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Abstract

Through two studies of fans who identified with the collective known as NASCAR (the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing hereafter referred to as Nascar), we examine why stakeholders identify with collectives that are perceived as only moderately prestigious (given that high prestige has been shown, empirically, to be the primary predictor of collective identification because it enhances identifiers' self-esteem). Our findings indicate that identifiers did not perceive Nascar to be high in prestige (compared to other similar collectives) and that their identification was predicted, primarily, by "Perceived Opportunity for Authentic Self-Expression" with Nascar. In addition, across both studies, we found that "patriotism"—a personal value that was difficult for fans to affirm elsewhere—was the most important value that fans perceived they could "self-express" when interacting with Nascar. These findings suggest that individuals may identify with moderate prestige collectives because they provide rare opportunities to express values that are part of their authentic selves, and thus, satisfy these individuals' "needs for authenticity."

Keywords

authenticity, identification, self-expression

Introduction

Organizations are part of larger social systems and collectives (Scott, 1987). As such, their stakeholders include not just employees, but customers, suppliers, and others who depend on the organization in some meaningful way. One of the primary mechanisms by which these varied stakeholders become involved and stay attached to an organization is through identification (i.e., a sense of

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overlap between their individual identities and the identity of the organization). Thus, identification is a fundamental social process that ties people to organizations and other collectives by linking their identities (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In turn, as we review in detail later, most empirical research that has examined identification with organizations and collectives has focused on the variable of *prestige* as the primary predictor of such identification because identifying with prestigious collectives is argued to satisfy individuals' needs for self-esteem enhancement (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). That is, the primary predictor of *individual-level* identification with collectives, according to empirical research, is the *collective-level* characteristic of prestige, i.e., how high status a collective is perceived to be (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Despite this focus in empirical studies, most of us are familiar with organizations or collectives that are not viewed as high in prestige, but have many identifiers (e.g., chronically losing sports teams, state universities that are not highly ranked, beloved but low-status restaurants and bars). In this paper, we examine stakeholder identification with one such collective—the auto racing collective known as Nascar. In particular, we examine why Nascar fans strongly identify with a collective that they perceive as, generally, *not high* in prestige (suggested by our qualitative findings from study 1) and more specifically, *moderate in prestige* (indicated by our quantitative findings from study 2). Based on our findings from study 2, we define moderate prestige as being viewed as neither high nor low in prestige, and/or scoring in the mid-range on a validated scale measuring *perceived external prestige* (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

By explaining why and how individuals identify with Nascar, we expand our understanding about why and how stakeholders, in general, bond with collectives that are not known for their high prestige, and thus, extend our understanding of identification motives beyond needs for self-esteem enhancement. Because, almost by definition, many collectives are of moderate or lower prestige (as a necessary precondition to distinguishing high-prestige collectives), we believe answering these questions is crucial to better understanding collective identification.

In this manner, we propose that our paper is an example of an “extreme case study” (Chen, 2016; Eisenhardt, 1989) that explores a poorly understood phenomenon in a context that increases its observability. Such settings help researchers to identify important variables and relationships that may not be as visible in more common settings. In our case, we argue that the extreme setting of Nascar makes visible how a collective that is widely viewed as moderate in prestige is, nevertheless, able to sustain strong identification by millions of stakeholders. Thus, we propose our setting helps to fulfill some of the promise of extreme cases to “question deeply held assumptions about how organizations should look and operate” (Chen, 2016, p. 41).

Nascar as an identification puzzle

Nascar is one of America's most popular sports—commonly viewed as second in fan popularity to the National Football League. Nascar races involve “stock cars” (i.e., commonly available car models, such as the Toyota Camry or the Ford Fusion) that are enhanced with performance and safety features. These cars are raced at speeds up to 200 miles per hour on (mostly) oval tracks in competitions that range from 200 to 600 miles in length.

To anyone who has ever witnessed a live Nascar race, it is evident that fans are openly and proudly supportive of the collective. Further, many fans define themselves, in an important way, vis-a-vis their association with the collective—i.e., they *identify* with Nascar (Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Breitsohl, 2016). Collective identification is defined as a feeling of “oneness” with a collective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This definition seems a good fit for the way many Nascar fans feel about the Nascar collective based on case studies (Wright, 2002). In addition, numerous journalists have commented on the strong connection that fans have with Nascar (e.g., Giangola, 2010;

MacWatters, 2010). Together, these findings indicate a feeling of oneness between many fans and the Nascar collective (Martin, 2012).

Despite its apparent popularity and identifying fan base, however, extant research and popular press articles suggest that most fans do *not* perceive Nascar to be high in prestige (a suggestion confirmed by our studies), especially compared to other sports collectives that have been shown to have strongly identifying fans in past research studies, for example, Formula One auto racing (Castellucci & Ertug, 2010) and collegiate sports teams (Kim, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2010). In these studies, prestige is defined as a perception of a collective's (relatively) high social status (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

In this manner, Nascar presents a counterpoint to most empirical research findings on collective identification. This is because extant empirical research has generally studied identification with relatively high-prestige collectives. As a result, most existing research supports theoretical arguments suggesting that people are motivated to identify with high-prestige collectives because doing so enhances their self-esteem (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This theory makes logical sense, but it does not help explain why people often show fierce identification with collectives that have average or even below-average prestige (Bartel, Bald, & Dukerich, 2016; Seyle & Swann, 2007).

Thus, our overall empirical and theoretical goal in this paper was to better understand why individuals identify with collectives that are not viewed as high in prestige. To pursue this goal, we carried out a series of studies of Nascar fans. Before describing our studies and findings in detail, however, we review collective identification vis-a-vis the existing organizational literature. This review helps to more clearly situate our studies and their potential contribution, as well as define our specific research question.

Literature Review: Explaining Collective Identification

As noted earlier, collective identification is defined as a sense of "oneness" with a social collective (such as an organization) and may be thought of as the degree to which individuals perceive that their personal identities overlap with a collective's identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).¹ In this manner, collective identification is a subjective perception. When we talk about identification with Nascar, we are referring to such collective identification.

Organizational researchers have provided extensive evidence that collective identification provides important benefits to both individuals and their collectives. For example, individuals who identify with prestigious or distinctive employment collectives are likely to gain in self-esteem and job satisfaction (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000) as well as learning (Walumba, Cropanzano, & Harnell, 2009). Such gains may result from the positive effects on personal identities that employees perceive when they are affiliated with prestigious collectives (Cialdini et al., 1976). In turn, collectives with identified members can expect those members to exhibit greater cooperation and work effort (Bartel, 2001), affective commitment (Carmeli, Gilat, & Weisberg, 2006), citizenship behaviors (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002), and lower turnover (Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006). Given these mutual benefits, researchers have spent considerable effort examining the predictors of collective identification.

