



Social Identity Threat and Withdrawal Intentions in Competitive Recreational Groups

Dr. Julian Everett Mercer

Senior Research Fellow in Sport and Social Identity Psychology
Department of Group Behaviour and Sport Psychology
Redwood Center for Recreational Sport Research
San Diego, California, USA

Article Type: Sport and Social Identity Psychology Research Article

Submitted: 09-October-2024

Revised: 09-November-2024

Accepted: 10-December-2024

Published: 17-December-2024

Abstract: Competitive recreational sport lies between informal physical activity and highly structured competition. Participants may join such groups for enjoyment, social interaction, personal development, physical activity, and achievement, yet continued participation may become difficult when group experiences threaten important aspects of social identity. This paper examines the conceptual relationship between social identity threat and withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups. The framework draws primarily on social identity theory and self-categorization perspectives, while also considering group identification, perceived acceptance, status evaluation, interpersonal treatment, social belonging, and perceived support. Existing sport psychology research indicates that group identification is relevant to behavioural engagement, social support, stress appraisal, leadership, and sport-related identity across both recreational and competitive settings. Because no original participant dataset was supplied, the manuscript adopts a simulation-based conceptual design. Illustrative withdrawal-intention scores of 2.18, 3.47, and 4.52 represent low, moderate, and high social identity threat, respectively. A second simulated analysis assigns contribution indicators of 52% to social identity threat, 44% to group belonging, and 37% to perceived group support. These values are conceptual illustrations rather than empirical estimates. The analysis proposes that identity threat may increase withdrawal intentions when participants feel devalued, insecure in their group position, insufficiently recognized, or socially disconnected. However, identity threat does not necessarily produce withdrawal, because participants may seek recognition, reinterpret negative experiences, strengthen group identification, or rely on alternative social identities. Future research should distinguish identity threat from general dissatisfaction and examine

how leadership, peer relationships, status perceptions, and group support influence withdrawal over time.

Keywords:

Social Identity Threat; Withdrawal Intentions; Recreational Sport; Competitive Recreation; Group Identification; Athletic Identity; Sport Participation; Group Belonging; Social Support; Sport Psychology;

1. Introduction

Background

Competitive recreational groups occupy a distinct position within the wider sport environment. Participants take part in organized activities that combine competition, cooperation, social interaction, and personal achievement, but usually without the highly structured demands of elite sport.

People may join these groups for several reasons, including enjoyment, physical activity, social connection, skill development, achievement, identity expression, and a sense of belonging. Because these motives often overlap, withdrawal from a recreational group should not automatically be explained by reduced enjoyment or declining physical interest.

The social structure of recreational sport is especially important because participation takes place within groups. Individuals become known as teammates, opponents, regular participants, newcomers, experienced members, leaders, or more peripheral members.

Over time, these positions may become part of how participants see themselves.

Social identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process because group membership may become part of an individual's self-concept and carry emotional and evaluative meaning.

Research applying social identity perspectives to sport has shown that group identification is relevant to sport behaviour, group development, social support, stress appraisal, and leadership.

The importance of identity is not limited to elite athletes.

Research comparing elite athletes, recreational participants, and non-participants has shown differences in athletic identity across levels of participation. These findings suggest that sport may influence self-perception even when participation occurs at a recreational level.

This is important because recreational groups may appear informal while still providing meaningful sources of identity and belonging.

Social identity threat occurs when a person feels that a valued group identity is being questioned, devalued, weakened, or placed at risk.

Within recreational sport, such experiences may develop through repeated social comparison, exclusion from decision-making, negative evaluation from teammates, perceived loss of status, lack of recognition, conflict with group norms, or the feeling that one's contribution is no longer valued.

Identity threat does not require explicit rejection.

Subtle changes in how other members communicate, respond, include, or evaluate a participant may also create uncertainty about their position within the group.

The effect of identity threat may depend on how important the group is to the individual.

A participant who sees the team or group as an important part of their identity may respond more strongly to negative social experiences than someone who views participation as a minor part of life.

The same event may therefore produce different reactions.

For example, performance criticism may be interpreted as normal feedback by one participant but as evidence of reduced acceptance by another.

Withdrawal intentions are an important behavioural outcome in this context.

Withdrawal intention refers to the likelihood that a participant considers reducing involvement, attending less frequently, changing groups, or leaving the activity entirely.

Withdrawal intention is different from actual dropout because an intention does not always result in behaviour.

Even so, withdrawal intentions may represent an important stage in disengagement. Participants may begin distancing themselves psychologically before changes in attendance become visible.

Research on sport dropout supports the relevance of social identity to continued participation. Murray and Sabiston examined adolescent girls involved in community sport and found that sport enjoyment helped explain the relationship between social identity and later sport dropout.

Although the study involved a younger population and a different sport setting, it provides evidence that social identity may influence continued participation.

Research on sport transitions also suggests that group memberships provide psychological resources.

Studies of athletes leaving competitive sport indicate that losing an important athletic identity may create adjustment difficulties, while maintaining existing group memberships or developing new ones may support adaptation.

These findings suggest that sport-related group membership may have consequences extending beyond participation itself.

The present paper applies these ideas to competitive recreational groups, where participation is voluntary but still socially structured.

The central proposition is that withdrawal intentions may increase when participants feel that their position within a valued group has become uncertain, weakened, or devalued.

Identity threat should not, though, be treated as a direct or unavoidable cause of withdrawal.

Participants may remain involved, strengthen other identities, reinterpret negative evaluations, seek greater recognition, or attempt to improve their position within the group.

Problem Statement

The principal problem addressed by this paper is the insufficient distinction between general dissatisfaction with recreational sport and social identity threat within recreational sport groups.

Participants may think about leaving because of scheduling difficulties, financial pressures, physical fatigue, changing interests, or competing responsibilities.

These reasons differ from withdrawal intentions that emerge because a participant feels their group membership, status, or social value has been threatened.

A second problem concerns the tendency to explain recreational sport participation mainly through individual motivation.

Motivation remains important, but recreational sport groups are social environments.

Participants observe each other, compare performance, receive feedback, form relationships, and develop informal status positions.

These social processes may influence whether membership continues to feel rewarding and personally meaningful.

