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When Your Team is Not Really Your Team Anymore: Identification with a Merged Basketball Club

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In this questionnaire study it was tested to what extent identification with a merged basketball club could be predicted on the basis of six concepts derived from a social identity perspective on mergers. Respondents were 160 fans and 91 youth players of a Belgian first division basketball club that had merged the previous season. A direct multiple regression analysis indicated that, both for fans and youth players identification with the pre-merger club was the best predictor of identification with the new merger club, followed by the perceived success of the merger. Two other concepts emerged as significant, though modest, predictors of post-merger identification for fans and youth players: the perceived necessity of the merger and their satisfaction with the merger process. For the fans, the perceived continuity/representation of the in-group in the merger group was also a significant predictor. Together, the hypothesized predictors accounted for 70% of the total variance in their post-merger identification. This high percentage underlines the relevance of a social-psychological perspective on how sport fans’ react to mergers. For youth players, 61% of the total variance in their post-merger identification was explained, which

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suggests that the processes that facilitate fans and youth players’ post-merger identification are quite similar.

The daily functioning of sport fans can be heavily influenced by the performances of their heroes (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Schwartz, Strack, Kommer, and Wagner (1987) reported that after a win of the German national soccer team, German men expressed more satisfaction with the overall quality of their life than after a draw of that same team. Sloan (1979) showed that basketball fans expressed more happiness after their team had won than after their team had lost. Similarly, Hirt and colleagues (1992) observed that basketball fans expressed a more positive mood and higher self-confidence after their team had won, whereas a loss resulted in the reverse pattern.

At times, being a sports fan is considered to be a matter of life and death. For example, in Reading, U.K., a funeral director offers the sport fans of the local soccer club the opportunity to be buried in a coffin (or ashes urn) with blue and white stripes (i.e., the team’s colors), adorned with the team logo and stadium. The team itself was happy to endorse the new product because many fans ask to be buried in the colors of their favorite team (Taphophilia, 2005). In Spain, the son of a deceased fan of soccer club Betis Seville still takes the ashes of his father to each home game, because this was stated in his will (Berlin-Online, 1995).

Given the above illustrations, the question that we want to answer is what will happen to the fans’ commitment when the team ‘dies’ before the fan does, as is the case in a merger between two or more teams? In this study, we will try to identify which factors predict that the merger team will ‘inherit’ the commitment to the ‘deceased’ pre-merger team.

In the last decades, more and more sports teams have been obliged to merge for various reasons. For example, out of the 128 Belgian soccer clubs who played in one of the four national league divisions in 1960, 53% had been involved in at least one merger by 2001 (Duke & Renson, 2003). According to the sport economist Dejonghe (2001), this percentage will increase if professional soccer wants to survive in Belgium. Also in Belgian basketball, mergers are a common phenomenon: four out of the ten clubs that are currently in the highest national division have been involved in a merger since 1995. Besides formal mergers, it is also quite common in basketball to change the club colors or club name (e.g., because of a new sponsor) or even to move the club to another city (e.g., the Vancouver Grizzlies became the Memphis Grizzlies in the NBA).

This merger trend in sports mirrors the global tendency towards mergers and acquisitions among business organizations, and sports mergers are often justified with the same arguments used for business mergers. However, the majority of these business mergers do not meet the initial goals and are considered to be financial failures (Devoge & Shiraki, 2000). These failures are usually attributed to the strategic and financial (mis)management of the organization, while the impact of personnel resistance towards the new merger is underestimated or even ignored (Cartwright & Cooper, 1992).

There is now a growing realization that employees’ shift of group membership should be steered more carefully to heighten the chances of merger success (e.g., Terry, 2003; Tyler, 1999; van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2002). It has been found that the stronger employees identify with their organization, the more they are willing to act in favor of that organization (e.g., to work harder and longer than is actually required) and they are less inclined to turn over to another organization (Christ, van Dick, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2003; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Research in merger contexts based on the common in-group identity model (Anastasio, Bachman, Gaertner, & Dovidio, 1997; Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993) has revealed that the more employees perceive the merged organization as one
group, the less bias and negative stereotyping they display towards employees of the former pre-merger outgroup.

Unfortunately, research has also shown that mergers have a negative impact on the identification of employees with their organization. For example, experimental studies (van Leeuwen, van Knippenberg, & Ellemers, 2003) as well as field studies (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Monden, & de Lima, 2002) have revealed that individuals identify significantly less with the new merger group than with their former pre-merger group. Although fans cannot be equated with employees of an organization, it seems reasonable to assume that sport fans will also feel threatened when their favorite team merges with another team, and that they will identify less with this merger team than with the original team. The less a fan identifies with a club, the less likely it is that he/she will act in favor of that club (e.g., attend a game; Murrell & Dietz, 1992), which will cost the new club money. Because it is important for a merger team to maintain as many fans of the pre-merger clubs as possible, it is thus in the best interest of this new team to minimize the reduction in fan identification.