Perceived external prestige as a predictor of collective identification

While the concept of prestige is commonly understood by laypersons to mean something related to status and relative importance or quality, organizational researchers have increasingly used a validated measure called *perceived external prestige* (i.e., perceptions that the collective "has a good

reputation, “is thought highly of” or “is considered prestigious”; Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to empirically measure prestige in studies of organizational identification. A majority of these studies indicate that perceived external prestige is a primary predictor of collective identification. Thus, perceived external prestige is shown to predict identification by employees for both for-profit and non-profit firms (Reade, 2001; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001), by external stakeholders such as customers and suppliers for consumer goods firms (Curras-Perez, Bigne-Alcaniz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009), by students for their universities (Bartels, Pruyn, & De Jong, 2009; Fuller et al., 2009), and by contract workers for their contracting firms (George & Chattopadhyay, 2005).

According to social identity theory (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1990), perceived external prestige predicts such identification because it satisfies individuals’ needs for self-esteem enhancement (i.e., needs to feel that they are esteemed or valued). This “self-esteem” hypothesis is also central to much organizational identity theory (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985) and has been demonstrated empirically (Fuller et al., 2006).

Interestingly, however, extant studies of collective identification that measure perceived external prestige² show that the average level of this variable for the organizations under investigation is relatively high (approximately 5.4 out of 7, with a minimum of 5.1 out of 7), suggesting that past research has focused on collectives that are viewed as relatively high in prestige. By contrast, the few studies that examine identification in relation to collectives that are relatively low in prestige (e.g., Elsbach, 2001; Frandsen, 2012) have shown that individuals actually disidentify with those collectives (e.g., maintain a sense of separateness between their identities and the identities of the organizations), rather than identify with them. By contrast, we can find no studies demonstrating positive identification with collectives that are not high in perceived external prestige.

Despite this lack of empirical research evidence, anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals do develop strong identifications with collectives that are not high in prestige. For example, customers often become very loyal to and identify with their favorite ‘dive’ restaurant, bar, or coffee shop. There are also examples of staunch identifiers with social movement collectives, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), that are perceived as relatively low-status among the general public (due to their use of provocative actions, such as throwing blood on fashion models who are wearing fur; Connor, 2011). In these cases, it seems that perceived external prestige and self-esteem enhancement are not likely to be the primary determinants of identification.

Similarly, researchers in the field of sports marketing have also examined identification with collectives, and in particular, fan identification with sports teams (Gau, Gailliot, & Brady, 2007; Todd & Harris, 2009; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Just as identification is important in the employment context because it affects employees’ engagement and behaviors, identification also is important to understand in the fan context because it affects fans’ engagement and behaviors. Sports collectives such as Nascar compete for fans’ time and investments relative to other professional spectator sports—many of which hold competitions and broadcast television coverage in competing time slots. As a result, fan *identification* with a sport collective (which is a cognition) may be an important predictor of *fan consumption* of that sport (which involves behaviors such as attendance at live events or television viewing).³

Most studies of identification with sports collectives (which are typically done at the “team” level, not the sport level, as in Nascar) have shown that prestige or high team performance (e.g., a winning record) are the strongest predictors of team identification (e.g., Gau et al., 2007; Todd & Harris, 2009). In addition, the mean level of prestige for teams in these studies is relatively high (e.g., over 5 out of 7). Thus, these studies generally confirm findings from studies of employment collectives, but do not shed additional light on identification with collectives that are not high in prestige.

Other predictors of collective identification

So why might people identify with collectives that are not high in prestige? At first blush, this identity puzzle may seem related to the important stream of research on “dirty work,” which has helped explain people’s identification with low-status occupations (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In this research, employees of stigmatized work (e.g., gravediggers, butchers) are argued to maintain positive identities by developing strong occupational cultures that allow them to highlight the essential nature of their work and choose comparison others in worse conditions (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). Looking more closely, however, this logic does not help us understand identification with lower-prestige collectives (like Nascar) where involvement is not considered essential work that must be performed in human society, and people’s relationship with the collective is relatively voluntary (unlike dirty work which often provides people with their livelihoods).

Examining non-prestige predictors of collective identification, by contrast, provides a more promising path toward unraveling this puzzle (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). For example, several extant studies in employment contexts suggest that collective identification may be predicted by factors other than prestige, such as distinctiveness (Jones & Volpe, 2011), value congruence (George & Chattopadhyay (2005), organizational support (Cheung & Law, 2008), and organizational justice (Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006).

Some of these predictors may be driven by motives other than the need for self-esteem enhancement, and thus could help explain identification with collectives not high in prestige (Vignoles, 2011). For example, a need to distinguish oneself from others (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012) may motivate identification with unique collectives (e.g., those with perceived distinctiveness) that are not also high in prestige. These findings fit with Brewer’s (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory, as well as with experimental findings showing that a need for distinctiveness may be a powerful motivator of group identification, especially when individuals feel *undistinctive* (Brewer, 1993).

Another non-prestige predictor of collective identification is value congruence (i.e., a person’s sense that he or she shares values with the collective). Thus, a few studies have found that workers are more likely to identify with firms whose espoused values are congruent (vs. incongruent) with their own personal values (e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002). These findings fit with research on self-verification (Swann, 2012), which suggests that individuals have a need to maintain continuity in their self-concepts over time (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012), especially in relation to important values (Breakwell, 1986). Further, these findings are also in line with the notion that people have a need for inclusion and acceptance by important others (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012), which may be satisfied by affiliation with a collective that accepts a person’s core values.

Taken together, recent research on non-esteem predictors of identification suggests that individuals may identify with collectives that are not high in prestige because those collectives are defined by characteristics (e.g., distinctiveness, shared values) that satisfy important human needs (e.g., needs for distinctiveness, continuity, belongingness) related to personal identities and self-concepts, even if they do not satisfy needs for self-esteem enhancement.⁴ While these ideas may seem obvious to the reader, to date, *we can find no empirical studies that have examined the effects of these (or other) non-esteem predictors of identification with collectives that are not high in prestige.*

Summary and research question

Based on our review of the literature, we argue that our understanding of the predictors of collective identification is incomplete because we do not have a clear and validated explanation for individual identification with collectives that are not high in prestige. Put another way, given that higher prestige

alternatives for identification exist (e.g., Formula One auto racing, or Major League Baseball), why do individuals choose to identify with a collective such as Nascar that is not high in prestige? It would be useful both for theory and practice to understand which characteristics (e.g., distinctiveness, value-congruence, or something else) might predict identification with collectives such as Nascar that are not high in prestige. Thus, we offer the following research question:

Research Question: What predicts stakeholder identification with collectives that are not high in prestige?

