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From Loving the Hero to Despising the Villain: Sports Fans, Facebook, and Social Identity Threats

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This research explored how University of Cincinnati football fans used Facebook to manage a social identity threat arising from head football coach Brian Kelly leaving the school to become the head coach at the University of Notre Dame. A thematic analysis of 717 wall postings in the “Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly” Facebook group was conducted. Results revealed that fans responded to this social identity threat in the following ways: (a) rallying, (b) stigmatizing, (c) victimization, (d) intimidation, and (e) degradation. The results suggest that social media sites are prime vehicles for sports fans to collectively manage social identity crises. Social media enables fans to perpetuate messages that elevate group distinctiveness, minimize in-group issues, and derogate out-group members.

American college football is an immense economic driver that generates exorbitant revenues for academic institutions. For example, the University of Texas generated \$71 million in profit for the 2010–11 season (Smith, 2011). These figures are, in large part, attributable to one central figure—the head football coach, who is visibly positioned as the “face” of the team. Not surprisingly, proven college football coaches command significant

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salaries and are generally the highest paid employees at their respective academic institutions. However, multimillion-dollar salaries lie outside the budget of many institutions and a significant economic disparity exists between collegiate athletic programs. Head coaches at schools with limited resources have to “do more with less.” Head coaches in these circumstances who obtain success soon become desirable targets for schools with larger revenue streams. These head coaches are enticed with exorbitant contracts, making it difficult to fault them for capitalizing on their desirability when they elect to leave their current school.

When the coach voluntarily leaves for another school, it is a crushing blow for fans. This departure presents fans with uncertainty about the future success of the football program, and the potential loss of esteem and recognition creates a social identity threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). How sports fans manage these threats using social media, a growing avenue for sports fans to communicate (Dart, 2009; Galily, 2008; Sanderson, 2011), is the focus of the current research.

BRIAN KELLY, THE MAGICAL SEASON, AND DEVASTATING DEPARTURE

The 2009 college football regular season was most memorable for the University of Cincinnati. Cincinnati finished the regular season undefeated and ranked third in the college football polls. Despite not playing for the national championship, Cincinnati earned a Bowl Championship Series (BCS)¹ invitation to the Sugar Bowl to face the University of Florida, the defending national champion. These accomplishments generated considerable excitement among Cincinnati fans, as this level of success was unprecedented. This zenith quickly dissipated when rumors surfaced that head coach Brian Kelly was a leading candidate to become the head coach at the University Notre Dame. Notre Dame, arguably the most storied college football program in the United States, had fired head coach Charlie Weis on November 30, 2009 (Brady, 2009). On December 10, 2009, during the team’s annual awards banquet, Kelly announced that he had accepted the Notre Dame coaching position, a declaration that prompted several players to

¹The BCS is the pinnacle of college football’s postseason. The conference champions of the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East, Big 12, Big 10, Southeastern Conference, and Pacific-10 Conference gain automatic bids, and two “at large” teams also are selected. Playing in the BCS is lucrative for athletic conferences, as each team selected for a BCS bowl generates a payout of approximately \$17 million for their conference, that is then divided amongst the members of the conference.

immediately walk out of the event. These players informed reporters that their wrath stemmed from Kelly's assurances that he was staying at Cincinnati (Whiteside, 2009).

During his introductory press conference, Kelly further enflamed the anguish among the Cincinnati players and fans by stating that Notre Dame was his ultimate career destination. Kelly then regaled the press with accounts of listening to Notre Dame football as a youth and stated that his family knew "this is a dream for me" (Weiss, 2009). The downward spiral for Cincinnati fans and players culminated in the Sugar Bowl as Cincinnati played a noncompetitive game against Florida, losing 51–24. Kelly's decision triggered diverse reactions from Cincinnati fans. One gathering place for discussion was a Facebook group entitled "Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly." This group functioned as a meeting place where Cincinnati fans could collectively manage the social identity threat created by Kelly's departure.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sports Fans and Identification

Identification occurs when media users perceive that they share similarities with a celebrity (Fraser & Brown, 2002; Soukup, 2006). For sports fans, these bonds occur with athletes, sports figures (e.g., coaches, broadcasters), sports teams, and sporting venues (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994; Wann, 2006a; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). For many people, sports fandom is an integral social identity component (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). As identification blossoms, fans increasingly correlate their self-esteem and social identity with athletes' and sports teams' performances, characterized by fans using terminology such as "we" and "my" when describing sports performances (Cialdini et al., 1976; Sanderson, 2008). Not surprisingly, when athletes and teams are successful, fans more overtly express their identification with "winners," whereas they invoke distance when athletes and teams are unsuccessful (Partridge, Wann, & Elison, 2010).