Consequently, we will try to distinguish determinants that can help to predict to what extent fans will still identify with their team after it has merged with another team. More specifically, we will look at the merger of sports teams from the perspective of the social identity approach (SIA, Haslam, 2004). This is the most influential social-psychological theory on group processes, incorporating both social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

According to SIA, social identity refers to the groups with which we feel connected, together with the emotional importance and the value we attach to these groups. Whether a specific group membership contributes positively or negatively to our self-concept depends on the relative status of this group. This status is determined by comparing the in-group with a relevant out-group on a relevant comparison dimension. If this comparison turns out favorably for the in-group, this in-group will be allocated a relatively high status, which will contribute to a more positive social identity and hence a more positive self-concept. By contrast, if the comparison turns out in favor of the out-group, the in-group will be attributed a relatively low status, leading to a more negative social identity and self-concept. However, because people strive for a positive social identity, they will actively try to shift the inter-group comparison in favor of their in-group (e.g., by increasing the relevance of the dimension on which the in-group exhibits better performance than the out-group).

Since the 1990s, a considerable number of studies on fan identification have been conducted focusing on how team identification is associated with various strategies to maintain psychological health (for an overview, see Wann et al., 2001). Some of these studies adopted a social identity perspective (e.g., Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Feys, 2002; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), which has proven to be fruitful to understand fan behavior. For example, Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1999) conducted a longitudinal study in which the perceptions of undergraduate students of their university football team were monitored. As predicted, fans with a strong university identity had more biased (i.e., more favorable) evaluations of their team than did fans with a weak university identity. In the present study we will focus on how the social identity approach can help us to understand fans’ reactions to a merger.

According to SIA, individuals strive to belong to high-status groups (i.e., groups that differentiate positively from relevant comparison groups on relevant comparison dimensions). Therefore, one important reason why a merger can be a threat to identification with a merger group is a possible loss in status (Haunschild, Moreland, & Murrell, 1994). Members of a group might fear that the merger will result in a relatively unsuccessful new merger group.
In an experimental study with artificial groups, Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Millet (2005) found that participants were more willing to identify with a new merger group that was attributed a high status than with a merger group that was attributed a low status. In addition, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants, and Feys (2005) conducted a survey study in a high school that had come into existence two years earlier as a merger between a boys’ school and a girls’ school. Among both the pupils and the teachers it was found that the more they considered the merger school as being successful, the more they identified with the new school. In a sports context, team status is highly related to team success. We therefore predicted that the more fans perceived the team as successful or expected that the new merger team would be successful in the future, the more they would identify with this new team (Hypothesis 1).

A second reason why a merger threatens the identification of a fan is that a merger implies that the existing social identity has to be transformed into a new post-merger identity. When two teams merge, big changes take place including the name of the team, the symbols (e.g., team colors, logo), and the internal culture/atmosphere. On the other hand, merger teams usually preserve some of the characteristics of the former pre-merger teams. In a sport context the name and colors are often a combination of the pre-merger teams. Based on the social identity approach, van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen (2002) stated that the more the merger group is perceived as a continuation of the own pre-merger group, the more the individual will identify with this new merger group. Experimental studies (van Leeuwen et al., 2003) as well as field studies (van Knippenberg et al., 2002) have shown that the more the in-group is perceived as being present in the new merger group, the more individuals identify with the merger group.

Nevertheless, we believed that a distinction could be made between three closely related concepts. The first concept is perceived continuity, which refers to the extent to which the new merger group is seen as a continuation of the own pre-merger ingroup. The second concept is relative representation, which refers to the relative contribution of the pre-merger group in the new merger group when compared with the pre-merger outgroup. Relative representation does not necessarily exactly mirror perceived continuity. For example, a merger group may preserve only a limited number of characteristics of both pre-merger groups. In that case, the perceived in-group continuity would be very low. However, the relative representation of the pre-merger group depends on the ratio of in-group to out-group characteristics that are preserved. As long as the number of preserved in-group characteristics is higher than the number of preserved out-group characteristics, the relative representation of the pre-merger group would be considered as high.

Besides these two rather cognitive concepts, we also propose a third, more affectively based concept, namely satisfaction with the representation. This concept refers to the contentment of the group members with the way in which their pre-merger in-group is preserved in the new merger group in various domains (e.g., name, culture). There are at least two reasons why this affective evaluation may not correspond with cognitive perception of the representation. First, satisfaction with the representation may depend on the size of the pre-merger group: The larger the pre-merger group, the greater the number of characteristics that will have to be preserved to generate satisfaction with the post-merger identity. Second, characteristics may differ in the importance that the fans attach to them. Fans of a pre-merger group may be more satisfied when only a few, but important characteristics of that pre-merger group are preserved than when a lot of trivial aspects are preserved.

Taken together, we expected that the three proposed concepts (perceived continuity, relative representation, and satisfaction with representation) could be distinguished empirically. We also predicted that each of them would be positively related to fans’ post-merger identification: The more fans perceived the merger team as a continuation of their pre-merger team, the higher
their post-merger identification (Hypothesis 2a). The more fans perceive their pre-merger team to be relatively represented in the merger team, the higher their post-merger identification (Hypothesis 2b). Finally, the more fans are satisfied with this representation, the higher their post-merger identification (Hypothesis 2c).