In the remainder of the paper, we attempt to answer this research question through two studies of Nascar fans.

Overview of Research Setting

Both of our studies involved studying fan identification with the collective of Nascar and were carried out from Fall 2010 through Spring 2017. It is important to note that, when we refer to the collective of Nascar, we are not referring solely to the formal NASCAR Corporation (which was a family-owned business venture headquartered in Daytona, Florida), nor were we interested in a particular Nascar race team (e.g., Hendrick Motor Sports). The Nascar collective includes millions of fans, hundreds of drivers, and dozens of teams and their sponsors (e.g., Budweiser beer, Tide detergent) (Wright, 2002). At the time of the study, Nascar promoted itself as a collective through its term the “Nascar family” as noted in its 2012 marketing guide:

Some would say we’re a community. Some would call us a pack. Still others say we’re one big family. (2012 NASCAR Marketing Guide, p. 3)

Thus, in studying fan identification with Nascar, we are studying how non-employees identify with a larger collective (such as how movie fans identify with the Hollywood movie industry), rather than how an employee might identify with an individual firm in the industry (such as how employees identify with Disney Studios). While this is not a common context in which to study stakeholder identification with a collective, as noted earlier, we view this context as appropriate for carrying out an extreme case study that explores a poorly understood phenomenon in a context that increases its observability.

During our investigation, Nascar organized three large racing series: the Sprint Cup, Nationwide Series, and Camping World Truck Series. Its top series—the Sprint Cup—included 36 races annually. These races were held at racetracks holding up to 170,000 fans and located in cities across the United States. According to personal communications with Nascar’s marketing group, at the time of the study Nascar fans were approximately 62% male with an average age of 42 years. Nascar’s 2012 Marketing Guide also indicated that the income distribution of Nascar fans mirrored that of the US population, with over 55% of fans reporting incomes of over \$50,000 annually. This same guide also indicated that 22% of Nascar fans were racial minorities (i.e., “non-white”), and that the geographic representation of fans was: 15% northeast, 26% midwest, 40% south, and 19% west.

Study I Method

In this study, our goal was to develop a framework of the predictors of fan identification with Nascar. To reveal these predictors, we needed to have a clear picture of Nascar’s collective identity among fans. Thus, we also sought to define fans’ perception of Nascar’s identity. We pursued these goals through two phases of data collection and analysis, described next.

Phase 1

In phase 1 we used qualitative, archival and interview data to develop an initial understanding of Nascar's identity and the predictors of fan identification, as well as fans' perceptions of Nascar's relative level of prestige.

Archival data collection. We collected written documents related to the identity of Nascar, perceptions of Nascar (including its prestige), and the reasons why fans identified with Nascar. These documents included books (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Fielden, 2009; Giangola, 2010; Wright, 2002), online blogs and news stories (Jaski.com; NASCAR.com;bleacherreport.com/nascar), and articles written in popular sports periodicals such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Car and Driver*. We also collected dozens of quotes related to Nascar's identity, prestige, and fan identification from "Nascar Nation" (a blog on the NASCAR.com official website). Across these archival sources, we collected over 300 documents and 500 quotes related to Nascar identity, prestige, and fan identification (and could have collected many more). We discontinued our archival data collection when we began to reach theoretical saturation (i.e., we were not learning anything new from the documents) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Our data analysis (described below) details what we looked for in these archival sources.

Initial interviews. We also conducted a set of initial interviews with both Nascar experts and fans in phase 1. We followed Kvale and Brinkman (2009) and first interviewed experts as a means of gaining broad insight about this collective. We began by interviewing five Nascar experts: a vice-president of marketing with Nascar, a racetrack owner, two managers with a Nascar racing team, and an author of a book on Nascar. Our interviews with these experts focused on their detailed and extensive experience with Nascar and Nascar fans. We asked them to tell us what they perceived to be the identity of Nascar, Nascar's level of prestige, the aspects of Nascar's identity with which they and most fans identified, and why they thought fans identified with Nascar. We also asked them to tell us how they expressed their identification with Nascar and how other fans expressed their identification. We followed up each question with requests for detailed descriptions and specific examples of their answers (e.g., Explain why you define Nascar's identity the way you do? Are there examples that illustrate that definition of Nascar's identity?).

We next interviewed eight self-identified "avid fans" of Nascar (three women, five men, average age 46 years) obtained through friendship ties, to gain a preliminary picture of fans' perspective of Nascar's identity and prestige, and their reasons for identifying with the collective. These fans held a variety of occupations (student, manager, IT technician, retail, retired) and were from all parts of the US (three west coast, two midwest, two south, one east coast). We asked them the same questions as we asked the Nascar experts, and we used this set of fan interviews to verify our archival data and to help us develop a more focused set of interview questions to use in our phase 2 interviews.

Analysis of archival data and initial interviews. We began our data analysis with our archival documents. We first used an open coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to search for any comments in the documents that related to Nascar's collective identity, relative prestige, and fan identification. In searching for evidence of Nascar's collective identity, we used past research as a guide, and searched for comments about the "type" or "kind" of collective attributed to Nascar as evidence that people were describing Nascar in terms of identity categorizations (see Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). In searching for evidence about Nascar's relative prestige we looked for comments about the "status," "prestige," or "eliteness" of Nascar. We also did searches of the internet using search prompts such as "why do people like Nascar?", "Describe a typical Nascar fan", and "Why is Nascar so popular?" to uncover evidence of fans' perceptions of Nascar's prestige.

Finally, in searching for evidence of fan identification with Nascar, we relied on Mael and Ashforth's (1992) definition of identification and looked for terms or phrases such as "I connect to Nascar because...", "the aspects of Nascar that I feel I can relate to are...", or "I identify [or connect] with X" (as a component of Nascar). We also looked for statements that suggested that fans perceived a sense of "oneness" with Nascar, such as statements about "we Nascar fans" or statements about being part of the "Nascar family." In this way, we were searching for evidence of the *cognition* of fan identification with Nascar (i.e., perceptions of overlap between a fan's self-concepts and the identity of Nascar), rather than mere *expressions* of fan identification with Nascar (i.e., things Nascar fans did because they identified with the collective, such as go to races or watch races). The first author and a research assistant performed open coding on all of the documents and developed a document comprising 139 distinct statements about Nascar identity, 44 statements about Nascar prestige, and 102 distinct statements about reasons for fan identification with Nascar. We discussed and resolved all discrepancies in our coding.