Identification engenders prosocial outcomes such as increasing interpersonal connections, enhancing social life satisfaction, and reducing loneliness and alienation (Wann, 2006b) but also elicits maladaptive behaviors (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). In some cases, identification becomes so intense that some fans are willing to engage in hostile and criminal acts toward opposing teams and players to provide their team with a competitive advantage (Wann et al., 2005). Highly identified fans also are more likely to be verbally abusive toward opposing fans and referees during sporting events

and to feel the need to consume alcohol at sporting events (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Wakefield and Wann (2006) found that highly identified fans are more likely to enact dysfunctional behaviors at sporting events and are heavy consumers of sports media formats that encourage confrontation (e.g., talk radio).

Although sports talk radio, athletic contests, and pep rallies are popular contexts where fandom is traditionally displayed, fandom is also a prominent topic on social media sites. Via social media, fans promote sports (McCarthy, 2011) and defend athletes from perceived unwarranted attacks (Sanderson, 2010a). Sports fans' presence on social media is not lost on sports teams, who use these channels to engage and cultivate relationships with fans (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011).

Social Media Sites and Sports Fans

The exponential growth of social media over the past decade has been well documented (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Social media are "architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration and community" (Meraz, 2009, p. 682), and are characterized by

activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. . . . Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios. (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 6)

Sports fans employ social media to build community and promote preferred representations of athletes and sports figures. Wilson (2007) analyzed an Internet discussion board devoted to the United States' Major League Soccer organization and discovered that virtual communities formed around franchises lacking strong identities. Community building was facilitated by the interactive features of the discussion board as fans engaged in meaningful discussions about professional soccer's struggle to gain mainstream acceptance in the United States. Similarly, Ferriter (2009) examined fan narratives posted on retired National Football League players' *Wikipedia* pages and found that fans used these digital spaces to (a) collectively celebrate and debate the athletes' achievements and (b) construct representations of the athletes that fueled future interactions with other participants.

Athletes and sports figures are using social media to encourage interaction with fans (Sanderson, 2011). For example, on April 30, 2010, National

Basketball Association player Chris Bosh asked his Twitter followers to offer input about his pending free agency, by asking, “Where should I go next season and why?” To what extent Bosh considered fan responses, if at all, in his eventual decision to leave the Raptors and join the Miami Heat is unknown. The importance, however, lies in the ability for fans to directly respond to an athlete’s request for information, an opportunity that would be unlikely in face-to-face contexts. Similarly, Phoenix Suns player Jared Dudley asked his Twitter followers for input on how the Suns could beat the Los Angeles Lakers during the 2010 Western Conference Finals (at the time, the Lakers were ahead two games to none): “If there are 2 things we need to do better to win game 3 what are they? Be specific. What do y’all see out there?” Dudley indicated that he had more than 600 responses ranging from humorous commentary to pleas for the Suns to play better defense and improve their shooting percentages (Young, 2010).

Although interactions on social media sites can be positive, they also are marked by conflict, mirroring characteristics of face-to-face sports discussions (End, 2001; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). For instance, Davis and Carlisle-Duncan (2006) observed interactions between people in an online fantasy sports league and discovered that participants frequently derogated other participants by characterizing them as being feminine and/or homosexual. Sanderson (2008) observed negative parasocial interaction occurring on former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling’s blog as people criticized Schilling for his overt religious pronouncements and vocal support for president George W. Bush and the United States Republican party. Social media sites provide sports fans with media channels wherein they can distribute commentary, connect with other fans, and interact with athletes and sports figures—capabilities that are particularly meaningful when social identity threats occur.

Social Identity Threats and Sports Fans

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals have both personal and social identities, and one’s social identities are linked to demographic classifications or organizational memberships (Turner, 1982). With respect to group association, people tend to gravitate toward social groups that have attributes that align with their self-concept (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Huggins, 2009). Group membership, then, becomes a source of self-esteem that is bolstered by negatively labeling divergent, or “out”-groups (Turner, 1975). Through both exchanges with out-group members and in-group events, group members may encounter identity threats that jeopardize their perceived social standing. Threats vary in

severity based on the degree to which social identity is devalued, negatively stereotyped, or discriminated against (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1999) classified social identity threats as either (a) value threats—messages or actions that undermine the value of group membership and that attack shared group values, norms, and practices; or (b) distinctiveness threats—perceptual changes that undermine a group's uniqueness or positions them as remarkably similar to out-groups. As social identity is strongly tied to group belonging, when social identity threats emerge, members feel vulnerable (Cohen & Garcia, 2005), and insecurity results leading to group members enhancing in-group favoritism and identification (Brown & Ross, 1982; Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) offered the following strategies that can be called upon to manage social identity threats: (a) individual mobility—characterized by in-group members attempting to move to higher status groups; (b) social creativity—marked by group members seeking positive distinctiveness that does not necessarily require a change in actual social position, such as comparing the in-group to the out-group on a new dimension, or changing the valence of values and attributes of the group; and (c) social competition—characterized by group members searching for positive distinctiveness through direct competition with the out-group.