Experimental research (van Leeuwen et al., 2003) has shown that pre- and post-merger identification are positively and strongly related when the in-group is represented relatively strongly in the new merger group. Consequently, it could be expected that the more a fan identified with the pre-merger team, the more this person would identify with the new merger team (Hypothesis 3). This prediction is based on the reasoning that even though the merger team is often perceived as only a watery version of the original pre-merger team, resulting in a reduction of identification, the merger team would nevertheless inherit some aspects of the pre-merger team so that the pre-merger identification could to some extent be transferred to the merger team.

A final determinant was derived from the research by Rentsch and Schneider (1991), who proposed that the perceived reasons for the merger have an influence on the expectations of group members with respect to the merger. These reasons can vary from the survival of the pre-merger group to the optimization of the chances to grow. In the context of a school merger, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants, and Feys (2005) found that the more pupils considered the merger as necessary, either for the survival or the growth of their pre-merger school, the more they identified with the merger school. Consequently, it could be expected that, regardless of the specific motives that were adopted (i.e., survival or growth), the more fans perceive the merger as necessary, the higher their post-merger identification (Hypothesis 4).

Although post-merger identification may be affected by a host of factors, based upon prior research, one could also expect that the effect of some of these factors depends on the strength of identification with the pre-merger group (i.e., may interact with pre-merger identification). Experimental research (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997) has shown that individuals who weakly identify with their group are more susceptible to status considerations in their group behavior. More specifically, when the in-group has a low status, weak identifiers are more likely to abandon their group than strong identifiers, who are more likely to stick with their group. It can therefore be argued that the positive relation between perceived merger status and post-merger identification would be stronger for fans who identified rather weakly with their pre-merger team, than for fans who had identified rather strongly with their team (Hypothesis 5). In other words, fans who had identified relatively weakly with their pre-merger group would be more likely to ‘abandon’ this group (i.e., identify relatively strongly with the new merger group), the more they perceive this new merger group as being a high status group.

In another experimental setting, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Brebels, Huybens, and Millet (2007), observed that the effect of relative representation on identification with a new merger group was more pronounced among participants who had identified strongly with their pre-merger group. We therefore predict that the impact of the three related concepts (i.e., perceived continuity, relative representation, and satisfaction with representation) would be stronger for fans who had identified strongly with their pre-merger team than for fans who had identified weakly (Hypotheses 6). This prediction was based on the assumption that fans who had identified strongly with their pre-merger group would find it more important that their team remains recognizable in the merger team than fans who had identified weakly with their pre-merger team (and therefore attach less value to the characteristics of their former team).

So far, empirical studies testing SIA-based predictions on mergers have focused on business organizations. At present only one empirical study has been conducted regarding the way sport fans react to a merger. Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005) asked 93 fans of two Belgian soccer teams that were about to merge to what extent they supported this merger. Respondents
made a distinction between their support for the merging process and their self-predicted future support for the new merger team. It was then tested to what extent fans’ support could be predicted on the basis of the determinants outlined above. Fans’ support for the merging process was predicted best by the perceived necessity of the merger and by the anticipated success/status of the merger team. Fans’ future support for the new merger team was predicted best by the anticipated success/status of the merger team and by the level of the identification with their own pre-merger team. Furthermore, as hypothesized, respondents differentiated between in-group continuity, in-group representation, and satisfaction with (name) representation. On the other hand, only in-group continuity was found to be a consistent, albeit modest, predictor of fans’ support.

It should be noted that the study by Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005) was performed before the merger actually took place. Consequently, no measure of post-merger identification was included. Moreover, given the limited sample size, only indirect evidence for the predicted interactions involving pre-merger identification was obtained. In the present research, we therefore selected a sports context in which the merger had already taken place one year earlier, so that the identification with the merger team could be assessed. We also included more respondents to have a proper test of the proposed interactions. In addition, we made sure to include enough youth players and fans of the pre-merger teams to allow separate analyses for both groups. Although youth players can also be considered as fans, it cannot be ruled out that they experienced the merger somewhat differently than the regular fans, because the merger might have had more day-to-day consequences for the youth players (e.g., new coaches, new teammates).

**METHOD**

**Merger Context**

From September to December 2004, a cross-sectional questionnaire study was conducted among the fans and youth players of a Belgian first division basketball club. This club had come into existence in May 2003 as a merger of two basketball clubs from the same region. The pre-merger clubs differed in many respects. Club A originated from a small village, and will therefore be designated as the ‘village club.’ This village club was financially healthy and during its last season as a separate club, it had finished in 2nd place (out of 13) in the second national division, and would have been promoted to the first division in the next season. On average, this village team attracted about 400 spectators for each home game. It should be noted that during its last year, this village club played its games in the center of a nearby city, more specifically in the home-base of Club B, which will be designated as the ‘city club.’ This city club played in the first national basketball division for several years but had serious financial problems. Nevertheless, it had managed to finish in 8th place (out of 11) in its last season as a separate club, and would have remained in the first division in the next season. This city team attracted between 1000 and 1500 spectators for each home game.