We next performed the same type of open coding on the initial interview data from experts and fans. From these 13 interviews, we found 24 statements about Nascar identity, 10 statements about Nascar prestige, and 36 statements about reasons for fan identification. Again, we discussed and resolved all discrepancies in our coding.

Finally, we went back through all the open coding statements from both the archival documents and the initial interviews and performed axial coding to determine themes or patterns in all of the statements about Nascar's identity, prestige, and reasons for fan identification (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first author and a research assistant first coded half of each set of data (i.e., half of the statements from the documents and half of the interview statements) and compared their findings. They discussed and resolved all discrepancies until they felt confident they had an unambiguous coding scheme. They then coded the remaining comments using that scheme. Inter-coder reliability on this second set of coding was measured using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960), and was an acceptable level of $\kappa = .83$. We discussed and resolved all discrepancies.

Based on our phase 1 analysis of data about Nascar's identity and fan identification, we identified Nascar's identity (based on four values) and one primary predictor of fan identification with Nascar: opportunities for authentic self-expression. We also found evidence that Nascar fans perceived the collective as not high in prestige.

Phase 2

Based on our findings from phase 1, we performed a second set of interviews with fans attending live Nascar races. We used this set of interviews to more fully understand the definition of Nascar's identity, predictors of fan identification with Nascar, and fans' perceptions of the collective's prestige.

Phase 2 interviews. We interviewed fans who were attending any one of five live Nascar races during the 2010 and 2011 race seasons. The five races included: Fontana, California (Oct. 10, 2010); Phoenix, Arizona (Nov. 14, 2010); Bristol, Tennessee (March 20, 2011); Talladega, Alabama (April 17, 2011); and Charlotte, North Carolina (May 29, 2011). We chose these five races because they included three "classic" and high-profile Nascar races attended by the most loyal fans (i.e., Bristol, Talladega, and Charlotte), as well as two lesser-known races in a separate geographic region of the country (Fontana and Phoenix). This group of races provided access to fans from the largest region of Nascar popularity in the US (i.e., the south) and to fans from the fastest-growing region of Nascar popularity in the US (i.e., the west).

We solicited all participants at tailgating activities (i.e., camping or picnic activities held in fields near the race tracks) prior to Nascar races, and interviewed them approximately 1 week later over the phone. The number of participants from each of the race sites was: Fontana 5, Phoenix 5, Bristol 5, Talladega 8, and Charlotte 7. In in-depth interviews, we asked all of the same questions we asked in phase 1 interviews—i.e., we asked each of these participants to define Nascar's identity in general (including its level of prestige), tell us their general level of identification with Nascar, and explain why they identified with Nascar. For each of the reasons for identification given by informants, we asked them to discuss that reason more specifically and in detail. For example, we asked if they could rank the relative importance of different reasons for identifying, and to provide examples of their identification with Nascar. We followed up with more indepth questions about why identifying with Nascar was important and how Nascar was distinctive (compared to other collectives) in motivating their identification. We also asked for specific stories that illustrated their identification with Nascar (e.g., an instance in which their identification with Nascar was salient or was tested). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Analysis of later interviews. The first author and a research assistant read all interview transcripts from our phase 2 interviews. We then constructed a second document including all fan comments about Nascar's identity, why they identified with Nascar, and perceptions of Nascar's prestige. We used open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to categorize this data according to identity definitions, reasons for fan identification, and general level of perceived prestige. As before, we discussed and resolved all discrepancies in coding. Next, we used axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify patterns in the categorized data. Again, we discussed and resolved all discrepancies in coding. The first author and research assistant coded data as indicating strong evidence for a pattern if there was extended discussion of a particular finding by at least half of informants, and moderate evidence for pattern if there was extended discussion of a particular finding by one-quarter to one-half of informants.

Study 1 Findings

Our data and analysis from study 1 provided insight about fans' perceptions of Nascar's prestige and identity, as well as the predictors of fan identification with Nascar. First, we found evidence that Nascar was not perceived as high in prestige compared to similar collectives, even by loyal fans. Second, we found evidence that Nascar's collective identity was grounded in four *core values* that were important to Nascar fans. Finally, we found evidence that the primary predictor of fan identification with Nascar was a sense that Nascar provided them with *opportunities for authentic self-expression* in relation to these values, and in particular, to the value of patriotism. We discuss these findings in more detail below. Tables summarizing additional evidence for these findings are available as supplemental material in the online version of this article.

Perceptions of Nascar's prestige

Our analysis of study 1 archival and interview data suggest that most fans and expert observers did not perceive Nascar to be high in prestige, nor was high prestige noted by fans when asked to describe Nascar and why they were attracted to it. Instead, fan comments in archival documents and interview data indicated that they perceived Nascar to be lower in prestige compared with similar collectives, such as the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball, or Formula One auto racing. It is important to note, however, that this relatively lower level of

prestige was not seen as signal that Nascar was an undesirable or “bad” collective. Instead, Nascar’s modest level of prestige was seen as an outcome of the sport’s humble roots and as a consequence of its status as a popular and inclusive, “everyman’s” sport. These features of Nascar were widely viewed as good things. As one informant noted when asked about Nascar’s prestige:

Nascar is very blue-collar and working class. We don’t try to pretend that we’re a high-status like Formula One—with all its fancy sponsors like Rolex and Perrier. And it doesn’t cost an arm and a leg to attend a Nascar race like it does for an NFL game. I would say we [the Nascar collective] are not very prestigious in the sense that we’re not an exclusive group. We’re open to everyone ... and that’s one thing I like about Nascar. ... So, I guess I would say that we’re a good group but we’re not what I would call “prestigious.”

Similarly, an expert explained:

Nascar is always going to be seen as a sport with humble beginnings and middle or lower class appeal. It’s a highly technical sport that appeals to the masses and comes across as small town and rural. We came from bootleggers in the rural South and that is just part of who we are and part of what people like about us.