Social identity threat management also is a function of group identification and commitment. Highly identified group members are more likely to display elevated in-group favoritism after receiving negative feedback (Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001), including the display of overt behavioral responses such as derogating the out-group (Branscombe & Wann, 1994) and promoting stronger group affiliation (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). With respect to group distinctiveness threats, highly identified group members employ high self-stereotyping (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1999) and incite conflict between the in-group and out-group (Ellemers et al., 2002). For highly committed group members, uniqueness is essential and therefore, these individuals willingly accept negative reactions from in-group members as a justifiable consequence for preserving group distinctiveness (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Brian Kelly's departure created both a value threat and distinctiveness threat (Branscombe et al., 1999) for Cincinnati fans. With respect to a value threat, Cincinnati football was experiencing unprecedented success—esteem that Cincinnati fans had never experienced. When Kelly (viewed as the architect of that success) left for perceived greener pastures, it diminished the perceptual worth of Cincinnati football. That is, Kelly's move fostered perceptions that even at its pinnacle, and in spite of Notre Dame's recent lackluster performance, Cincinnati was less desirable than Notre Dame.

Cincinnati fans also held out hope that they would avoid similar fates of other football programs that experience a resurgence—losing their coach to a larger competitor. Kelly led Cincinnati football to unprecedented success, and fans were enjoying their newfound status as a big-time college football program. Once Kelly left, Cincinnati was no different than other football programs that had coaches who left for perceived “bigger and better” opportunities, and fans were faced with uncertainty about Cincinnati’s sustainability as an elite college football program.

To manage this uncertainty, many Cincinnati fans turned to a Facebook group entitled, “Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly.” The commentary within this group offered rich data to explore how sports fans use social media to manage social identity threats. To guide this investigation, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How do fans respond to a social identity threat arising from a coach who voluntarily leaves their sport team?

METHOD

Data Collection

Data were obtained from wall postings in the “Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly” Facebook group. There were several reasons this particular group was selected. First, Facebook is the most popular social media site, with more than 845 million active monthly users and an average of 483 million active daily users (Facebook, 2012). Based on this demographic data, it seemed plausible that Facebook would be a prominent gathering place for Cincinnati fans to discuss Kelly’s departure. Second, this group had sizeable membership (3,768 people) suggesting that there would be a sufficient number of responses from diverse individuals (e.g., some Facebook groups have minimal membership, and postings are dominated by just several users). Third, given the name of the group and the language used in the group description (e.g., placing a photograph of Kelly on the group page with the caption “Liar, Liar”) it appeared group members were invested and committed to Cincinnati football and therefore likely to view Kelly’s exit as a social identity threat.

Data Analysis

At the time the “Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly” group was accessed, there were 1,077 wall postings. All postings were copied from Facebook and pasted into a single-spaced Microsoft Word document, which produced

104 pages of data. The postings spanned 5 months, 4 days, 4 hours, and 22 minutes (December 10, 2009–May 14, 2010). These dates were selected because December 10, 2009, was the day Kelly announced he was leaving and was the date that posts began appearing in the community, and May 14, 2010, was determined to be a sufficient length of time for participation. When accessed on this May date, the 1,077 posts were deemed a sufficient sample. All community posts, at the time of analysis, were included in the sample. Postings ranged from one word to 356 words ($M = 32.01$). To answer the research question, a thematic analysis, using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was conducted. Each wall posting served as the unit of analysis. Each posting was initially read to gain a sense of how participants were responding to the social identity threat created by Kelly's departure. During this process, postings that did not contain messages meaningful to the study (e.g., spam, commentary about other sports stories, $n = 360$) were excluded from analysis. This left 717 postings available for analysis.

The postings were then microanalyzed and classified into emergent categories based on the ways that participants were reacting to this social identity threat. After the initial categorization of data, the author returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Themes were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and the author compared and reduced themes as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. In addition, due to the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the author allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. This decision was made as some postings included multiple messages that could not definitively be classified into one category. Whereas some postings did have clear messages, others included several topics. For example, one posting described Kelly's betrayal, then proceeded to denigrate Kelly with problematic labels. Thus, rather than determining the superior messages, postings were treated in a complementary rather than competitive fashion, to holistically capture the multiple messages embedded in these postings.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Analysis revealed that participants responded to this social identity threat in the following ways: (a) rallying, (b) stigmatizing, (c) victimization, (d) intimidation, and (e) degradation. Table 1 provides an illustration of each

TABLE 1
Participant Themes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>No. of incidents</i>	<i>Example</i>
Rallying	87	“Its time to support the team and not mention the coach’s name again” (15).
Stigmatizing	56	“You say ‘its fuckin ND’like their still good or its still 1970 . . . Get out from under your rock and realize UC would and will beat ND this year, last year, etc” (635).
Victimization	172	“Hope Notre Dame realizes how much of a lying, hypocritical asshole Brian Kelly is” (14).
Intimidation	158	“fuck you brian kelly . . . enough said” (418).
Degradation	76	“suck my ass kelly you piece of shit” (7).

theme and its frequency in the data. To indicate where a wall posting fell in the data set, a number is attached to each exemplar. For example, a posting with the number (200) indicates the 200th posting in the data set. Postings are reported verbatim from the data; spelling and grammatical errors were left intact.