In May 2003, the board of the two teams decided to merge at the start of the 2003–2004 season. On paper, this merger was a take-over by the village club because the new merger club took over the stem number of the village team, whereas the stem number of the city team disappeared. The stem number is the matriculation number assigned by the Belgian Basketball Union. This stem number refers to the rank order by which the team joined the Union and constitutes the only official means by which a club can be identified throughout history (i.e., one can change the name of a club, but not its stem number). A formal merger would have meant that the Basketball Union assigned a completely new stem number to the new merger
In addition, the new merger club also took over the colors of the village club, the board of the village club, as well as most internal regulations. However, with respect to the youth teams (i.e., most Belgian basketball clubs not only have a senior team, but also a considerable number of junior teams where youngsters of different ages and skill levels are trained), the merger was more like a combination of the two clubs, considering that about half of the training staff and half of the youth players came from each pre-merger club.

In the first competition year of the merger club (2003–2004), they finished in 9th place (out of 10) in the first national division, which was below expectations, and which was also worse than the ranking of the city club in its last year of existence. For the second year, the aim was to finish within the first six positions to advance to the play-offs. An important change during this second year would be that from the start of 2005 (i.e., after our questionnaire study had been completed), the merger club would play its games in a brand new and modern basketball stadium in a new location in the same city.

Sampling

The youth players were contacted with the approval of the board of the merger club. The researchers were allowed to distribute the questionnaires in September 2004 during training sessions of each youth squad with players older than nine years. The fans were approached in multiple ways. Questionnaires were distributed and collected by a researcher during the first games of the new competition and during club events organized to raise money (e.g., spaghetti lunch). The youth players were also asked to distribute questionnaires to family members or friends they knew to be a fan of one of the pre-merger clubs (i.e., snowball sampling). The chairwoman of the fan club of the merger club was asked to distribute questionnaires during the collective bus trip to away games and during other activities organized by the fan club (e.g., meetings). We deliberately decided to use a large number of sampling strategies to obtain a heterogeneous sample of fans in terms of identification. It should be noted that the different subsamples of fans were too small for meaningful analyses.

There were four sorts of questionnaires: one designed for youth players of the village team, one for fans of the village team, one for youth players of the city team, and one for fans of the city team. These questionnaires were identical except for the introduction and the specific framing of the items in terms of pre-merger in-group and pre-merger out-group. At the beginning of the questionnaire, it was clearly stated that the questionnaire was intended only for people who categorized themselves as having been a fan of one of the two pre-merger clubs or for youth players who had belonged to one of the two pre-merger clubs. On all questionnaires, it was explicitly stated that although the management of the merger club had granted permission for this questionnaire, it was developed by our university for scientific purposes only. The anonymity of the respondents was ensured, and it was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers. All questionnaires were completed during the first half of the 2004–2005 Belgian basketball season.

Participants and Background Characteristics

There were 251 respondents: 160 fans and 91 youth players. Of these respondents, 50.2% originated from the village team, while 49.8% originated from the city team. Considering that we distributed 129 questionnaires to youth players older than nine who were present at the training sessions in September 2004, the response rate among the youth players was 71%. About 290 fans accepted a questionnaire, with 160 returning a completed questionnaire.

As could be expected in a Belgian basketball context, there were many more male ($N = 206$) than female ($N = 45$) respondents. The mean age of all respondents was 28.25 years.
(SD = 15.14), but significantly differed between youth players (M = 15.2) and fans (M = 35.68), F(1, 249) = 183.84, p < .001. During the last season of the pre-merger club, respondents had attended on average 10.85 out of 18 home games of their own pre-merger club (SD = 6.94) and 4.50 out of 18 away games (SD = 6.36). During the first year of the merger club, respondents had attended on average 10.06 out of 18 home games and 3.53 out of 18 away games. None of these background characteristics differed significantly between respondents of the city and village teams.

Measures

Unless stated differently, respondents answered all items by indicating their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (‘disagree completely’) to 7 (‘agree completely’). The term ‘my old club’ was always replaced by the specific name of the pre-merger club to which the respondent belonged, whereas the term ‘the other club’ was replaced by the name of the merger partner.

Pre-Merger Identification

Identification with respondents’ pre-merger basketball club was measured with five items: ‘My old club had a very important place in my life’; ‘I minded it a lot when the A-team of my old club lost a game’; ‘I considered myself as an ardent fan of the A-team of my old club’; ‘When someone laughed at my old club, I felt personally insulted’; and ‘I felt very connected to my old club.’

We decided to use this self-constructed identification questionnaire instead of established scales of fan identification such as the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) because the present study was set up from a SIA approach. This approach focuses on the self-categorization aspect of identification, which is not explicitly incorporated in the existing scales. Moreover, the items that we selected to measure identification in the present study have already been shown to be internally consistent and relevant in other contexts (e.g., Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants, & Feys, 2005; Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Swinnen, 2005).

Merger Success/Status

The perceived success of the new merger club was measured by four items: ‘The merger between my old club and the other club is a real success according to me’; ‘The merger club is a healthy and ambitious first national division team’; ‘The merger club will succeed in attaining the top six in the first division’; and ‘In the future, the merger club will succeed in becoming Belgian champion.’