These quotes, which are typical of those collected through our interview and archival data sources, provide confirmation of our initial impressions that Nascar was perceived by fans to be appealing, but not high in prestige. While this is not proof of Nascar’s specific level of prestige, it does suggest that fans did not perceive the collective as high in prestige. We further confirm these impressions through a large-scale survey, described in study 2.

Nascar’s identity

Our analyses revealed that Nascar’s identity was defined, primarily, by the dimensions of “patriotism,” “family,” “competition,” and “tradition.” These four identity dimensions were common across archival and interview sources, and all sources mentioned all four of these dimensions as a part of Nascar’s identity. Further, based on our analysis, we interpreted these identity dimensions as *values*—defined as general beliefs about the importance of normatively desirable behaviors or end states (e.g., Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Values tell people how they should behave and how resources should be allocated. Below, we discuss the four primary or core values defining Nascar’s identity based on our analysis of data from study 1. Due to space considerations, we provide only a representative sampling of the extensive data we obtained illustrating each value.

Patriotism. First, and most commonly, fans defined Nascar’s identity in terms of the value of patriotism. As one fan noted:

We are the people that make America great. We are the people that pay taxes, we are the people that go to war and defend this country. That’s who Nascar is.

In fact, patriotism in the form of “American Pride” and the “Honoring the Military” was listed as the top value that defined Nascar in one online article. As Nascar columnist Sandra MacWatters noted:

Pre-race ceremonies are replete with displays of our American flag, whether it be a massive flag on the infield at a NASCAR event, waving from a pole, or tiny flags in the hands of the fans being hoisted in the air. The American flag is tradition at all motorsport events along with the singing of the national anthem. Members of the military find special recognition at NASCAR national events either as participants in various ceremonies or as guests of the owners, teams and sponsors. The military is recognized and some

cars are sponsored by different branches of our armed forces. American pride is evident when cars go racing and the fans are there to watch. (MacWatters, 2010)

This value categorization of Nascar as “patriotic” was evident not only in print comments, but in many visual images from the racetrack (it should be noted that these were very common images at every Nascar race televised and personally viewed by the authors). As one fan noted:

I don’t watch Nascar for the crashes. I watch it because it’s one of the definitions of America. Think about it. Nascar is a pure American sport.

Family. Second, Nascar’s identity was strongly tied to the values of family and community. As one fan put it:

I think Nascar is about friends, family, memories, you know, being part of the group that, you know, enjoys like things. It’s about camaraderie and family.

This sentiment was shared by many fans, and even noted by President Barack Obama during a White House visit with Nascar drivers. As he noted:

Families can go to the track and they can see these great races and enjoy a good family event that lasts for awhile and it’s affordable. (President Barack Obama, August 19, 2009, quoted live on ESPN’s *NASCAR Now* television show)

Competition. Third, many fans perceived Nascar as defined by the value of competition. In this vein, one Nascar fan blogged:

NASCAR is brash, no holds barred, take no prisoners competition. It’s speed, and burning rubber. There’s nothing else like it. It’s one of the only places that you can wreck another competitor and keep on going.

Tradition. Finally, Nascar’s identity was linked to the value of tradition, including the notion that Nascar stayed true to its humble, southern roots, its connection to Christian faith, and its small town and rural values. As one fan put it:

NASCAR’s always been about the south and southern traditions. I mean, that’s always been the dominant thing, I guess, thing identified with it for me. It’s about, you know, a sport that was born in the South, you know, where they’re highly religious and relate to small town values and, you know, and that still comes through today.

Summary. In summary, our findings from archival and interview data indicate that fans perceived Nascar’s identity to be defined by the core values of patriotism, family, competition, and tradition. Importantly, these four values were consistently identified as defining Nascar’s identity across all data sources.

Predictors of fan identification with Nascar

Our analyses of study 1 data indicated that fan identification with Nascar had one primary predictor: a sense that Nascar provided fans with *opportunities for authentic self-expression* in relation to important personal values.

Thus, identifying fans perceived that they could “be themselves” or express their “true selves” when at Nascar events or around other Nascar fans. These insights align with what psychologists have called “authentic self-expression,” such that a fan “acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382).

Further, fan comments suggested that the ability or opportunity to express their authentic selves with regard to important values was a key determinant of their identification with the Nascar collective. In particular, fans indicated that their ability to express their true selves was related to expressing one or more of the core values defining Nascar’s identity (i.e., patriotism, family, competition, and tradition).

Importantly, however, we found that a large majority of comments relating opportunities for authentic self-expression to identification with Nascar were related to *patriotism* (compared to the other three values defining Nascar’s identity). Thus, most of the fans we interviewed claimed that that Nascar was one of the few places left where a person could express and display the value of patriotism, which led them to feel strongly connected to the collective. As one fan put it:

It’s a sport that’s not scared to stand up and say, “Hey, we support the troops. And, we’re Americans.” And in the PC world, America is not always supposed to be the good guy. And it’s okay to go to a Nascar race and say, “you know what, I’m an American, and American exceptionalism is a good thing.”

Further, numerous fans commented on how distinctive Nascar was in terms of the *degree* to which patriotism was an important part of collective identity and was expressed by fans at races. As one fan noted:

You do see the Star-Spangled Banner being played at most major sporting events, but you don’t see the respect it’s given at a Nascar race. Like you go to a football game, baseball game, the PBR [Professional Bull Riding] and people are asked to stand for the national anthem. And they stand, some people take their hat off, some don’t, people are talking, there’s just no respect given, you know, not what I feel is due. But Nascar fans, you know the stadium is quiet, I mean, nobody’s talking. I mean, it’s just ... it amazes me. That is probably still one of the most powerful things every weekend, every race I go to. It is just a very ... the fans, ... they’re just very respectful in Nascar and, you know, I guess they foster and honor that And I guess I’m patriotic in that it gives me just an incredible sense of fulfillment and pride that I can do that. I just don’t feel that at any other type of event.

In this way, a majority of fans indicated that their identification with Nascar was predicated on the fact that patriotism was a value that was important to their “authentic” selves and was a value that could be easily expressed when attending Nascar events. This finding was consistent across the five race locations in which we solicited fan interviews. In fact, we found that the opportunity “to be patriotic” was mentioned twice as many times as any other reason for identifying with Nascar. Further, we found that 70% of informants mentioned “patriotism” as an important value defining Nascar and the opportunity “to be patriotic” as an important reason to identify with Nascar. This was compared to the following percentages for the other three values: family (50%), competition (49%), and tradition (44%). We also found patriotism to be mentioned in a majority of archival data relevant to Nascar’s identity and the reason it is so popular with fans. No other value was mentioned in over half of all archival data as an important dimension of Nascar’s identity. It is worthwhile to examine this evidence more closely.

