, 2020)

This exchange displayed disagreement and started a temporal shift in supporters' construal of the asterisk. In response to New shoes' initial post, Quiet Time argued that a compromised conclusion to the PL season would contribute to in-group differentiation and distinctiveness; although, they made clear that seeing 'all games played' would have greater integrity than a league curtailment. While competition integrity was important to how supporters evaluated winning the PL, the continued postponement created a motivation to interpret success favourably—despite out-groups not recognising the achievement, or an asterisk being recorded next to it. Therefore, supporters started to discuss how winning the PL in scenarios that lacked integrity could add to the club's 'amazing history', which we discuss in relation to: Evolving folklore.

Evolving folklore. At the end of March and beginning of April, there was a shift in supporter discussions about the asterisk. Interventions such as Quiet Time's led to the

emergence of new shared understandings between forum members. In another post Quiet Time explained: “In years to come we’ll forget the annoyance and remember just what a strangely historic win it will have been. Books and hundreds of articles will be written about it, and it will enter our already rich folklore” (Thread 2, Quiet Time, March 30th, 2020). This added another layer to the ways in which the social context and supporters’ evaluations of success are related. Supporters remember, reconstruct, and embellish stories about ‘our’ history and success. These recollections include past and present achievements (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010); however, they also incorporate subjective interpretations that enable supporters to recall potentially negative events in ways that are in-group affirming. Dignifried developed this idea in response to rival fans derogating LFC’s success:

The tactic of saying the title ‘doesn’t count’ only works if you allow it to wind you up. I’ve been waiting 30 years for this, I’ve got a bottle of champagne in the cupboard and a Cuban ready and waiting - if they do curtail it and hand us the title then the minute that gets confirmed I’m photographing myself with a Cuban and that champagne with the caption #taintedtitle and wind the c*nts up no end (Thread 2, Dignifried, April 16th, 2020)

Rather than interpreting #taintedtitle negatively, Dignifried argued that it could become an important feature of LFC’s distinctiveness.

In embracing the asterisk, supporters started to think creatively about how they could integrate success in a compromised competition structure into a distinctive feature of their identity to make rival fans angry. This included creating slogans describing the asterisk in terms that LFC supporters started to value. For example, Anfield_Dreamz (Thread 2, April 30th) wrote “Champions 19/20*, *fuckin piss easy”, while, amongst others, Dignifried (Thread 2, April 30th) quipped “*By the biggest margin ever”. Rather than supporters

passively accepting negative media articles and ‘banter’ from rivals about their potential achievement, they reconstrued the asterisk as a source of pride (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010).

Moments of celebration

In this section, we discuss the value of collective celebrations (Bravo et al., 2020; Unanue et al., 2020) to supporters’ experience of winning championships. There were two sub-themes in this theme: (1) Lifting the trophy, and (2) celebrating in relational groups. The context we investigated was opportune as it allowed us to explore features of success that supporters discussed because restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 made *normal patterns of celebration and social interaction impossible*. In short, because supporters typically consume sport with other fans, researchers have not explored the importance of other people to individual, relational, and collective (Lock & Funk, 2016) evaluations of success. The following exchange illustrated supporters’ sense of loss as the pandemic disrupted rituals and practices in which they ‘expected’ to engage after winning the league:

Times saying that all games in England will be played in empty grounds once COVID numbers surpass 500 which is likely to be tomorrow (Thread 2, ForzaRossa, March 11th)

Responding to ForzaRossa: “Fucking hell. Us winning the prem will look like a glitch in a FIFA match. Thirty bloody years to win it in an empty ground”
(Thread 2, Xabi, March 11th, 2020)

In this discussion, ForzaRossa and Xabi introduced the importance of communal celebration and the visual spectacle of winning the title in a stadium. Next, we discuss why supporters valued moments of celebration in the experience of being awarded the title.