In-Group Representation

Four items assessed different aspects of the perceived representation of the pre-merger club in the new merger club. First of all, respondents’ general perception of the relative representation of both clubs in the new merger club was measured by the question: ‘In general, how much is left from your old club in the new merger club in comparison with the other club?’ A second question referred to the relative advantage that each team had gained from the merger: ‘Which club has gained the most advantage out of the merger according to you?’ These two questions had to be answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (‘the other club much more than my old club’) to 7 (‘my old club much more than the other club’). A third item referred to respondents’ perception of the illegitimacy of the representation: ‘My old club was entitled to a greater presence in the merger club than is now the case’ (reverse coded). A fourth item referred to respondents’ perception of how the pre-merger clubs are valued within
In the preliminary analyses, two global Principal Component Analyses (PCA) were performed, including both fans and youth players: one PCA on all items intended to measure a predictor concept, and one PCA on the items intended to measure the criterion (i.e., post-merger identification). In the main study analyses, two separate direct multiple regressions were performed: one including only the fans and one including only the youth players.
Preliminary Analyses

PCA on Predictor Items

We first performed a global PCA with Oblimin rotation on the 28 items that were designed to measure a predictor concept (i.e., merger success, in-group representation, satisfaction with in-group representation, in-group continuity, pre-merger identification, and perceived necessity). We decided to use an oblique rotation because we assumed that some of the predictor concepts would be mildly correlated (e.g., in-group representation, satisfaction with in-group representation, and in-group continuity). Only components with an eigenvalue higher than one were retained. As a result, six components were extracted which explained in total 59% of the variance. Table 1 displays the component loadings of each item.

On the first rotated component, the four items referring to merger success loaded highly (i.e., component loading was higher than .50), as well as the item referring to satisfaction with the representation in general. We therefore labeled this component as respondents’ perceived merger success.

On the second rotated component, the five items referring to respondents’ identification with the pre-merger group loaded highly, so we labeled this component as respondents’ pre-merger identification with their former team.

On the third rotated component, the four necessity items loaded highly and this component was thus labeled as respondents’ perceived necessity of the merger.

On the fourth rotated component, the four in-group representation items loaded highly on this component, as well as the three items referring to respondents’ perceived in-group continuity. Therefore, this component was labeled as respondents’ perceived in-group representation/continuity.

On the fifth rotated component, three satisfaction with representation items loaded highly, namely the items referring to respondents’ satisfaction with the team colors, with the stem number, and with the composition of the board. This component was labeled as respondents’ satisfaction with the colors/stem number/board.

Finally, on the sixth rotated component, three other satisfaction items loaded highly: the items referring to the satisfaction with the communication during the merger process, with the participation during the merging process, and with the location of the new merger club. This component was labeled as respondents’ satisfaction with the merging process.

PCA on Criterion Items

PCA on the five items referring to respondents’ identification with the new merger club revealed only one component with an eigenvalue of 3.58, explaining 72% of the total variance. Moreover, these five items constituted a highly reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$). We therefore computed respondents’ unweighted mean on these five items as a measure of their post-merger identification ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.54$). This mean post-merger identification was positively and moderately strongly related to the number of attended home games of the merger team, $r = .48, N = 250, p < .001$, as well as to the number of attended away games of the merger team, $r = .45, N = 250, p < .001$.