First, we found that, although Nascar’s primary stated purpose is to put on auto racing events, it was easy for participants to identify patriotism as a central value defining Nascar’s identity. Thus, participants noted that Nascar made the value of patriotism a salient part of its identity through extensive displays of US military ceremony, symbolism, and tributes. For

example, at all five races attended by the first author, a medley of patriotic-themed popular songs was sung or played prior to the race start (e.g., Billy Ray Cyrus' hit "All Gave Some, Some Gave All" and Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA") accompanied by a video montage of patriotic scenes. In addition, most races included an audience-wide recitation of the pledge of allegiance (led by a Nascar driver), the playing of the National Anthem, a military color guard, and a military flyover (that was timed to happen right as the National Anthem was ending). At all events, there was a strong presence of military personnel in uniform (which allowed those personnel to get special access to the infield and pit row activities in many cases). Many fans noted that Nascar was unique among professional sports in their devotion to patriotism as a prominent value. As one fan noted:

I would say that Nascar is really the only sport that really sticks with patriotism and they don't just use it for marketing. They really are involved with it and that's why I like it.

Second, as a result of this clear overlap between the value of patriotism and Nascar's identity, many fans reported that they were drawn to the collective and identified with it. As one fan said:

Stock car racing is a great connection to the USA because of its connection to American car brands and its roots in American history. It's very different when you get into the open wheel racing like in Formula One, which has become more global, well then you really lose that connection to a country type of thing. I think that's one of the reasons I'm proud to say I'm a Nascar fan ... because it's truly American.

Finally, in looking further at fans' explanations of what patriotism meant to them, why it was an important shared value with Nascar, and how it was associated with Nascar compared to other collectives, we discovered that *the scarcity of opportunities for expressing this value within collectives was precisely what made it so powerful to fans*. That is, many Nascar fans claimed patriotism as an important personal value, but said there were few opportunities outside of Nascar to affirm this value, and thus express their "true selves." As one fan noted:

I think there's a great connection between Nascar and patriotism that you don't find anywhere else. I think that, you know, when they have the jets fly over, I get tears in my eyes. I mean, I hear the national anthem, I get tears in my eyes. I feel more patriotic going to a Nascar race than anywhere else. I mean, look at Bristol, they brought some soldiers home [from Afghanistan], brought them back together earlier than they were supposed to be home from tour. I mean, who would think of doing something like that? You know, and nobody else is thinking of doing that.

Similarly, another informant noted:

There are not a lot of places where you can kind of revel in unrepentant patriotism and good ol' American values and so on and Nascar is definitely one of them.

These findings help to explain why the opportunity for authentic self-expression was important enough to promote strong fan identification despite the fact that Nascar was not high in prestige. Presumably, other, more prestigious collectives allow expression of at least some of the same values that define Nascar (e.g., competition, tradition, and family seem like values that might be associated with the more prestigious collective of Major League Baseball). But patriotism was a value that was difficult to affirm in an authentic manner—at least to the same degree—in any other well-known collective. Thus, the opportunity to express and affirm this important value emerged as an especially strong predictor of fan identification with Nascar.

Summary of study 1 findings

Findings from study 1 did not reveal evidence that Nascar fans were drawn to the collective because of its prestige. Instead, our findings from study 1 indicate that fans' belief that they could engage in authentic self-expression of important values (related to Nascar's identity)—especially those that were difficult to affirm elsewhere (e.g., patriotism)—was the primary predictor of their identification with the collective. This finding helps to explain why individuals might strongly identify with a collective like Nascar that was not high in prestige. Based on these findings, we offer the following general hypothesis:

General hypothesis: *For collectives that are not high in prestige, the effect of perceived opportunity for authentic self-expression is greater than that of perceived external prestige in predicting individual identification.*

In a second, quantitative study, we sought to provide empirical support for this hypothesis via a large-scale, longitudinal, survey-based study using a large sample of Nascar fans (different from those included in our qualitative study).

Study 2 Methods

To justify our use of Nascar fans as a context for testing our general hypothesis, we first needed to empirically validate our study 1 finding that fans did not perceive Nascar to be high in prestige. In particular, we wanted to compare Nascar's perceived external prestige (PEP) to that of other collectives studied in extant, empirical research where collective identification was shown, and standardized scales of PEP and identification were used (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Based on this goal, our first, specific hypotheses in study 2 was:

Specific hypothesis 1: *Average ratings of Nascar's perceived external prestige (PEP) by identifying fans will be lower than those of other collectives studied in extant, empirical research where collective identification was shown, and standardized scales of PEP and identification were used.*

Next, our primary goal of study 2 was to empirically test our general hypothesis derived from study 1 regarding the predictors of identification with collectives not high in prestige (i.e., perceived opportunity for authentic self-expression vs. perceived external prestige). More specifically, we wanted to test this hypothesis with fans of Nascar. Thus, our second, specific hypothesis for study 2 was:

Specific hypothesis 2: *The effect of perceived opportunity for authentic self-expression is greater than that of perceived external prestige in predicting fan identification with Nascar.*

Finally, we wanted to confirm, in the Nascar context, the established finding that collective identification leads to behaviors that support the collective, such as greater effort on behalf of the collective and social endorsement of the collective (e.g., see Bartel, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002). Based on this goal, our third, specific hypotheses in study 2 was:

Specific hypothesis 3: *Identification with Nascar will predict fans' supportive behaviors of the collective, such as greater effort on behalf of the collective and social endorsement of the collective.*

Respondents. Respondents were members of the Nascar Fan Council, an official group of over 10,000 Nascar fans who agreed to provide feedback to Nascar, over many years, on a variety of issues ranging from reactions to marketing campaigns to evaluation of racing rules changes. Fan Council members were well-suited for our study because we wanted to focus on members of the Nascar collective who were likely to hold a clear conception of Nascar and its identity. Participants consisted of a random set of 1,876 Fan Council members (58% male, 64% married, and average age 45 years old), from an original set of 2,000 members selected by Nascar (124 of these original members had out-of-date contact information and could not be reached). We obtained individual demographic data on each participant and were able to identify each participant across the three phases of our study (described below). Participants came from all over the US, and their geographic composition was 16% northeast, 24% midwest, 41% south, and 18% west coast. These demographic characteristics roughly mirrored the population of Nascar fans in the US, according to Nascar's marketing department.