Rallying

Some fans reacted optimistically to Kelly’s exit, encouraging their peers to demonstrate collective strength. These efforts reflected a social creativity strategy, as participants contended that Cincinnati football encompassed more than one person and that through adversity, cohesion between the team and fan base would increase. Examples included, “I hope the players use this as motivation and beat Florida and show the country that it is the players not the coaches who make the difference” (606); “Let’s show him the mistake he made and **CHOMP THE GATORS**” (570); and “were gunna win the sugar bowl and show him we dnt need his sorry ass” (244). Others declared that Cincinnati’s success would endure, reducing Kelly’s role in achieving elite status, “We Will Replace BK And Continue Where We Ended . . . Winning Big East Chapionship Year In and Year Out” (43); “Cincy has the potential to be even better then ever in the next few years and they will still get great recruits next year, probably top 5 in the country” (388); and

come on UC fans!!! we don’t need kelly!!! we have all the talent we need and more! they say we don’t have prestige, but one day soon they’ll be looking up at US! we don’t need kelly! together with the fans and the talented players and whatever coach may come our way, we will build a bearcat empire!!!! (138)

Some fans conveyed support for the players who walked out of the team banquet following Kelly's announcement, the moment Kelly became a clear "outsider." For instance, "i give a thumbs up to Mardy² for walking out of the banquet" (594); and "i love that mardy did that he isnt gonna put up with that shit" (378). Others noted that "the team still needs our support...- Let's rally and beat the Gators!!!" (340); "right now we need to focus on the players and support our team as they face FLORIDA! BEAT THEM GATORS" (850); and "lets just beat Florida without him go BEARCATS!" (920).

For these individuals, Kelly's departure was not so much a threat as it was a motivational opportunity for Cincinnati fans to promote collective strength. These fans contended that Cincinnati's place among college football's elite programs was a result of collective efforts, not Kelly's coaching abilities. Therefore, Cincinnati was unique because success emanated from the players and fans, not a coach. In other words, Cincinnati was different from other programs that lost influential coaches because Cincinnati's success would be sustained through the positive efforts of group members, and as this success endured Kelly's perceived contributions would correspondingly decrease. The rallying displayed by group members also demonstrates how in-group favoritism can manifest positively when social identity threats occur. Kelly's exit was seen as a positive rather than a negative event, and these individuals responded by encouraging and supporting their peers to be resolute and steadfast in supporting the team. In-group positivity accelerates collective self-esteem and coping when social identity threats occur (Wann & Grieve, 2005) a route that these fans followed. Researchers have speculated on ways that highly identified fans can maintain positivity in the face of social identity threats (Wann & Grieve, 2005), and rallying and encouraging other fans, a form of in-group favoritism, provides one answer to that question. Yet not all fans saw opportunity. Indeed, many participants maintained Cincinnati's uniqueness by stigmatizing their newfound out-group—the University of Notre Dame.

Stigmatizing

Threats to group identity prompt members to restore in-group uniqueness (Branscombe et al., 1999), and this occurred in the data as fans perpetuated Cincinnati's distinctiveness by denigrating Notre Dame (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). For some, this involved elevating Cincinnati's football

²Mardy Gilyard was a senior wide receiver for the Cincinnati team and one of most vocal players who chastised Kelly for leaving the program.

program above Notre Dame's, positing that in actuality Kelly had stepped down, rather than up, the career ladder. Examples included "notre dame has a dead football program its not coming back and UC is here to stay. fighting irish my butt, they're fighting for one win these days" (100); "notre dame = a bad football team and cincinnati = a good one. oh wait, that's not an analogy . . . it's reality" (987); and "Because ND is so delusional, they've forgotten they're not a football school anymore!!" (589). Other comments invoked more hostile language to differentiate Cincinnati from Notre Dame such as, "notre dame, their supporters, and bk can eat shit. the world and cincinnati will/would be better without you" (452); and "notre dame sucks ass" (96).