Main Study Analyses

Multiple Regression for Fans

A direct multiple regression was performed on post-merger identification, taking only the fans into account. The predictors that were entered were the (obliquely) rotated principal component scores on the six components that emerged from the PCA, as well as the two-way interaction effects that were hypothesized (i.e., between pre-merger identification and merger
Table 1
Loadings of Items on Extracted Components after Oblimin rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1. mergersuccess</th>
<th>2. pre-merger identification</th>
<th>3. merger necessity</th>
<th>4. ingroup cont./repr.</th>
<th>5. satisfaction colors</th>
<th>6. satisfaction process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My old club had a very important place in my life.</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.771</td>
<td>-.175</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I minded it a lot when the A-team of my old club lost a game.</td>
<td>.224</td>
<td>.784</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>-.145</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I considered myself as an ardent fan of the A-team of my old club</td>
<td>.188</td>
<td>.785</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>-.161</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>-.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When someone laughed at my old club, I felt personally insulted.</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>-.107</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>.147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I felt very connected to my old club.</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>.845</td>
<td>-.113</td>
<td>-.102</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The merger between my old club and the other club is a real success according to me.</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The merger club is a healthy and ambitious first national division team.</td>
<td>.785</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>.309</td>
<td>.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The merger club will succeed in attaining the top six in the first division.</td>
<td>.780</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. In the future, the merger club will succeed in becoming Belgian champion</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.220</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. In general, how much is left from your old club in the new merger club in comparison with the other club?</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.724</td>
<td>.364</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Which club has gained the most advantage out of the merger according to you?</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>-.169</td>
<td>.402</td>
<td>.509</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My old club was entitled to a greater presence in the merger club than is now the case.</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>-.264</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>-.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I have the feeling that what comes from the other club is valued more than what comes from my old club.</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.299</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>-.182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. There is nothing much left of my old club in the merger club. (reverse coded)</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>-.108</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The merger club is really a completely different club than my old club. (reverse)</td>
<td>.304</td>
<td>-.101</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.621</td>
<td>-.195</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. In my eyes, my old club still lives on in the merger club.</td>
<td>.397</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td>.551</td>
<td>.336</td>
<td>.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. In general, how satisfied are you with the way your old club is present in the new merger club?</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>.402</td>
<td>.418</td>
<td>.214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued on next page.)
### Table 1
Loadings of Items on Extracted Components after Oblimin Rotation (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1. mergersuccess</th>
<th>2. pre-merger identification</th>
<th>3. merger necessity</th>
<th>4. ingroup cont./repr.</th>
<th>5. satisfaction colors</th>
<th>6. satisfaction process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. How satisfied are you with the name of the merger club?</td>
<td>.396</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.397</td>
<td>−.127</td>
<td>.331</td>
<td>.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. How satisfied are you with the colors of the merger club?</td>
<td>.155</td>
<td>−.054</td>
<td>−.265</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. How satisfied are you with the fact that the merger club took the stem number of the village club?</td>
<td>.421</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.188</td>
<td>.317</td>
<td>.715</td>
<td>.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. How satisfied are you with the composition of the board of the merger club?</td>
<td>.276</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. How satisfied are you with the communication of the club to the fans/youth players with respect to the merger?</td>
<td>.369</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.319</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. How satisfied are you with the participation of the fans/youth players during the merger?</td>
<td>.350</td>
<td>−.083</td>
<td>.247</td>
<td>.197</td>
<td>.236</td>
<td>.717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. How satisfied are you with the location where the A-team of the merger club currently plays?</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>−.071</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. The merger to the new merger club was necessary for my old club to survive.</td>
<td>.261</td>
<td>−.141</td>
<td>.771</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>−.055</td>
<td>.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. The merger to the new merger club was necessary to ensure top basket in our region.</td>
<td>.442</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.591</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.422</td>
<td>.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Even without the merger, my old club would have been able to survive. (reverse coded)</td>
<td>−.026</td>
<td>−.167</td>
<td>.786</td>
<td>.201</td>
<td>−.177</td>
<td>.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Even without the merger, my old club would have managed to (continue to) play in the first national division. (reverse coded)</td>
<td>−.179</td>
<td>−.145</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Success, between pre-merger identification and in-group representation/continuity, between pre-merger identification and satisfaction with colors/stem number/board, and between pre-merger identification and satisfaction with the merger process).

This model explained 70% of the total variance in fans’ post-merger identification, $F(10, 148) = 38.05, p < .001$. Table 2 presents the standardized regression coefficients of the predictors. In line with Hypothesis 1, merger success was a significant and positive predictor of post-merger identification: The more fans perceived the merger club as successful, the more they identified with this merger club. As predicted in Hypotheses 2a and 2b, in-group continuity/representation was also a significant predictor of post-merger identification. The
Table 2
Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Fans’ Post-merger Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merger success</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup continuity/representation</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with colors/stem number/board</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with merger process</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>16.65</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merger necessity</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x merger success</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x ingroup continuity/representation</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x satisfaction with colors/stem number/board</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>.694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x satisfaction with merger process</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>.401</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = 70\%$.

results with respect to Hypothesis 2c are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, satisfaction with colors/stem number/board was not a significant predictor. On the other hand, satisfaction with the merger process did emerge as a significant predictor.

In correspondence with Hypothesis 3, pre-merger identification turned out to be a significant predictor of post-merger identification: The more fans identified with their pre-merger club, the more they identified with the new merger club. In line with Hypothesis 4, merger necessity was also a significant predictor of post-merger identification: The more fans perceived the merger as necessary, the more they identified with the new merger club. Pre-merger identification clearly emerged as the strongest predictor of post-merger identification.

Contrary to Hypotheses 5 and 6, none of the hypothesized two-way interactions involving pre-merger identification was significant.

Table 3
Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Youth Players’ Post-Merger Identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merger success</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup continuity/representation</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>.748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with colors/stem number/board</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-0.91</td>
<td>.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with merger process</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>7.22</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merger necessity</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x merger success</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x ingroup continuity/representation</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
<td>.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x satisfaction with colors/stem number board</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>.897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-merger identification x satisfaction with merger process</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.966</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = 61\%$. 
Multiple Regression for Youth Players

The same model was used for the youth players, explaining 61% of the total variance in post-merger identification, $F(10, 79) = 14.74, p < .001$. Table 3 presents the standardized regression coefficients of the predictors.

As for the fans, pre-merger identification emerged as the strongest predictor of youth players’ identification with the new merger team, thereby confirming Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 1 was also supported again: merger success was a significant and positive predictor of youth players’ post-merger identification. For merger necessity, the regression coefficient approached significance, so Hypothesis 4 can also be considered to be re-confirmed.

However, contrary to the results for the fans, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were not corroborated. In-group representation/continuity did not emerge as a significant predictor of the youth players’ post-merger identification. The results with respect to Hypothesis 2c were again ambiguous: satisfaction with colors/stem number/board was not a significant predictor, but satisfaction with the merger process was. Finally, in line with the findings for the fans, none of the two-way interactions involving pre-merger identification were significant, which implies that Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not confirmed.