Lifting the trophy. LFC supporters often discussed their Captain, Jordan Henderson lifting the PL trophy. More specifically, they described the importance of the *moment at which he lifted the trophy*. This moment would mark complete solidarity between LFC

players, coaches, and supporters as the shared goal of winning the championship—and an ultimate moment of intergroup distinctiveness—became reality. At the start of April, supporters shared news articles about ‘proposed’ endings to the PL; however, two generated consistent discussion. First, one stated the PL and British Government were in ‘advanced talks’ about the PL returning behind closed doors (i.e., without fans; Maddock, 2020). Second, UEFA stated that European leagues would restart in July (Harris, 2020). The articles reassured fans about PL completion; however it was confirmed that supporters would not be there when LFC were awarded the title. This provoked discussions about the value of communal celebrations amongst players, coaches, and supporters:

I just hope that assuming it does go behind closed doors that we create some event when it's safe to do so for us to see Jordan [Henderson] lifting the trophy in front of a crowd, as both they and we fully deserve that. Even if it is mid next season or whatever - would be a bit weird but they'd be the first group to bring it home in 30 years and there's no way they or we should be robbed of the moment to celebrate that properly (Thread 2, Codename, 10th April)

Codename explained the trophy lift was important because it was the moment that players, coaches, and supporters had collectively worked towards (“we deserve that”). Therefore, not being present when the title was awarded would ‘rob’ group members of an important celebration of their shared identity and achievements.

Supporters watched, and discussed, trophy presentations in other competitions, which offered insight into the valued features of the trophy lift. There were two trophy ceremonies that triggered discussions amongst supporters. First, a supporter shared an article about the PL restart from The Telegraph newspaper (Burt & McGrath, 2020). This fuelled discussions after the Scottish Premier League ‘gave’ Celtic Football Club the title without playing all fixtures. Manager Neil Lennon did not lift the trophy in front of supporters. Instead, he

picked it up from Celtic Park (Celtic Football Club's home ground) and took it to a forest in Glasgow where he celebrated and posed for photos *alone*. The following comment explained why celebrating and lifting the trophy as a group was important:

Not bothered where they do it, but it would just be great to have everyone who's earn't it all in one place on that podium with Sir Kenny [Dalglish] carrying the trophy to Hendo [Jordan Henderson]. I want to see it 'lifted' (even in an empty ground - or indoors) and not just a posed situation like Neil Lennon today. (Thread 2, Red one, May 18th)

This quote animated the trophy lift as a collective ritual that was important because it involved one or more club legends lifting the outcome of player, coach, and supporter labour. This extended to having ex-LFC player and manager Kenny Dalglish ('King' or 'Sir' Kenny in forum parlance) passing the trophy to Jordan Henderson (club legend to club legend).

Second, one supporter shared footage of Red Bull Salzburg being awarded the Austrian Cup in May. In the footage, players stood, socially distanced, and passed the trophy from set positions on a mat. The following exchange shows why this was perceived to diminish the moment at which an objective advantage changed to a title that was awarded:

Just seen Salzburg's trophy 'presentation'. Really hope ours is better than that. Gutted if Jurgen [Klopp] can't be picked up in the air again - surely if they wear masks and gloves even for it! (Thread 2, ClubLegend, May 30th)

Responding to ClubLegend: If they don't wear masks & gloves for playing, they won't wear them for lifting the trophy surely (Thread 2, TrueRed, May 30th)

Supporters discussed the importance of proximity between players and coaching staff when lifting the trophy. Although it was broadly acknowledged that COVID-19 made normal celebrations impossible, supporters discussed how a moment that would typically involve the

collective release of joy and camaraderie would be sanitised and diminished. This revealed the value of closeness, proximity, and sociality to the moment at which an objective points advantage transitions into a *permanent ratification* of team success.

Celebrating in relational groups. Supporters discussed how celebrating and watching success with friends and family functioned as the culmination of relational journeys. While supporters described the trophy lift in collective terms (i.e., when ‘we’ lift the trophy), other discussions focussed on the friendship and familial (i.e., relational) groups with whom supporters hoped to watch the moment at which the trophy was lifted. This finding animated the journeys of small groups of supporters before LFC’s success in 2019-2020. In one exchange two supporters discussed this point:

When it happens all I’m hoping for now is that we're in a position in this country so that I can be with my friends. If I can't be in the ground, I want to be able to get pissed and go mental with them rather than pissing off my housemates by jumping up and down screaming in my room! (Thread 2, Sea and Sky, April 25th)

Responding to Sea and Sky: That's exactly what I’m hoping for, I hope I can spend the day with my nephew who has never seen us lift it, my kids aren't that bothered about football, my nephew was born after 2005, he's only known pain yet not once did he waver. There's a generation that need this. (Thread 2, Blond_Ambition, April 25th)