A third problem concerns competitive comparison.

Competition creates repeated opportunities for evaluation.

Participants may compare performance, recognition, playing opportunities, leadership roles, and perceived contribution.

When these comparisons repeatedly suggest that a participant holds a less valued position, social identity threat may develop.

A fourth problem is the limited distinction between identity threat and objective exclusion.

A participant may feel socially devalued even when formal membership remains unchanged.

They may continue attending sessions while believing that they are no longer respected, included, or valued.

In contrast, another participant may experience an objectively difficult situation without interpreting the experience as a threat to identity.

A fifth problem concerns the gradual nature of withdrawal.

Withdrawal intentions may develop through repeated experiences rather than a single negative event.

Understanding this process requires attention to changes in group identification, belonging, perceived support, recognition, and status over time.

The present paper therefore addresses the following central problem:

How may social identity threat influence withdrawal intentions among participants in competitive recreational groups, and what social processes may strengthen or weaken this relationship?

Research Motivation

The first motivation for examining this relationship is the growing recognition that sport participation involves social and psychological processes alongside physical activity.

The social identity approach to sport psychology treats group membership as an important influence on sport-related behaviour and links identification with social support, stress appraisal, group development, and leadership.

The second motivation comes from evidence that sport-related identity matters outside elite competition.

Research comparing elite athletes, recreational participants, and non-participants suggests that recreational sport may also contribute to self-perception and identity development.

Competitive recreational groups therefore provide an appropriate setting for examining identity-related participation decisions.

The third motivation concerns the practical value of studying withdrawal before actual dropout occurs.

Once a participant leaves a group, understanding the social experiences that contributed to the decision becomes more difficult.

Withdrawal intentions therefore provide an important intermediate outcome for examining disengagement while participants are still involved.

The fourth motivation concerns group management.

Recreational groups often depend on voluntary participation, informal leadership, and ongoing social relationships.

Understanding social identity threat may help explain why groups with similar competitive structures experience different levels of participant retention.

2. Literature Review

Social Identity in Sport

Social identity theory proposes that people develop part of their self-concept through membership in social groups. In sport, this may involve identification with a team, club, training group, sport community, or broader sporting category.

Social identity becomes especially important when group membership shapes how participants interpret experiences and make behavioural decisions.

Rees, Haslam, Coffee, and Lavalley's social identity approach to sport psychology argues that sporting groups should not be viewed only as external features of the sport environment. Group membership may become part of a participant's self-concept and influence behaviour, group development, social support, stress appraisal, and leadership.

This perspective differs from explanations focused mainly on individual personality or motivation.

It suggests that sport experiences also carry social meaning. The same training session, competitive result, or interpersonal comment may affect participants differently depending on how they interpret the experience in relation to their group membership.

Stephen et al.'s scoping review further demonstrated the breadth of social identity research in sport. Their review included 45 studies examining the social identity performance hypothesis and considered how social identity has been defined and measured within sport research.

This body of research supports the importance of group norms, shared values, collective goals, and group-based resources in understanding sport behaviour.

Athletic Identity and Recreational Participation

Athletic identity refers to the extent to which a person identifies with the role of being physically active or athletic.

Although athletic identity has often been studied among competitive athletes, research suggests that recreational sport may also contribute to how people understand themselves.

The development of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale provided an important framework for examining this construct. Later research has explored athletic identity in relation to participation, psychological responses, and transitions in and out of sport.

Studies comparing elite athletes, recreational participants, and non-participants have found stronger athletic identity among both elite and recreational groups than among people who do not participate in sport.

These findings suggest that recreational sport may contribute to self-perception even when participants do not consider sport their main life role.

This distinction is important for the present study.

Competitive recreational participants may attach meaningful identity value to group membership even when sport represents only one part of their wider self-concept. As a result, threats to group membership or status may still carry psychological significance.

Social Identity Threat

Social identity threat refers to concerns that a valued social identity is being negatively evaluated, weakened, or challenged within a particular setting.

Within competitive recreational groups, identity threat may develop through interpersonal treatment, performance comparisons, perceived exclusion, uncertainty about status, or conflict with group expectations.

The key process involves interpretation.

Poor performance alone does not necessarily create identity threat. It becomes identity-relevant when participants interpret the experience as evidence that they are less valued, less competent, less accepted, or less legitimate as group members.

Identity threat may also emerge when a participant's social position changes.

Someone who previously held an informal leadership role may experience threat if their influence declines. A long-standing member may also feel threatened if newer participants begin receiving greater recognition or responsibility.

Competitive sport provides frequent opportunities for these comparisons because performance is visible and feedback often occurs quickly.

Competition may therefore increase awareness of social evaluation.

Even so, competitive comparison does not automatically create identity threat.

In groups that emphasize development, mutual support, and shared achievement, differences in performance may be interpreted as opportunities for improvement.

The meaning attached to competition therefore plays an important role in determining whether comparison becomes threatening.

Group Identification and Belonging

Group identification refers to the psychological importance a person attaches to group membership.

Participants who strongly identify with a group are more likely to interpret group experiences as personally meaningful.

Strong identification may provide both benefits and vulnerabilities.

It may strengthen belonging, support, meaning, and motivation. At the same time, negative group experiences may have greater emotional impact when membership forms an important part of self-definition.

The social identity approach to sport highlights this dual role.

Group membership may provide valuable psychological resources while also making group-based rejection, exclusion, or status loss more personally significant.

Belonging is closely related to identification but should be treated as a separate concept.

A participant may continue to identify strongly with a group while feeling that current relationships within the group are weakening.

This distinction is important because withdrawal intentions may develop when group identification remains high but perceived belonging begins to decline.

Social Support and Sport Participation

Social support may help participants remain involved by providing encouragement, companionship, information, and practical assistance.

Within recreational groups, teammates may help individuals interpret setbacks, maintain motivation, and preserve a sense of connection.

Research on social identity leadership also suggests that leaders may influence attendance and participation by strengthening group identification.

Stevens and colleagues examined 583 participants from sport teams and exercise groups and studied relationships among identity leadership, group identification, and attendance.

These findings suggest that leadership may influence continued participation partly through social identity processes.