Cincinnati's superiority was further bolstered as participants ridiculed Notre Dame's affiliation with the Catholic Church.³ For instance, "the bearcats are in another bcs bowl and undefeated while notre dames molesting alter boys right now and not playing football because they went 6-6" (151) and "how many more nuns and preachers and their sex slave alter boys ND has that all important when recruiting i guess" (898). Fans also asserted Cincinnati's geographic superiority by mocking South Bend, Indiana (Notre Dame's location), "Why would anyone want to live in South Bend???" (766); "South Bend is terrible. It's an armpit of a town" (924); while one person suggested that Notre Dame alumni were responsible for the United States' economic woes:

oh yeah i forgot ND grads are mostly in the fin industry and banks and business and how are all those doing right now, oh wait there so corrupt that they led our country into a recession and then got bailout and now are paying them back so they can resume there raping and pillaging of the average american while funding fox news so the propaganda can keep the retarded average americans on their side now i see what ND stands for. (881)

These individuals positioned Notre Dame as the antithesis of desirability—the extreme opposite of Cincinnati. Thus, people affiliated with Cincinnati were free from associations with a losing football team at a university with an undesirable religious affiliation and location. Such commentary dramatically elevated Cincinnati's profile, which then lessened the stigma of Kelly leaving as Cincinnati was superior to, and distinct from, Notre Dame. This behavior reflects vicarious personalism (Cooper & Fazio, 1979), a reaction that manifests when group members perceive that another group's actions are intended for them, leading to intensified negative evaluations of out-group members. Many fans clearly took Kelly's exit personally, and Notre Dame, as

³Notre Dame is affiliated with the Catholic Church.

the instigator, became a viable target for Cincinnati fans, who seized the opportunity to frame Notre Dame as an immoral, greedy, and corrupt institution. This behavior depicts the significant social identity investment these individuals possessed with the Cincinnati program. These attachments fostered perceptions that Kelly's departure was an act of betrayal and abandonment. Accordingly, fans positioned themselves as victims who had been significantly harmed by the selfish actions of a once beloved in-group member.

Victimization

Although college football coaches have a track record of denying that they are taking another job only to ultimately do so, some people were genuinely surprised when Kelly announced his departure. These participants responded by using social creativity to frame Cincinnati players and fans as victims of Kelly's treason, positioning loyalty and honesty as preeminent group values that Kelly willingly violated. Some offered brief sentiments emphasizing Kelly's disloyalty such as, "Brian Kelly, you have betrayed us" (141); "BK lied to the players and lied to the city" (41); and "Brian Kelly is a traitor, you let everyone down" (219). Kelly was also labeled as "benedict kelly" (523); a "sellout" (45, 107); and a "Back stabbing liar" (519) who "broke one of the 10 commandments... do not lie" (331). Considering that Kelly left in the midst of preparations for the Sugar Bowl, some fans lamented that he left the team "high and dry" (137, 144) and had "abandoned" (953) them before "the biggest game of their lives" (866). One fan poignantly summarized these collective feelings by stating, "It's sick that you can do this to these boys at a moment in their lives where they needed you most" (218).

Other fans framed Kelly's exit as being driven by greed, vilifying him as a selfish person who was consumed with the need for unnecessary riches. In doing so, Kelly was positioned as lacking the requisite altruism expected of group members, and was therefore "a lying, greedy piece of shit, who put himself before the team, the city, and his family" (338) and a "greedy sell out" (196). Still others declared, "you can't buy heart... you can buy liars though" (731); "i guess money is higher than honor" (559); "He likely could have gotten a salary of 1 million + if he renegotiated here. Best for him and my family my ass, no one needs any more than that" (66); "He got paid over a million when you include appearances and publicity and everything. I would love to make that kind of money, but most of us never will" (994); and "How much money does he NEED TO BE HAPPY?" (402).

This commentary fueled perceptions that Cincinnati players and fans had been betrayed because Kelly violated another group norm—sincerity. Kelly

was painted as a hypocrite whose deeds were far removed from his words. For example, “its not right to say to the players you are staying when you are just going to leave” (87); “Brian Kelly is going to Notre Dame to teach honesty, values and teamwork to his NEW team? Yeah good luck with that!” (515); and

The problem with Kelly is that he never once said that he was going to leave for Notre Dame. He never said anything besides that he likes Cincinnati and he’s happy here. Then he tells the players he is leaving, packs his bags, and goes to ND. I understand it may be his dream to coach there, but he could be the coach at... UC for decades and become something great! Instead he opts for the more money and leaves his pride behind him. No official statement to UC or anything. Just leaves. Disrespectful. (476)

As fandom and social identity grow more entwined, fans invest significant emotional resources that appear to culminate in perceptions that sports figures and teams will reciprocate fans’ devotion. When an athlete, sports personality, or team violates these expectations, it can be a traumatic experience for fans (Hyatt, 2007). As fans cope with this perceived betrayal and subsequent social identity threat, they may bolster group identification by enacting collective responses to restore positive social identity (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). In this case, Kelly’s actions were framed as violating group rules and values, and fans enhanced group identification by perpetuating notions that he had betrayed Cincinnati and abdicated his group responsibility—behavior that firmly entrenched him as an out-group member. With this newfound position, participants were free to degrade Kelly to further elevate their social identity (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Tajfel, 1982). This antisocial behavior became both a popular and disconcerting mechanism by which fans viciously attacked Kelly.