In the opening post, Sea and Sky explained that they wanted to see the moment of celebration with friends that supported LFC, in contrast to celebrating at home *alone*. In the second post, Blond_Ambition spoke about wanting to be with their nephew to share the experience of them seeing LFC lift the first league title in their lifetime. The following excerpt sheds light on the habitual attendance in relational groups that supporters described:

I go the game every week with my dad and have done for 15 years... I've waited for this moment for as far as I can remember. I want to be on the Kop [the iconic 'home end' at LFC's stadium, Anfield] with my dad, celebrating the way that I've dreamed about since I was a lad. It's not gonna happen now and I've accepted that. So yes, they may finish the season and award us the title and that'll be great, but celebrating that in my house, on my own just doesn't sound like something to get excited about. (Forever Bird, Thread 2, April 29th)

The social restrictions imposed to control the spread of COVID-19 interrupted some supporters' habitual patterns of attendance, which revealed important social dimensions to the experience of team success.

Discussion

Our aim was twofold: To explore how supporters evaluated success when their team's objective performance record did not change, but subjective features of the context did change; and to explore why being awarded the PL title—in addition to LFC's objective points advantage—was important to supporters' evaluations of their team's success. League postponement is rare; however, by investigating its nuances, we have contributed novel insights into how context can affect evaluations of success, and why winning a championship is subjectively important in addition to a large objective competition advantage.

Theoretical implications

Through our first aim, we contributed to social identity theorising (Lock & Heere, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and literature on success (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). In previous work, researchers have measured evaluations of success or failure without considering that they might be prone to change as the context evolves. We unearthed two changes in supporters' evaluations of their team's success, despite no matches taking place. The first occurred when it became clear that COVID-19 would lead to competition

postponement. To date, researchers have overlooked, or assumed, that supporters *perceive* the structure in which their team's success occurs to be legitimate (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Inoue et al., 2022). Prior social psychological research indicates that the legitimacy of status differences between groups is related to shared understandings about a superordinate category (the PL in this case; Weber et al., 2002). Completion of the competition using non-standard methods (e.g., modified games, shortened league structure) initially devalued supporters' evaluations of LFC's success and status, despite the team not playing any further matches. As such, this contribution demonstrates that structure and context are more important to the ways in which success is evaluated than previously considered.

The second change in evaluations developed prior evidence on the temporality of success (Delia, 2015). Two related social and psychological processes underpinned this contribution: (1) as noted above, supporters experienced social identity threat linked to perceptions about the legitimacy of the competition structure; and (2) out-groups consistently derogated LFC's success because of (1). As a result of these two related processes, supporters responded using collective storytelling and elements of social creativity to restore in-group distinctiveness (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The inductive strand of our analysis demonstrated how supporters used collective empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2005)—a concept not previously linked to success—to rework out-group criticisms about the #taintedtitle and asterisk so that they could be internalised as features of in-group identity. Through this process supporters were able to re-evaluate the asterisk favourably, despite doubts about competition legitimacy. To extrapolate this point, it is unlikely that New England Patriots fans focussed on deflategate when they won Super Bowl XLIX weeks later.

Our second aim concentrated on why being awarded a championship transcended the objective advantage LFC had in the PL. On a superficial level, the subjective distinction between a large points advantage and the conferral of a title is self-evident. However, beneath

this surface, there are important aspects of in-group status, and experiences of success that have not been animated in prior work. Previous literature invokes a position that consistent positive outcomes and competition superiority would be perceived positively by supporters (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Jensen et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2008). As Keri (2015) showed, this was not the case when the Montreal Expos objective advantage did not translate into a Conference title in 1994. The change in context LFC and their supporters experienced granted us a three-month period in which to observe the distinctive qualities of winning championships through the *prism of supporters' discussions about what they feared losing* if the objective points advantage did not translate into the award of a PL title. Through this, we built on prior evidence that not all victories have the same value to supporters (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015).

Winning a championship is additive to individual victories, or streaks of matches, because it immortalises intergroup status advantages in history. In social psychology, status comparisons are dynamic (Turner et al., 1994); however, we showed that some achievements are held in collective memory as more permanent representations of in-group status. Such achievements are also opportunities to create new “consumptive vehicles” (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010, p. 596), to symbolise past achievements in the present. As well as celebrations of success in the present, we developed Decrop and Derbaix’s (2010) findings, showing that winning championships is socially and psychologically meaningful because it contributes to *cumulative* status comparisons with out-groups that are more ‘salient’ in terms of historical performance (e.g., Manchester United) than rivals in a season (e.g., Manchester City).