A leader who strengthens a shared understanding of group membership may help participants feel more connected to the group.

Social support may also reduce the impact of identity threat.

If a participant receives negative performance feedback but continues to experience strong support from teammates, the experience may be interpreted as temporary criticism rather than evidence of social rejection.

Competitive Context and Social Comparison

Competition creates regular opportunities for participants to compare themselves with others.

These comparisons may involve performance, competence, recognition, status, or contribution to the group.

Social comparison may be upward, downward, or lateral.

Upward comparison involves comparing oneself with higher-performing participants.

Downward comparison involves comparing oneself with lower-performing participants.

Lateral comparison involves comparison with others viewed as relatively similar.

Such comparisons are not automatically harmful.

They may provide useful information, motivation, and opportunities for learning.

Repeated unfavourable comparisons, though, may contribute to identity threat when participants begin to believe that their position within the group is declining.

The effect of comparison also depends on group norms.

A development-focused climate may treat differences in performance as opportunities for improvement.

A strongly status-oriented environment may instead communicate that social value depends heavily on competitive performance.

This issue is especially relevant in recreational sport because participants often have different goals.

Some may place greater value on competition and achievement, while others prioritize enjoyment, social connection, or physical activity.

A single competitive norm may therefore affect group members in different ways.

Sport Enjoyment and Withdrawal

Sport enjoyment plays an important role in continued participation.

Participants who continue to enjoy an activity may remain involved despite occasional negative experiences.

Murray and Sabiston's research provides relevant evidence.

Their study of adolescent girls participating in community sport examined social identity, sport enjoyment, and later dropout. The findings indicated that enjoyment helped explain the relationship between social identity and later sport participation.

Although the study involved a different population from the competitive recreational groups considered here, it demonstrates that social identity may influence continued participation through emotional experiences such as enjoyment.

The present framework extends this idea by proposing that identity threat may reduce enjoyment or belonging and, in turn, increase withdrawal intentions.

Identity Leadership

Leadership may influence whether group experiences feel supportive or threatening.

Social identity leadership refers to leadership behaviours that represent, strengthen, develop, and embed a shared sense of group identity.

Research in sport and exercise has linked identity leadership with group identification, attendance, performance-related outcomes, self-efficacy, confidence, resilience, participation, and lower burnout.

The evidence base continues to develop, although stronger causal research is still needed.

This literature is relevant because identity threat may be shaped by leadership as well as by peer interactions.

Leaders influence which behaviours receive recognition, whose contributions are valued, and which norms define legitimate group membership.

Leadership practices may therefore strengthen belonging or contribute to uncertainty about a participant's position within the group.

Multiple Group Memberships

Sport participation usually exists alongside several other social identities.

Individuals may also identify with family groups, friendship networks, educational or professional communities, cultural groups, and other recreational organizations.

Having multiple group memberships may provide protection when one identity becomes threatened.

Research on athletes undergoing sport transitions suggests that maintaining existing social groups or developing new memberships may reduce some of the difficulties associated with losing an important athletic identity.

This finding has implications for recreational sport.

Participants with several meaningful sources of belonging may have alternative forms of social support when one recreational group becomes difficult or threatening.

In contrast, participants whose social life is heavily centred on one recreational group may experience identity-related problems within that group as more significant.

3. Research Gap

The existing literature shows that social identity is relevant to sport behaviour, group processes, leadership, participation, and sport transitions. Research has also linked social identity with sport enjoyment and later dropout. Even so, several important gaps remain.

First, much of the existing research focuses on elite athletes, organized sport teams, youth sport, or transitions out of sport. Competitive recreational groups receive less direct attention despite combining voluntary participation, competition, social interaction, and relatively informal group structures.

Second, social identity and identity threat should not be treated as the same concept. Strong group identification may support continued participation when the social environment is positive. Social identity threat, by contrast, involves feeling that a valued identity is vulnerable, questioned, or devalued. More research is needed to understand when strong identification supports persistence and when identity-related experiences increase thoughts of withdrawal.

Third, withdrawal intentions differ from actual dropout. Participants may consider leaving after an identity-threatening experience but continue attending because they still value friendships, enjoyment, convenience, achievement, or other aspects of participation.

Fourth, group belonging requires clearer attention. A participant may strongly identify with a group while still feeling poorly accepted within it. Measuring identification without assessing belonging may therefore miss an important part of the withdrawal process.

Fifth, competitive comparison may act as an important contextual mechanism. Existing social identity research highlights the importance of group norms and social evaluation, but the

specific role of competitive comparison in producing identity threat within recreational groups requires further study.

Sixth, leadership may shape how participants interpret competitive experiences. Supportive leadership may frame setbacks as opportunities for development, while unsupportive leadership may intensify concerns about status or acceptance. Existing research links identity leadership with group identification and attendance, but stronger longitudinal and causal evidence is still needed.

The principal research gap is therefore the limited integration of social identity threat, group identification, belonging, competitive comparison, leadership, and withdrawal intentions within competitive recreational groups.

4. Novelty / Proposed Contribution

The proposed contribution is a Social Identity Threat–Withdrawal Pathway Model for competitive recreational groups.

The conceptual sequence is:

Competitive Group Context → Social Evaluation → Perceived Identity Threat → Reduced Belonging / Enjoyment → Withdrawal Intention

A protective pathway is also proposed:

Group Support + Identity Leadership → Stronger Belonging → Threat Reappraisal → Continued Participation

The model does not assume that social identity threat automatically leads to withdrawal. Participants interpret identity-related experiences within a wider social environment that includes relationships, leadership, group norms, and alternative sources of belonging.

The proposed framework identifies four principal conditions that may shape the consequences of threat: group identification, perceived belonging, social support, and leadership climate.

Strong group identification may increase the personal importance of group-related experiences.

Perceived belonging may influence whether participants continue to see themselves as accepted and valued members.

Social support may provide emotional and interpersonal resources for dealing with negative experiences.

Identity leadership may influence how competition, evaluation, and group membership are understood within the group.

The novelty of the framework lies in treating withdrawal intention as the outcome of an interaction between identity vulnerability and social resources, rather than as a direct response to poor performance or other negative competitive experiences.