DISCUSSION

In the present study we tested to what extent fans’ and youth players’ identification with a merged basketball team could be predicted on the basis of six determinants derived from a social-psychological perspective on fandom: perceived success of the merger, perceived relative representation of the in-group in the merger club, perceived continuity of the in-group, satisfaction with the representation of the in-group, pre-merger identification, and perceived necessity of the merger. Preliminary analyses revealed that respondents did not differentiate between in-group representation and in-group continuity, while they did make a distinction between their satisfaction with the merger process and their satisfaction with the colors/stem number/board of the merger club.

Direct multiple regressions were then performed on fans’ and youth players’ identification with the merged club, including the six resulting concepts as well as the hypothesized two-way interactions with pre-merger identification. The results revealed that both for the fans and the youth players, satisfaction with the colors/stem number/board of the merger club was not a significant predictor of post-merger identification, neither were the two-way interactions involving pre-merger identification. Nevertheless, with respect to the fans 70% of the variance in their post-merger identification could be explained. This high percentage indicates that the social-psychological perspective that we adopted to look at fan identification after a merger is relevant.

With respect to the youth players, the combined concept referring to in-group representation/continuity was not a significant predictor of their post-merger identification. Nevertheless, the included concepts explained 61% of the total variance. In other words, despite the phenomenological differences between these two types of respondents, our social-psychological analysis of identification with a merged team applies to fans as well as to youth players.

More specifically, for both types of respondents pre-merger identification clearly emerged as the strongest predictor of post-merger identification: As predicted, the more respondents identified with their own pre-merger club, the more they identified with the new merger club. This finding extends the results obtained by Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005), who reported that soccer fans’ identification with their own pre-merger team was positively related
to their self-predicted future support for the new merger club. The present study suggests that
the subsequent identification with the merger club is even more strongly determined by the
level of identification with their former club. The relevance of identification with the merged
club is illustrated by the rather high positive correlation with the number of attended home
and away games of the new club.

One might argue that it is not surprising that pre- and post-merger identification are strongly
related because they were measured at the same time point. However, it should be noted that in
previous field studies that measured pre- and post-merger identification at the same time, these
two concepts were not always significantly related. For example, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants,
and Feys (2005) found that the retrospective identification of teachers and pupils with their pre-
merger school was not a significant predictor of their identification with the new merger school.
Both van Knippenberg et al. (2002) and Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Cool (2006) found that pre-
and post-merger identification were strongly related among employees of the high status pre-
merger organization, but not for employees of a low status pre-merger organization. Moreover,
Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Millet (2005) even found a negative correlation between pre- and
post-merger identification when the in-group was less represented in the merger group than the
out-group. These findings thus suggest that it is not so obvious to find a strong positive relation
between pre- and post-merger identification, even when they are measured at the same time.

Respondents’ perceived success of the merger was found to be the second-best predictor
for both fans and youth players. As predicted, the more fans and youth players perceived the
merger club as successful, the more they identified with this merger club. Boen, Vanbeselaere,
and Swinnen (2005) already found that soccer fans’ support for the merging process as well
as their support for the new merger team was significantly related to the anticipated status
(i.e., expected success) of the merger. Moreover, in their study on a merger between two high
schools, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants, and Feys (2005) also observed that both pupils’ and
teachers' identification with the new merger school was positively related to the perceived
success of the merger school. The present study thus further corroborates the importance of
the perceived status/success of the merger group, as was derived from SIA and experimental
findings obtained by Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Millet (2005).

We would like to point out that the merger club was quite successful in its second season
(i.e., just after our questionnaire study had taken place). The team finished in 7th place (out of
10), which was two places higher than the year before. More importantly, it won the Belgian
cup and hence qualified for the European competition. On the basis of our findings with respect
to perceived success one may suspect that the identification of the fans and youth players after
this second season would have increased compared with when our study was conducted.

In line with our expectations and with earlier research (Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Swinnen,
2005; Boen, Vanbeselaere, Hollants, & Feys, 2005), perceived necessity was found to be a
significant predictor. The more fans and youth players perceived the merger as necessary, either
for the survival of their pre-merger club, or for its further growth, the more they identified with
the new merger team. It thus seems worthwhile to inform the fans and the youth players about
the economic, commercial, and strategic motives behind a merger, and explain these clearly
and with details. Managers should not assume that fans are only interested in what happens on
the court. As outlined by the social identity approach, when the team constitutes an important
part of the social identity of a fan, he/she will be interested in all aspects concerning the team.

Our prediction that satisfaction with representation would be a significant predictor of
post-merger identification was partially confirmed. As noted above, respondents distinguished
between their satisfaction with the merging process (i.e., the way the merger was
communicated, and the way they had participated in the merger) and their satisfaction with
the colors/stem number/board of the new merger club. Respondents’ satisfaction with the
colors/stem number/board was not a significant predictor of post-merger identification, but satisfaction with the merger process was, and even a slightly stronger predictor than in-group representation/continuity. This finding indicates that the way the merger is communicated and the way the fans and youth players are allowed to participate in the merger process does have an impact on later identification with the new merger team.