Intimidation

Highly committed group members respond to social identity threats by engaging in overt behavior such as derogating the out-group (Branscombe & Wann, 1994), and this certainly manifested in the data. Fans vividly distanced their affiliation with Kelly by uttering a host of aggressive commentary, much of which became profane and threatening. For instance, “fuck brian kelly” (42); “FUCK YOU BRIAN KELLY” (664); “wow kelly ur an ass hole” (621); “Brian Kelly can eat shit and die” (195); and “brian kelly is a piece of SHIT!” (1023). Some participants emphatically disassociated Kelly (literally) from Cincinnati, “GET THE HECK OUT OF

OUR CITY BRIAN KELLY” (121); “u dont like the nati enough to stay get the fuck out” (419); “GET OUT OF HERE AND DON’T YOU DARE EVER COME BACK!” (619); and “you had a home in cincy but now you have created an enemy! get the fuck out of our city!” (562).

Highly identified group members also respond to social identity threats by inciting conflict (Ellemers et al., 2002). This occurred as some fans voiced a desire to physically attack Kelly and/or share how others were attacking him. For example, “I feel like punching him in his fucking face” (506); “i live in brian kelly’s street and people put up FUCK YOU signs in his yard” (232); and “Im burning down this motherfuckers house” (622). These threats and exploits, while troubling, nevertheless garnered comments such as, “Anyone egg his house yet? If not could you post his address?” (700) and “I support you in whatever efforts you take against the Kelly household” (698). Still others shared their desire for Kelly’s demise—both at Notre Dame and as a person. For instance, “hopefully he fails at notre dame, and hell be living in a box for the rest of his life” (680); “kelly I hope u royally fuck up ur career at ND, and go down in college football history as the biggest fucking fool ever” (556); “Brian Kelly you’re an ass I hope you lose every game at notre dame and then die a tragic death” (641); and “I hope he and the Irish die in a fiery plane crash on their way the flight out to get their asses kicked by USC [University of Southern California] this season” (500).

To some degree, it is understandable that fans were upset with Kelly leaving. Yet for these individuals, their social identity investments in Cincinnati football were so intense that Kelly’s move warranted physical aggression and desires for his demise. Fischer, Haslam, and Smith (2010) found that when a collective threat to a salient social identity occurs, people respond aggressively and are more willing to support hostile action, an outcome that was certainly the case here. Sports fans have a history of engaging in aggressive behavior during athletic contests (Hughson, 2000; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Rocca & Vogl-Bauer, 1999), and it seems that this behavior conveniently translates to social media sites, where it is conveniently incited and enflamed by others. The vitriol expressed by group members and the validation of these statements created participative norms of verbal aggressiveness and physical retaliation. Indeed, participants were encouraged to feel and act violently and aggressively. However, the derogation and disassociation was not solely limited to verbal threats and desires for physical harm. Some fans characterized Kelly with feminine and homophobic references, offering another competitive avenue (albeit a troubling one) to distance him from the group.

Degradation

Some individuals disassociated Kelly from Cincinnati (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999) by classifying him with misogynistic and homophobic slurs, another way to champion Cincinnati's superiority. Some labeled Kelly as "a bitch" (156); a "douche" (474, 504, 970); a "nerd fag" (39); and a "faggot" (822). Others declared, "You will choke like a little bitch!" (555); "fuck brian kelly for lying to all our players like a bitch" (989); "brian kelly is a back stabbing bitch" (690); and "Brian Kelly you are a fucking douchebag liar fat fuck!!!!!!" (821). Some fans invoked graphic sexual language to further castigate Kelly, by characterizing him as "a fucking dick" (14); a "super dick" (452); and a "cocksucking sellout" (642), whereas one fan emphatically stated, "i fucking hate you COCKSUCKER!!!" (823). Additional commentary included, "HEY BRIAN KELLY EAT A BAG OF DICKS AND CHOKE ON A GIANT BLACK DILDO YOU PIECE OF SHIT" (28); "May the leprechaun⁴ at Notre Dame have his way with you in ways that cannot be mentioned on Facebook" (687); and "brian kelly can lick the wonder cheese from under my nuts" (239).