5. Research Objectives / Research Questions

The primary objective is to examine the conceptual relationship between social identity threat and withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups.

The secondary objectives focus on how group identification, belonging, peer support, competitive comparison, and leadership may shape this relationship.

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between perceived social identity threat and withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups.
- To distinguish social identity threat from general dissatisfaction and reduced enjoyment.
- To examine the relationship between group identification and identity-related responses to competitive experiences.
- To examine perceived group belonging as a potential mechanism associated with withdrawal intentions.
- To examine perceived peer support as a potential protective factor.
- To examine competitive social comparison as a contextual source of identity threat.
- To examine identity leadership as a potential influence on group identification and continued participation.
- To develop a conceptual framework for longitudinal research on identity threat and recreational sport withdrawal.

Research Questions

1. How may social identity threat influence withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups?
2. How does group identification influence responses to identity-threatening experiences?
3. What role does perceived belonging play in the relationship between identity threat and withdrawal intentions?
4. How may peer support shape responses to identity threat?

5. How does competitive social comparison contribute to identity threat?
6. How may identity leadership influence the relationship between identity threat and participation?
7. How does sport enjoyment interact with identity threat and withdrawal intentions?
8. Do participants with multiple valued group memberships respond differently to identity threat?
9. How does identity threat change across repeated participation?
10. Under what conditions might identity threat result in persistence rather than withdrawal?

6. Methodology

Research Design

The present paper adopts a simulation-based conceptual research design. The design brings together social identity theory, self-categorization perspectives, athletic identity research, social support perspectives, social comparison processes, and sport participation literature to develop a theoretically grounded explanation of withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups.

The manuscript does not report a completed empirical study because no original participant dataset was supplied. The numerical values presented in the Results section are simulated only to show how the proposed variables might be represented in a future empirical analysis.

The framework treats social identity threat as the main explanatory construct and withdrawal intention as the primary outcome.

Group identification, belonging, perceived support, enjoyment, and identity leadership are treated as variables that may influence, explain, or change the strength of this relationship.

This conceptual approach is consistent with sport psychology research showing that social identities are relevant to group behaviour, social relationships, and continued sport participation.

Dataset / Sample

No original participant dataset was collected or analyzed.

For future empirical research, the target population should include adults who regularly participate in competitive recreational groups, such as community leagues, recreational clubs, amateur competitive teams, or other organized competitive activity groups.

Participants should have enough experience within the group to evaluate their social position, relationships, and sense of belonging.

Recruitment should include groups that differ in competitiveness, organizational structure, leadership style, and participant turnover.

Researchers should also collect group-level information because social identity threat partly depends on the wider social environment.

The sample should include participants with different levels of group identification so that researchers can examine whether the importance of group membership influences responses to identity threat.

Tools / Techniques

A future empirical study should use validated measures of social identity and group identification where suitable.

Social identity threat should be assessed through items examining whether participants feel that their membership, status, value, or legitimacy within the group is being questioned or undermined.

Perceived belonging should measure feelings of acceptance, connection, and psychological membership within the group.

Peer support should assess encouragement, interpersonal assistance, and access to supportive relationships.

Sport enjoyment should measure positive feelings and enjoyment associated with participation.

Withdrawal intention should assess the likelihood of reducing attendance, changing groups, leaving the group, or discontinuing participation.

Identity leadership should be assessed through an established identity-leadership framework where appropriate.

Actual participation should also be measured through attendance records, membership continuation, or other behavioural indicators.

Experimental Procedure

The present manuscript does not report a human-participant experiment.

A future longitudinal study could begin with a baseline assessment of group identification, belonging, enjoyment, perceived support, and initial withdrawal intention.

Participants could then complete short repeated assessments after competitive sessions.

Researchers could also record relevant group events, such as changes in playing roles, leadership changes, interpersonal conflict, competitive outcomes, or changes in status.

At later measurement points, researchers could assess whether perceived identity threat increased or decreased and whether withdrawal intentions changed at the same time.

Actual attendance could then be compared with participants' reported withdrawal intentions.

Qualitative interviews could provide further insight into how participants interpret socially threatening experiences within the group.

Such a design would help distinguish short-term dissatisfaction from more persistent identity-related disengagement.

Evaluation Metrics

The principal outcome should be withdrawal intention score.

The primary predictor should be social identity threat score.

Secondary variables should include group identification, belonging, peer support, sport enjoyment, identity leadership, perceived status, and competitive comparison.

Actual withdrawal or continued attendance should also be measured as behavioural outcomes.

For longitudinal research, mixed-effects models would be suitable for examining changes in identity threat and withdrawal intentions while accounting for participants being grouped within teams or recreational groups.

Mediation analysis could examine whether belonging or enjoyment helps explain the relationship between identity threat and withdrawal intention.

Moderation analysis could test whether group identification, peer support, or identity leadership changes the strength of this relationship.

Survival analysis could also be used when the outcome involves the time taken until actual withdrawal from the group.

7. Results

Table 1. Illustrative Withdrawal Intentions across Social Identity Threat Conditions