We also developed theorising about the sociality of success. Winning championships adds to objective performance records, because of the moments of social solidarity and celebration it, typically, enables. Before COVID-19, sport spectatorship *was* a fundamentally collective activity (Lock & Funk, 2016). However, COVID-19 prevented collective

consumption at the end of the 2019-2020 season. The context we explored was opportune because it stripped away features of success that are typically present and, therefore, overlooked by researchers. Therefore, we have shown that the moment shared by players, coaches, and supporters when a championship is awarded has such value, because an *ultimate shared goal* and *point of intergroup distinctiveness* becomes a reality.

Building on Decrop and Derbaix's (2010) observation that pride ensues from achievements that are meaningful collectively and personally, we showed the importance of another social layer to experiences of success. In a non-pandemic time, people rarely attend sport alone (Aveni, 1977). We show that achievement is experienced at a level that intersects the individual and collective levels described in prior work (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). Relational groups are the product of journeys on which friends and family members have experienced the highs and lows of sport consumption *with* meaningful others. This represents the culmination of a journey that assembles a series of successes into a moment of in-group distinctiveness shared in relational groups.

Managerial implications

Prior to 2020, the PL—and most major sporting leagues—had not navigated a global pandemic on the scale of COVID-19. As such, the uncertainty and doubt about concluding the competition was understandable. It is unlikely that COVID-19 will be the last pandemic (Mason & Friese, 2020). Therefore, governments (that legislate for acceptable behaviour during pandemics), governing bodies, and sport leagues need to ensure that—in future pandemics and other disasters (e.g., climate events)—there is a clear structure in which supporters can reconcile and understand intergroup dynamics. While we focussed on the experiences of LFC supporters, six teams (Brighton and Hove Albion, West Ham United, Watford, AFC Bournemouth, Aston Villa, and Norwich City) faced the possibility of relegation to the Championship (i.e., the league below the PL). Beyond Europe, other teams

faced different threats. For example, the National Hockey League's traditional rivalries were disrupted because of the necessary formation of contrived Canadian and U.S. divisions.

Moving forward, league officials and strategists need to consult, plan, and legislate around the context of their competition structure so that if future pandemics or disasters impact sport, the implications are clear for clubs and supporters from the outset to minimise uncertainty.

Limitations and future research

There are three main limitations and areas for future work. First, we investigated a research context that was unusual, but not without precedent. This is a strength of our study—as it allowed us to investigate new features of success and in-group status—and a limitation, because the broader transferability of our findings is unclear. We recommend that greater attention is paid to nuance and subjectivity in supporters' interpretations of success (building further on Decrop & Derbaix, 2010; Delia, 2015). Furthermore, we would encourage experimentalists to investigate the downstream effects of different kinds of success. For example, meaningless games, streaks of games, conference wins, or championships could be compared to decipher the outcomes of different kinds of success on supporters. This line of work would benefit from longitudinal designs that explore how the degree of certainty about championship outcomes (e.g., the number of points needed to secure a title reduces) affects BIRGing and other behaviours. Second, our contributions are based on one study of a single supporter base, and we acknowledge a contextual dimension to our findings. Competitions with conference, play-off, and finals structures may yield different conclusions. In the future, researchers might investigate the features of success we have shown to be meaningful elsewhere to assess transferability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Third, it is plausible that all successful teams perceive league structures to be legitimate (although our data challenges this idea). However, our contribution offers potential to innovate in future work on the effects of success. One, by manipulating competition

legitimacy to see how it affects supporter evaluations of success. Two, through exploring how supporters of unsuccessful teams use evaluations of out-group illegitimacy to protect their social identity after failure.

Conclusion

Our purpose was to extend social identity theory and literature on the intergroup status dynamics associated with team success. We have contributed new knowledge about how supporters perceive in-group status when objective performance does not change, but context does. Furthermore, we have shown that winning leagues and championships is additive to winning individual fixtures, or streaks of matches because it immortalises status and enables social releases of emotion as an ultimate shared goal becomes a reality. We have also shown that context is important to the ways in which supporters interpret and evaluate their team's successes. This subject is ripe for development in the future.

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