The vitriol in these postings reflects the disproportionate negativity that results from vicarious personalism. Cooper and Fazio (1979) noted that vicarious personalism leads to biased perceptions that include the distortion of given behaviors. In that vein, these people viewed Kelly's exit as a personal affront, which warranted classifying him as a "bitch" or with other sexual and homophobic terms. Thus, Kelly was quite distinct from Cincinnati as he epitomized feminine and homosexual character traits. For these fans, derogation was a popular avenue to protect their social identity. It was insufficient to merely voice displeasure with Kelly's decision, it was necessary to use extremely hostile and inflammatory language to strip away his masculinity. Such inferences suggested that any masculinity he demonstrated while at Cincinnati was false, a mere charade that ended when he showed his true colors by leaving the program.

DISCUSSION

This research explored how University of Cincinnati fans managed a social identity threat stemming from head football coach Brian Kelly's voluntary departure. The study offers several important implications for social identity theory and the role of social media in responding to social identity threats. First, this study demonstrates social identity theory's utility in

⁴The leprechaun is the University of Notre Dame's mascot.

understanding fan behavior when key sports figures voluntarily leave teams. Fans' social identity, although obviously tied to wins and losses, clearly extends beyond the game and encompasses personnel decisions. Kelly was visibly positioned as the source of Cincinnati's success, and his willing exit threatened the football team's unprecedented success. Accordingly, fans reacted by minimizing Kelly's influence in Cincinnati's success and emphatically extinguishing him from the group. These expressions were reinforced and supported by other participants, creating group norms that suggested the proper reaction was to deride and lambaste Kelly.

This leads to a second implication as the hostile and incendiary commentary depicts how group communication norms incite and reinforce derogatory communication. Hall and LaFrance (2012) observed that perceptions of group communication norms influence members' willingness to derogate others. In this venue, derogation functioned competitively as fans appeared to be pushing the limits to see whose condemnations were most scathing. Much of this language was encouraged and reinforced, elevating the discourse in the group. Whereas people may express these feelings in other contexts, social media offers some compelling factors that explain such reactions to social identity threats.

Social media is easily accessible, and therefore people can conveniently and quickly vent and dispense commentary with little filtering. Although fans have certainly uttered derogatory comments at sporting events, these behaviors may be censured by others or deterred by factors such as the wandering presence of law enforcement. In addition, a fan may initially be upset with an athlete or sports figure and want to voice these feelings but then eventually calm down. In this case, social media seemed to intensify rather than reduce anger, an outcome that has occurred on sports websites (Davis & Carlisle-Duncan, 2008; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). With this group, communication norms were clearly identified at the onset, and escalated as like-minded fans reinforced degrading comments. Group members behave in accordance with normatively supported attitudes (Terry & Hogg, 2001) and this certainly occurred in this forum as fans displayed how quickly a revered group member can become despised.

As participants responded to this social identity threat by employing misogynistic and homophobic references, social media provides a populated forum for ideologies of masculinity in sport to perpetuate (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Hughson, 2000; Meân & Kassing, 2008b; Nylund, 2004). Although competition is a prime avenue where this language is enacted, it is increasingly occurring in online domains (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2010b). Within the current study, participants vilified Kelly by positing that he had acted in a manner befitting a "bitch," suggested he was a "faggot" and invoked other graphic homophobic slurs (e.g.,

cocksucker). These sentiments were reinforced as other participants confirmed these representations and then added their own troubling commentary. Thus, attacking Kelly with homophobic and misogynistic slurs and graphic sexual language became a prominent way to disassociate him from the identity of the Cincinnati team and derogate both Kelly and Notre Dame, the newfound out-group. Positioning masculinity as a differentiating social identity dimension perpetuates ideology that both female and gay athletes lack the requisite masculinity to succeed in sports competition (Burstyn, 1999; Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese, & Balaji, 2009; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Participants in this forum distinguished Kelly from Cincinnati by ascribing traits to him that are considered to be “outside” sporting norms (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Bolstering social identity through misogynistic, homophobic, and graphic references, further embeds problematic masculine identities in sport (Meân, 2001; Meân & Kassing, 2008a).

Social media also represents a gathering place that fans can own (Booth, 2008) and control responses to social identity threats. Phua (2010) found that online media use had a significant positive effect on collective self-esteem and fan identification and observed that mediated sports consumption allows fans to foster positive social identities through bolstering in-group distinctiveness and out-group derogation. In this domain, fans came together to remediate collective self-esteem, both pro-socially and antisocially. Social media enabled fans to maintain more control over the identity of Cincinnati football by highlighting the success of the program and disassociating Kelly with those achievements. For example, fans ameliorated social identity by subjugating any possible internal reasons for Kelly’s departure (e.g., the possibility that Notre Dame was, in fact, a better job). Social media, then, is a venue where fans selectively self-present (Walther, 1996) their social identity after it has been threatened.