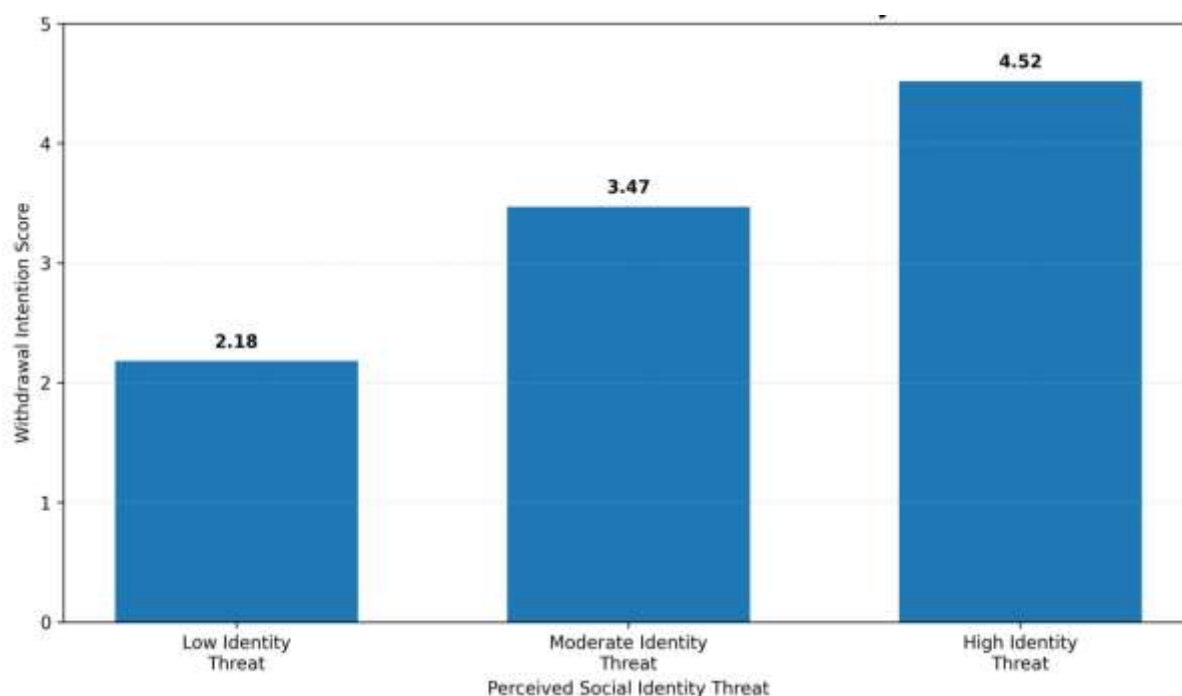
Social Identity Threat Condition	Illustrative Withdrawal Intention Score
Low Identity Threat	2.18
Moderate Identity Threat	3.47
High Identity Threat	4.52

The illustrative values show a gradual increase in withdrawal intention as perceived social identity threat becomes stronger. The score rises from 2.18 under low identity threat to 3.47 under moderate identity threat and 4.52 under high identity threat.

This pattern represents a hypothetical positive relationship between social identity threat and withdrawal intention. Participants who feel that their status, acceptance, or value within the group is increasingly threatened may become more likely to consider reducing their involvement or leaving the group.

These values are included only for conceptual illustration. They do not represent empirical findings, measured effects, causal estimates, or population-level relationships.

Graph 1. Illustrative Withdrawal Intentions Across Social Identity Threat Conditions



The graph shows a gradual increase in withdrawal-intention scores across the three simulated social identity threat conditions.

These values are included only for illustration and do not represent empirical findings.

Table 2. Illustrative Social-Psychological Factors Associated with Withdrawal Intentions

Social-Psychological Factor	Simulated Contribution (%)
Social Identity Threat	52
Group Belonging	44
Perceived Group Support	37

The simulated values present social identity threat as the strongest illustrative factor associated with withdrawal intentions, with a value of 52%. Group belonging follows at 44%, while perceived group support has an illustrative value of 37%.

Social identity threat represents concerns about being devalued, excluded, or losing status within the group. Group belonging reflects the extent to which participants feel accepted and connected. Perceived group support represents the encouragement and interpersonal assistance participants experience from other group members.

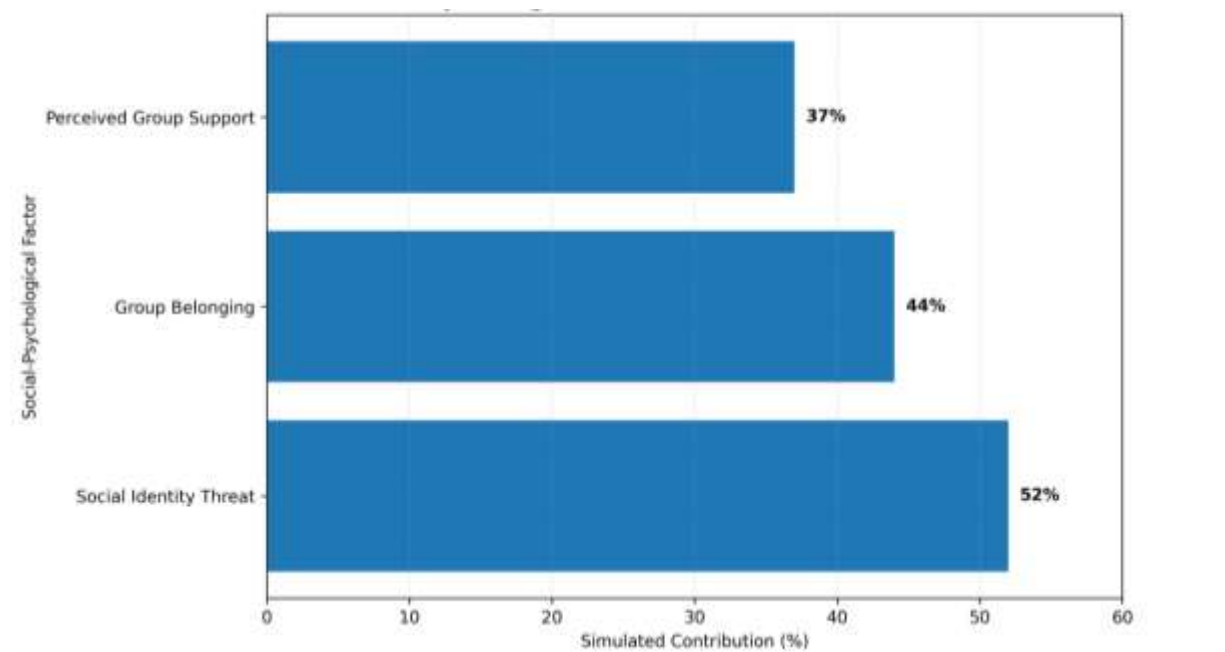
These factors should not be interpreted as independent causal effects. They may interact with one another. For example, strong belonging and group support may reduce the effect of identity-threatening experiences on withdrawal intentions.

The values are independent illustrative indicators. They do not represent regression coefficients, explained variance, causal contributions, or percentages that sum to 100%.