Survey design. Our methods involved three, large-scale, online surveys at three points in time to mirror the conceptual causal order of the relationships we were testing. Our surveys were sent directly from Nascar's corporate marketing department to members of the Nascar Fan Council. Our first survey measured fans' ratings of opportunity for authentic self-expression with Nascar, and their perceptions of Nascar's perceived external prestige. Six months later, we sent the same set of fans a second survey assessing their level of identification with Nascar. This lag between surveys makes it unlikely that individuals would remember their responses to the first survey, thus reducing the threat of priming, self-consistency biases, mood effects, or hypothesis guessing. Of the 1,876 individuals to whom we sent the initial survey, 1,449 completed the second survey (77% response rate). Finally, eight months after the second survey, we collected data on outcomes of fan collective identification. Of the 1,449 fans who completed the time 1 and 2 surveys, 1,413 completed the time 3 survey (97% response rate).

Measures. In our first survey, we measured *perceived external prestige* by adapting Mael and Ashforth's (1992) measure of this variable (i.e., "most people think of Nascar as high status," "most people think highly of Nascar," and "Nascar is perceived as prestigious by most people").

We measured *opportunity for authentic self-expression* with three items that emerged from respondents' comments in our qualitative research, and also consistent with Waterman's (1993) self-expression scale (i.e., People associated with Nascar understand my point of view; I can be myself around Nascar fans; When I'm with Nascar fans, I feel that I am accepted for who I am). All items were assessed on 7-point Likert-type scales.

In our second survey, we measured *identification* with Nascar by adapting Mael and Ashforth's (1992) organizational identification scale (i.e., "when someone praises Nascar it feels like a personal compliment to me," "the successes of Nascar are my successes," "when someone criticizes Nascar it feels like a personal insult").

Finally, in the third survey we measured the extent to which fans supported Nascar. We used three items that Nascar marketing executives suggested were among the best indicators of fan support for Nascar, based on their own data analysis. Our first measure asked fans how likely they would be to recommend Nascar to friends (i.e., "I would recommend Nascar to a friend). We measured responses to this question on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Next, we asked fans how many races they watched on television in a typical race season (i.e., "Thinking of a typical race season, approximately how many of the following Nascar Series races do you watch on television?"). Finally, we asked fans to report the number of

races that they personally attended (i.e., “Thinking of a typical race season, approximately how many of the following Nascar Series races do you personally attend?”).

Study 2 Analysis and Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are displayed in Table 1.

Fans’ perceptions of Nascar’s perceived external prestige

To compare Nascars’ perceived external prestige (as perceived by fans) to the average level of perceived external prestige associated with other collectives studied in empirical research where identification was shown, we looked at published studies that used the validated measures of perceived external prestige and identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). We found ten relatively recent empirical studies meeting this condition (included in Note 2). These studies revealed an average level of perceived external prestige of 5.45 out of 7 (ranging from 5.11 to 5.75). The average level of collective identification in these studies was 5.18 out of 7, and ranged from 4.68 to 5.96. Thus, these studies showed that moderately to strongly identifying individuals perceived the prestige of collectives with which they identified as moderately high (i.e., 5.45 out of 7).

Analysis of our survey data indicated that fans’ mean level of identification with Nascar was 4.73 out of 7 ($SD = 1.52$). This score indicated a moderately strong level of identification with Nascar among respondents. Analysis also revealed that fans’ mean rating of perceived external prestige for Nascar was 4.07 out of 7 ($SD = 1.35$). This score was equivalent to “neutral” on the response scale (i.e., neither agree nor disagree with statements about the collective’s perceived external prestige). A t-test confirmed that fans’ reported perceived external prestige of Nascar was significantly lower than the perceived external prestige reported in past studies ($t = 2.26$, $p < .001$). Overall, then, these results provide quantitative empirical support for specific hypothesis 1.

Predictors and outcomes of fan identification with Nascar

We used Stata to conduct a structural equation model estimating all of the relationships in our model (shown in Figure 1). We standardized all of the predictor variables, then examined the association of opportunity for authentic self-expression and perceived external prestige with each of the outcomes (recommending Nascar to friends, watching Nascar, and attending races), mediated by collective identification. For each outcome, we conducted a mediation analysis using seemingly unrelated regression (Ender 2011; Hayes & Scharkow, 2013; Kenny, 2008). This analysis simultaneously tests the indirect effects of both predictors (opportunity for authentic self-expression and perceived external prestige) on the relevant outcome through collective identification. The numbers in brackets below are bias-corrected 95% CIs bootstrapped with 5,000 resamples.

As shown in Figure 1, results revealed that the direct effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on collective identification was .613 ($p < .001$) while the direct effect of perceived external prestige on collective identification was .432 ($p < .001$). Figure 1 also shows that the direct effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on recommending Nascar to friends through collective identification was significant: $b = .413$ (.268, .558), $p < .0001$. The indirect effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on recommending Nascar to friends through collective identification was significant: $b = .144$ (.092, .195), $p < .0001$, and the total effect was .557 (.418, .695), ($p < .0001$).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Variables for Study 2.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender (female = 1)	1.42	0.49										
2. Age	5.00	1.23	-0.03									
3. Income	3.23	1.34	-0.13	-0.01								
4. Education	4.13	0.95	0.00	-0.06	0.34							
5. Married	2.32	1.11	0.14	0.23	-0.15	-0.09						
6. External prestige (T1)	4.08	1.35	0.07	0.12	-0.14	-0.16	0.07					
7. Self-expression (T1)	5.54	1.15	0.11	-0.02	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.47				
8. Organizational identification (T2)	4.73	1.52	0.11	-0.05	-0.05	-0.10	0.03	0.40	0.45			
9. Recommend NASCAR (T3)	9.02	1.77	0.14	0.01	-0.04	-0.07	0.02	0.39	0.38	0.35		
10. Watch NASCAR races (T3)	32.59	5.74	0.08	-0.05	-0.03	-0.06	-0.06	0.12	0.18	0.20	0.21	
11. Attend NASCAR races (T3)	1.81	3.22	-0.02	-0.07	0.16	0.10	-0.04	0.00	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.02

Listwise $n = 1167$; $p < .05$ for $r > .05$; $p < .01$ for $r > .08$.