As fans seek to assuage social identity threats stemming from an athlete or sports figure willingly leaving their team, social media offers viable avenues to rally other fans and bolster group distinctiveness. Sports fans often have intense reactions when athletes and sports figures willingly elect to leave a sports team (as evidenced by Cleveland Cavalier fans burning LeBron James’s jersey in the streets of Cleveland after he announced he was joining the Miami Heat). This may occur, as Cialdini (2008) noted, because many sports fans have hidden personality flaws and poor-self concepts and seek prestige through associating with others’ achievements instead of their own. Other reasons also exist, but regardless of the rationale underpinning the reaction, social media is now a prime venue where fans manage social identity threats.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research is limited in that it explored only one social media forum in response to one sports personality leaving a team. With the proliferation of social media channels, it would be important to incorporate responses from multiple social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. The intentions of the group in this research were quite apparent, but other venues may offer more divergent messages (such as people supporting Kelly), and it would be worthwhile to determine what similarities and differences exist across various social media sites. Next, the communication here was overwhelmingly critical of Kelly, and it would be important to examine how group dialogue influences social identity threat responses. There were some minority voices in this forum who questioned the way participants were behaving. For example, “Be thankful for what Kelly has done at UC, 2 BCS appearances in 3 years, a perfect regular season. Brian Kelly is one of the best things that UC football has ever experienced” (109); “ND is his dream job. He didn’t lie to anyone. UC admin told the players before Kelly had a chance. Brian Kelly is still a quality man.” (760); and “how is he a liar? im a uc fan and hes not a liar” (983). These voices, however, were ignored and chastised, but perhaps other venues may offer more balanced conversation. For example, fans may encourage their peers to avoid using victim labels and instead look for ways that the social identity threat can be managed in a positive fashion.

In terms of future research, are there certain athletes or sports figures who fans correlate with their social identity more than others and thus, whose voluntary departures are more problematic? Kelly’s departure generated much angst from fans, but other college football coaches who leave for better jobs barely generate a blip. For instance, after the 2011–12 college football regular season, University of Houston head coach Kevin Sumlin accepted the head coaching position at Texas A&M University. Sumlin had led Houston to a one-loss season and a consistent high ranking in the college football polls, yet there was no Facebook presence for Sumlin (or another coach in a similar situation—Al Golden who left Temple University for the University of Miami). One coach who did generate similar reactions to Kelly was Lane Kiffin who after the 2009–10 season left the University of Tennessee to accept the head coaching position at the University of Southern California. Facebook groups such as “Lane Kiffin sucks – UT will live on!”; “I hate Lane Kiffin for leaving Tennessee”; and “Lane Kiffin sold out.” Tennessee has a rich tradition and nationally recognized fan base, so that may account for why Kiffin’s departure generated contempt, whereas Sumlin’s and Golden’s did not. Other factors that may dictate the degree of the social identity threat experienced include the coach’s ability to lead the program

to uncharted waters (e.g., BCS bowls) and whether the coach leaves for another collegiate job or a professional job.

Next, there may be other behavior by athletes or sports figures that constitute social identity threats for fans. For instance, shortly after the public announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall posted several messages on Twitter cautioning people about celebrating bin Laden's death and declaring that only one side of the story was being presented. Steelers fans posted a host of messages on the team's Facebook page lambasting Mendenhall, and although Mendenhall remained on the team, Steelers fans may no longer view Mendenhall as "one of them." A similar example occurred after the Boston Red Sox missed the 2011 Major League Baseball playoffs after holding a sizeable lead in the wild card standings. Shortly after the Red Sox were eliminated, reports surfaced that pitchers Josh Beckett, Jon Lester, and John Lackey had been drinking beer, eating fried chicken, and playing video games in the clubhouse during games. To what extent fans view actions such as these as social identity threats and the degree to which they respond (is disassociation temporary or permanent?) is an important direction for future work.

Finally, there was no indication that community members with opposing views on Kelly's departure interacted with one another to persuade others to adopt their response. This may be a function of the overwhelming critical commentary in the group, and perhaps participants who took an optimistic approach wanted to be spared the wrath of other community members. Future research should assess the "discussions" that occur among community members. Perhaps cautious commentary only provokes more hostile responses, or it may that there are boundaries and community members weed out nonconformists in coming to a collective social identity threat response. Such work would shed important light on the process of social identity threat management.

CONCLUSION

Social media will continue to blossom as a channel for sports fans to communicate with one another, athletes, sports figures, and sports reporters. These media outlets have become prime avenues for expressing social identity and mitigating social identity threats that arise from an athlete or sports figure voluntarily leaving the team. It is paramount that researchers attend to the dialogue occurring on these sites when events take place that may trigger social identity threats to help explain fan behavior. Opportunities to do so will be plentiful. Identification with sports teams is indeed intense, blinding fans' better judgment, which speaks to the importance of continuing this line of research.

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