Graph 2. Illustrative Social-Psychological Factors Associated with Withdrawal Intentions

The graph provides a visual comparison of the three simulated factors. Social identity threat has the highest illustrative value at 52%, followed by group belonging at 44% and perceived group support at 37%.

The graph is intended only to demonstrate how these variables might be compared in a future empirical study. The values should not be treated as measured effects or population estimates.



The graph presents the simulated relative values assigned to social identity threat, group belonging, and perceived group support.

Statistical / Experimental Findings

No inferential statistical testing was conducted because no empirical participant dataset was available.

The illustrative withdrawal-intention score rises from 2.18 under low identity threat to 3.47 under moderate identity threat and 4.52 under high identity threat.

The difference between the low and high illustrative conditions is 2.34 score points.

The second illustrative analysis assigns values of 52% to social identity threat, 44% to group belonging, and 37% to perceived group support.

These values are included only for methodological illustration. They do not represent observed effects, statistical estimates, or causal relationships.

The simulated pattern shows how future empirical research might examine whether withdrawal intentions vary according to perceived identity threat.

8. Discussion / Critical Discussion

Results Interpretation

The simulated pattern represents a hypothetical positive relationship between social identity threat and withdrawal intentions.

The illustrative withdrawal-intention score increases from 2.18 under low identity threat to 4.52 under high identity threat.

Although these values are not empirical observations, the pattern fits the theoretical argument that identity-threatening experiences may increase thoughts of disengagement when group membership becomes difficult to maintain psychologically.

The proposed process begins with social evaluation.

Competitive recreational groups create frequent opportunities for participants to assess their own contribution and compare themselves with others.

When these evaluations become linked with social worth, recognition, or legitimacy as a group member, performance information may become identity-relevant.

A participant may therefore interpret repeated low recognition as more than a performance issue.

It may begin to signal that their position within the group is becoming less secure.

This interpretation may weaken belonging and make withdrawal appear more attractive.

Identity threat should not be treated as an unavoidable cause of withdrawal.

Group membership may also provide psychological and social resources that help participants manage difficult experiences.

Strong supportive relationships may help participants interpret negative events as temporary rather than as evidence of rejection.

This helps explain why two people exposed to similar competitive experiences may develop different withdrawal intentions.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The proposed relationship is consistent with research showing that social identity is linked with sport-related behaviour.

Rees and colleagues argued that social identity may become part of self-concept and influence behaviour, group processes, support, stress appraisal, and leadership within sport.

The framework is also consistent with research on athletic identity and participation.

Studies comparing elite, recreational, and non-participating groups suggest that recreational participants may also develop meaningful athletic identities.

This means that threats to sport participation or group membership may matter outside elite environments.

The link with withdrawal is also supported by longitudinal research from Murray and Sabiston.

Their study found that sport enjoyment helped explain the relationship between social identity and later sport dropout among adolescent girls participating in community sport.

Although the population differs from the present focus, the findings show that social identity processes may influence continued participation.

The proposed framework also aligns with research on identity leadership.

Stevens et al. reported relationships among identity leadership, group identification, and attendance in sport and exercise groups.

This supports the idea that leadership may influence continued participation partly by shaping how participants experience group membership.

Research on sport transitions provides further support.

Haslam et al. found that losing an athletic identity was associated with poorer adjustment, while maintaining existing group memberships or developing new ones helped reduce some negative effects.

This suggests that alternative social identities may provide useful psychological resources when one group identity becomes threatened.

Why Results May Differ

Future empirical findings may differ from the simulated pattern because identity threat depends heavily on both individual and group circumstances.

The first factor is group identification. Participants who identify only weakly with a recreational group may experience limited identity threat even when negative group events occur.

The second factor is perceived belonging. Strong belonging may reduce the likelihood that criticism or poor performance is interpreted as evidence of rejection.

The third factor is peer support. Supportive relationships may reduce the psychological impact of competitive setbacks.

The fourth factor is leadership style. Identity-oriented leadership may strengthen shared membership and reduce uncertainty about a participant's place within the group.

The fifth factor is competitive climate. A development-focused environment may frame performance differences as opportunities for improvement, while a strongly status-focused environment may make those differences more threatening.

The sixth factor is sport enjoyment. Participants may remain involved despite identity threat when the activity continues to provide enjoyment and personal value.

The seventh factor is alternative group membership. Participants with several valued social identities may have more psychological options if one group becomes threatening.

The eighth factor is perceived status stability. A temporary decline in performance may be less threatening than a continuing sense of reduced recognition or social status.

The ninth factor is group tenure. Long-standing members may identify more strongly with the group, but they may also have established relationships that protect them from temporary threats.

The tenth factor is actual participation opportunity. Withdrawal intentions may not result in withdrawal when friendships, convenience, or other practical factors continue to support attendance.

9. Research Contribution / Implications

The primary contribution of this paper is the conceptual integration of social identity threat and withdrawal intentions within competitive recreational groups.

Existing sport research has established the importance of social identity for behaviour, group processes, leadership, participation, and transitions.

The present framework extends this work by focusing on the psychological stage that may occur before actual withdrawal.

A second contribution is the distinction between identity threat and general dissatisfaction.

A participant may be dissatisfied with scheduling, cost, or activity structure without feeling that their social identity is threatened.

In contrast, another participant may still enjoy the activity itself but consider leaving because their status, acceptance, or value within the group feels uncertain.

This distinction improves conceptual clarity in research on sport participation.

A third contribution concerns the competitive recreational setting.

These groups combine voluntary participation with visible performance evaluation.

This combination may create a distinctive social environment in which comparison, status, belonging, and identity interact.

A fourth contribution concerns protective social resources.

The framework proposes that belonging, peer support, identity leadership, enjoyment, and alternative group memberships may influence how participants respond to identity threat.

This means the relationship should not be treated as a simple linear pathway.

Practical Implications

Strengthen group belonging: Recreational organizations should create social practices that communicate that participants remain legitimate group members even when performance varies.

Use inclusive leadership: Leaders should promote a shared group identity without treating performance as the only basis for recognition.

Normalize developmental differences: Competitive groups should separate performance evaluation from judgments about personal or social worth.

Encourage peer support: Supportive relationships may help participants interpret setbacks more constructively.