Respondents did not make the predicted distinction between in-group representation and in-group continuity. On the other hand, our expectations were confirmed in the sense that the combined concept in-group representation/continuity was a significant, albeit modest, predictor of fans’ post-merger identification. In their study on a planned soccer merger, Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005) found that the soccer fans did distinguish between in-group representation and in-group continuity, but only in-group continuity was significantly related to fans’ support for the merging process and for the new merger team. It should be noted that in-group representation/continuity was not included in the final model for the youth players.

Contrary to what we had expected, pre-merger identification did not interact with any other predictor to determine post-merger identification. Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005) also found no significant interactions involving pre-merger identification to predict soccer fans’ support for a planned merger. Whereas their failure to obtain significant interactions with pre-merger identification could also be attributed to their limited sample size, the sample size in the present study was sufficient to detect even small two-way interactions. In any event, the available evidence so far suggests that the impact of merger success, merger necessity, in-group representation/continuity, and satisfaction with the merging process is not moderated by pre-merger identification. In other words, they seem to exert the same effect on strongly identified fans and youth-players as on weakly identified fans and youth players.

It should be kept in mind that pre-merger identification itself was by far the strongest predictor of post-merger identification. Being a highly identified fan of a pre-merger club makes it likely that one will become a highly identified fan of the merger club. However, pre-merger identification was measured retrospectively in this study and at the same time as post-merger identification, which might be an alternative explanation for the strong association between these concepts.

Despite this large transfer from pre- to post-merger identification, especially for the fans, additional analyses revealed that both fans and youth players felt significantly less committed to the merger club than to their pre-merger club. For example, for fans the mean of the five items measuring pre-merger identification was 4.40 (SD = 1.45). This mean pre-merger identification was significantly above the mid-point of the scale (i.e., 4.00), \( t(159) = 3.51, p < .01 \). This indicates that respondents had identified rather strongly with their pre-merger club. The mean of the five items measuring fans’ post-merger identification was 4.10 (SD = 1.56). This mean post-merger identification was not significantly above the mid-point of the scale (i.e., 4.00), \( t(159) = 0.74, p = .46 \). This indicates that fans overall did not identify strongly with the merger club. Moreover, a paired-sample t-test revealed that the mean post-merger identification was significantly lower than the mean pre-merger identification, \( t(159) = -3.63, p < .001 \). In other words, fans identified less with the merger club than with their old pre-merger club. Although the size of this difference was relatively small in absolute number in the present study (i.e., 0.30 on a scale from 1 to 7), it is nevertheless in line with numerous experimental and field studies on the social-psychological impact of mergers, showing that group members identify less with a new merger group than with their old pre-merger group (e.g., Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Millet, 2005; Boen, Vanbeselaere, Holllants, & Feys, 2005; Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Cool, 2006; Boen, Vanbeselaere, Brebels, Huybens, & Millet, 2007; van Leeuwen, van Knippenberg, & Ellemers, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2002).
We realize that the present study had its limitations. First, the data were gathered cross-sectionally more than one year after the merger club had come into existence. Respondents had to indicate their pre-merger identification and their satisfaction with the merging process retrospectively, and could thus have idealized the situation (or perceived it as worse than it was at the time). Future studies should therefore try to collect longitudinal data starting just before and/or after the beginning of the merger club, and continue to do so at the end of each season.

Second, the specific context of the merger might have facilitated identification with the merger team. As noted above, during the last season before the merger, the first team of the village team had played in the same location as the first team of the city team. Moreover, the prospect of moving to a modern and large new location in the second year of the merger might also have smoothed the integration between the two pre-merger clubs. It remains to be seen whether pre-merger identification would be transformed so swiftly into post-merger identification in a setting where a more antagonistic relation exists between the pre-merger teams. In addition, it should not be forgotten that (Belgian) basketball clubs tend to change their name and team colors when a new sponsor is found, even without a formal merger taking place. As a result, basketball fans might be relatively accustomed to such changes and thus feel less resistance than fans of other team sports, which could also explain the strong relation between pre- and post-merger identification. These regularly occurring changes of the name and team colors could also explain why satisfaction with colors/stem number/board was not a significant predictor of post-merger identification in the present study.

A third and final limitation concerns the fact that the results of this study may apply only to male athletes (i.e., 100% of the sample) and predominantly to male fans (i.e., 82% of the sample). On the other hand, it should be noted that in Belgium spectatorship of sports is mainly male. For example, in their study on two merging soccer teams Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Swinnen (2005) used similar sampling methods. These authors reported that only 9% of their respondents were females, and that this number came close to the proportion of females among the season ticket holders of the new merger team (i.e., 11%). We therefore believe that the unequal gender distribution found in the present study is representative of the actual gender distribution of the fans.

To summarize, this study has revealed the relevance of a social-psychological view—more specifically a social identity approach—to studying fan identification after a merger between sports teams. Most of the predictions derived from this approach were supported, but more importantly, the proposed concepts explained a lot of variance in fans’ identification with the merger club. Consequently, the findings of this research can be taken as a building stone to develop a more elaborate model of fan identification with a merged club, which should be tested across sports and cultures, and which also seems to apply to youth players.

REFERENCES