Monitor withdrawal intentions: Groups should pay attention to early signs of disengagement before they develop into actual dropout.

Recognize diverse contributions: Groups should value reliability, encouragement, organization, teamwork, and social participation alongside competitive performance.

Support newcomers: Early group experiences may influence whether new participants develop a meaningful sense of identification and belonging.

Reduce unnecessary status uncertainty: Clear communication about roles and participation opportunities may reduce ambiguity.

Protect recreational motives: Programs should respect participants whose main goals involve enjoyment, health, friendship, or social connection rather than competitive achievement.

Develop multiple pathways to participation: Participants should have opportunities to remain socially involved even when their competitive role changes.

10. Conclusion

Social identity threat provides a useful framework for understanding withdrawal intentions in competitive recreational groups because participation in these settings is behavioural, interpersonal, and identity-related.

Recreational participants may not view sport as their primary identity, but group membership may still become meaningful enough for changes in recognition, belonging, status, or interpersonal treatment to influence decisions about continued participation.

The proposed conceptual model suggests that competitive evaluation may become identity-threatening when participants interpret negative social information as evidence that their position within the group is being devalued.

Under these conditions, reduced belonging, lower enjoyment, or uncertainty about membership may contribute to stronger withdrawal intentions.

Identity threat should not be treated as a direct or inevitable cause of withdrawal.

Supportive relationships, strong belonging, constructive leadership, continued enjoyment, and alternative social identities may change how participants respond.

The illustrative results show a hypothetical increase in withdrawal intention from 2.18 under low identity threat to 3.47 under moderate identity threat and 4.52 under high identity threat.

These numerical values are simulated and do not establish an empirical relationship.

The second illustrative analysis also presents simulated values for social identity threat, group belonging, and perceived group support.

These values should not be interpreted as statistical estimates or measured effects.

The wider sport literature provides a theoretical basis for examining these relationships.

Research on social identity shows that group membership may influence sport-related behaviour, support, stress appraisal, leadership, and group development.

Research on athletic identity also shows that sport may contribute to self-perception among recreational participants.

Longitudinal research linking social identity, enjoyment, and dropout further suggests that social psychological processes matter for continued participation.

The central implication is that withdrawal from recreational sport should not always be explained as a loss of motivation.

In some cases, disengagement may reflect changing social meaning within the group.

Recognizing this distinction may improve future research on retention and encourage recreational organizations to consider belonging, recognition, leadership, and social support alongside standard participation measures.

Future empirical research should use longitudinal designs that combine repeated identity-threat assessments with objective attendance records.

Such research should separate identity threat from general dissatisfaction, examine competitive comparison directly, identify protective social resources, and test whether withdrawal intentions lead to actual disengagement.

11. Limitations

The main limitation of this manuscript is the absence of an original empirical dataset.

The numerical values in the Results section are simulated only for methodological illustration and do not establish statistical significance, causal relationships, or population-level effects.

A second limitation concerns conceptual overlap among social identity threat, group belonging, social support, sport enjoyment, group identification, and perceived status.

These constructs are related, so future research should test whether they remain empirically distinct.

A third limitation concerns the diversity of competitive recreational groups.

Community leagues, amateur clubs, university recreational teams, and informal competitive groups may differ greatly in structure, leadership, and competitive intensity.

A fourth limitation concerns the voluntary nature of recreational participation.

Participants may remain involved because of convenience, cost, location, friendships, or limited alternatives rather than because identity-related concerns have been resolved.

A fifth limitation concerns the difference between withdrawal intention and actual withdrawal.

Intentions may change over time and should not be treated as equivalent to dropout behaviour.

A sixth limitation concerns self-report measurement.

Identity threat and belonging are subjective experiences and may be influenced by memory, mood, or social desirability.

A seventh limitation concerns alternative identities.

The framework recognizes that participants may belong to several groups, but it does not empirically measure the relative importance of those identities.

An eighth limitation concerns competitive intensity.

The relationship between identity threat and withdrawal may differ between low-intensity recreational competition and highly competitive amateur settings.

A ninth limitation concerns leadership.

Leaders may strongly influence group norms, but their effects are difficult to separate from wider organizational structures without suitable multilevel research.

A tenth limitation is that the simulated results do not establish the direction or magnitude of relationships among the proposed variables.

12. Future Work

Future research should use longitudinal designs to examine how social identity threat develops across repeated participation.

Measuring identity threat at several time points would help determine whether it represents a temporary reaction to specific competitive events or a more stable perception of group membership.

Researchers should combine self-report measures with objective participation records.

Attendance, membership continuation, and actual withdrawal would provide behavioural evidence alongside reported withdrawal intentions.

Future studies should distinguish descriptive and evaluative aspects of identity threat.

Researchers should examine whether participants respond mainly to how others actually treat them or to what they believe that treatment means for their social identity.

Social-network analysis may also provide useful insight.

Researchers could examine whether participants with wider or more supportive interpersonal networks respond differently to identity threat.

Competitive social comparison should be measured directly.

Participants could report how often they compare their performance, recognition, or status with other group members and whether those comparisons feel motivating or threatening.

Identity leadership should also be examined as a possible protective factor.

Existing research links identity leadership with group identification and attendance in sport and exercise settings.

Longitudinal and experimental designs would provide stronger evidence about whether leadership changes identity threat and participation over time.

Future research should also examine sport enjoyment.

Existing longitudinal research suggests that enjoyment may help explain the relationship between social identity and dropout.

Research with recreational adults should test whether reduced enjoyment helps explain the relationship between identity threat and withdrawal intention.

Multiple group memberships represent another important direction.

Participants with several valued identities may be less likely to respond to threat in one group by fully withdrawing from sport or social participation.

Qualitative research could also identify the specific experiences participants interpret as identity-threatening.

Interviews may reveal important differences between performance criticism, exclusion, role changes, interpersonal conflict, status loss, and lack of recognition.

Cross-cultural research would strengthen the evidence base because the meaning of competition, group membership, status, and recreational sport may differ across social contexts.

Future intervention studies should also examine whether recreational groups can reduce unnecessary identity threat while preserving legitimate competitive evaluation.

The aim should not be to remove competition.

The aim should be to prevent competitive performance from becoming the only basis through which participants judge their social value and group membership.

13. Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

Funding

No external funding was received for preparation of this simulation-based conceptual manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This manuscript does not report original research involving human participants.

The numerical values presented in the Results section are simulated illustrative values.

Any future empirical research involving human participants should obtain appropriate institutional ethics approval where required and follow suitable procedures for informed consent, confidentiality, privacy protection, and participant safeguarding.

Data Availability

No empirical participant dataset was generated or analyzed for this manuscript.

The quantitative values presented in the Results section are simulated solely for methodological illustration.

References

1. Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 237–254.
2. Bruner, M. W., Sutcliffe, J., Herbison, J., & Martin, L. J. (2020). A social identity approach to enhancing youth development and sport participation. In *The power of groups in youth sport* (pp. 91–105). Academic Press.
3. Carron, A. V., Brawley, L. R., & Eys, M. A. (2002). The group environment questionnaire: Test development, 1968–2002. *Small Group Research*, 33(1), 1–26.
4. Coffee, P., Rees, T., & Haslam, S. A. (2009). Bouncing back from failure: The impact of social identity and group support on resilience. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 27(1), 1–10.
5. Crocker, J., & Major, B. (1989). Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychological Review*, 96(4), 608–630.
6. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.

7. Doyle, J. P., Lock, D., Funk, D. C., Filo, K., & McDonald, H. (2017). "I was there from the start": The identity-maintenance strategies used by fans to combat the threat of losing. *Sport Management Review*, 20(2), 184–197.
8. Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 161–186.
9. Haslam, C., Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Bevins, A., Ravenscroft, I., & Tonks, J. (2019). The social treatment: The benefits of social group interventions in health and social care. *Psychology and Health*, 34(1), 1–24.
10. Haslam, C., Lam, B. C. P., Yang, J., Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys, T., Boen, F., Mertens, N., De Brandt, K., Wang, X., Mallett, C. J., & Fransen, K. (2021). When the final whistle blows: Social identity pathways support mental health and life satisfaction after retirement from competitive sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 57, 102049.
11. Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T., & Haslam, C. (2009). Social identity, health and well-being: An emerging agenda for applied psychology. *Applied Psychology*, 58(1), 1–23.
12. Jetten, J., Haslam, C., & Haslam, S. A. (2012). *The social cure: Identity, health and well-being*. Psychology Press.
13. Kendzierski, D., & Morganstein, M. S. (2009). Test, revision, and cross-validation of the Exercise Identity Scale. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 31(4), 484–507.
14. Martin, L. J., Balderson, D., Hawkins, M., Wilson, M., & Bruner, M. W. (2018). Groupness and leadership in sport. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(1), 1–14.
15. McPherson, B. D., Curtis, J. E., & Loy, J. W. (1989). The social significance of sport: An introduction to the sociology of sport. *Human Kinetics*.
16. Murray, R. M., & Sabiston, C. M. (2022). Understanding relationships between social identity, sport enjoyment, and dropout in adolescent girl athletes. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 44(1), 62–66. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2021-0135>
17. Rees, T., Haslam, S. A., Coffee, P., & Lavalley, D. (2015). A social identity approach to sport psychology: Principles, practice, and prospects. *Sports Medicine*, 45(8), 1083–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-015-0345-4>
18. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed., pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.

19. Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.
20. Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.
21. Stevens, M., Rees, T., & Cruwys, T. (2021). Social identity leadership in sport and exercise: Current status and future directions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 55, 101931.
22. Stevens, M., Rees, T., Coffee, P., Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., & Polman, R. (2018). Leaders promote attendance in sport and exercise sessions by fostering social identity. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 28(9), 2100–2108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.13217>
23. Stephen, S., Coffee, P., Habeeb, C. M., Morris, R., & Tod, D. (2023). Social identity in sport: A scoping review of the performance hypothesis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 67, 102437.
24. Yousaf, S., & Laber, F. (2020). Does international sporting boycott act as a social identity threat? The effects on the national collective self-esteem of Pakistani cricket fans. *SAGE Open*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020931855>
25. Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity: Articulation and significance of multidimensionality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(1), 80–114.
26. Blascovich, J., Mendes, W. B., Hunter, S. B., & Lickel, B. (2001). Stigma, threat, and social interactions. In T. F. Heatherton, R. E. Kleck, M. R. Hebl, & J. G. Hull (Eds.), *The social psychology of stigma* (pp. 307–333). Guilford Press.
27. Branscombe, N. R., Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (1999). The context and content of social identity threat. In N. Ellemers, R. Spears, & B. Doosje (Eds.), *Social identity: Context, commitment, content* (pp. 35–58). Blackwell.
28. Brewer, M. B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(5), 475–482.
29. Cruwys, T., Haslam, S. A., Dingle, G. A., Haslam, C., & Jetten, J. (2014). Depression and social identity: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 18(3), 215–238.
30. Eime, R. M., Young, J. A., Harvey, J. T., Charity, M. J., & Payne, W. R. (2013). A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for

- children and adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 10, 98.
31. Ellemers, N., Haslam, S. A., Platow, M. J., & Knippenberg, D. V. (2003). Social identity at work. In M. A. Hogg & J. Cooper (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social psychology* (pp. 190–214). Sage.
32. Hogg, M. A. (2007). Uncertainty–identity theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 39, 69–126.
33. Hogg, M. A., & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. Routledge.
34. Jetten, J., Haslam, S. A., & Alexander, S. H. (2012). *The social cure: Identity, health and well-being*. Psychology Press.
35. Prichard, I., & Tiggemann, M. (2008). Relations among exercise type, self-objectification, and body image in the absence of obligatory exercise. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 13(4), 480–489.
36. Sabiston, C. M., Pila, E., Vani, M., & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C. (2019). Body image, physical activity, and sport involvement in adolescence. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 42, 1–12.
37. Slater, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2010). Body image and disordered eating in adolescent girls and boys: A review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33(2), 293–304.
38. Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. Academic Press.
39. Turner, J. C. (1991). *Social influence*. Open University Press.
40. Wann, D. L. (2006). Understanding the positive social psychological benefits of sport team identification: The team identification–social psychological health model. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 10(4), 272–296.