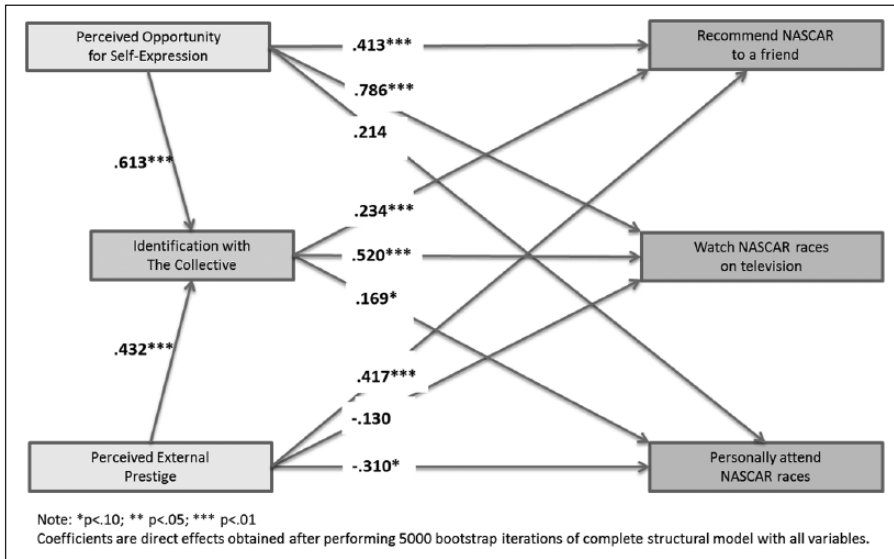


Figure 1. Study 2 Results.

These results suggest that the more people perceived that Nascar permitted authentic self-expression, the more they identified with Nascar, which in turn was related to them recommending Nascar to friends. The total effect of perceived external prestige on recommending Nascar through collective identification was also significant, albeit smaller: $b = .518 (.402, .635)$, $p < .0001$.

Next, results revealed that the direct effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on watching Nascar was significant: $b = .788 (.350, 1.22)$, $p < .0001$. The indirect effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on watching Nascar through collective identification was significant: $b = .319 (.155, .483)$, $p < .0001$, and the total effect was $1.11 (.689, 1.53)$, ($p < .0001$). That is, the more people perceived that Nascar permitted authentic self-expression, the more they identified with Nascar, which in turn was related to them watching Nascar events. The total effect of perceived external prestige on watching Nascar through collective identification was not significant: $b = .095 (-.268, .457)$, $p > .05$.

Results revealed that the direct effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression on attending Nascar races was not significant: $b = .214 (-.155, .584)$, $p > .05$. The indirect effect of opportunity for authentic self-expression, through collective identification, on attending Nascar races was $b = .104 (-.013, .221)$, $p < .10$, and the total effect was positive and significant $b = .318 (.007, .630)$, ($p < .05$). The total effect of perceived external prestige on watching Nascar through collective identification was *negative* and significant $b = -.237 (-.467, .008)$, $p < .05$.

We used a bootstrap analysis with SEM examining bootstrapped with 5,000 resamples to test the difference in indirect effects for each of the three outcome variables (after standardizing both self-expression and external prestige). Results revealed that the difference in indirect effect is significant for “recommending to friends” ($p < .048$), marginally significant for “watching on TV” ($p < .076$), and not significant for “attending races” ($p < .218$).

Taken together, these analyses provide support for our specific hypothesis 2, specific hypothesis 3, and our general hypothesis. Opportunity for authentic self-expression was a significant predictor of fan identification with Nascar, and the effect of opportunity for self-expression is greater than the effect of perceived external prestige. In addition, fan identification with Nascar led to

collective-supporting behaviors, including recommending the collective to friends, and watching Nascar races. Finally, results showed that identification with Nascar mediated the relationship between opportunity for authentic self-expression and two supportive behaviors.

Discussion

In this paper, we presented evidence that the opportunity to express one's authentic self when interacting with a collective may be an important predictor of identification with that collective. Further, our findings suggest that opportunity for authentic self-expression of *central values that are difficult to express elsewhere* may be important enough to motivate identification with collectives that are not high in perceived external prestige (and thus, relatively unlikely to enhance people's self-esteem). While these findings may make sense to individuals who currently hold such identifications, they are unique among the extensive empirical research on collective identification, and are among the first to show specific predictors of collective identification that are stronger than perceived external prestige. As such, our findings have implications for theory as well as a number of methodological strengths and limitations.

Theoretical implications

Our findings provide new insights about why, when, and how authenticity is related to collective identification. As a result, they flesh out a better overall understanding of why people identify with particular collectives. That is, all else being equal, our results help answer questions such as "Why does expressing authenticity predict collective identification?," "Under what circumstances is the opportunity for authentic self-expression more important than the opportunity to gain high status to organizational identifiers?," and "How might individuals most effectively signal an authentic identity to others?"

Why expressing authenticity predicts collective identification. Authentic self-expression is a defining characteristic of what it means to be human (Kernis, 2003). In fact, according to many philosophers, writers, and researchers, authentic self-expression allows individuals to achieve the most fulfilling and satisfying life possible (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The core of authenticity is that each person has a true inner self and that only by expressing this inner self through actions in the external world can a person achieve self-fulfillment as an authentic human being (Guignon, 2004). Thus, to be authentic, we must align our internal experiences (e.g., values, beliefs, feelings) with our external expressions (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouis, & Joseph, 2008).

Recent positive psychology research suggests that, in addition to improving individual self-fulfillment, authentic self-expression may have a number of positive effects in collectives, such as improving trust, commitment, work engagement, and interpersonal relationships (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2012). Further, recent research on collective identity resurrection has shown that authenticity in lived experiences with a collective is critical to sustaining a collective identity (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013). In this paper, we add to this developing stream of research by demonstrating that the ability to express individual authenticity, through the display of deeply held but difficult-to-affirm values, may be a critical predictor of collective identification.

In general, these findings support Pratt's (1998) early ideas about "identification through affinity," or "recognizing an organization as one that has values and beliefs that are similar to those in one's own identity" (Pratt, 1998, p. 179). Further, although these ideas have not gained significant

attention in the organizational identity literature, Pratt (1998, p. 184) argued almost 20 years ago that organizations may attract identifiers because of their particular “worldview” or “vision” because these types of organizations allow identifiers to find meaning and purpose in life by enacting a set of “deeply held personal values.” Thus, our findings suggest that future work should heed Pratt’s early advice and focus on the role of values and value expression as predictors of identification.

These findings also give credence to recent research suggesting that values may be central to role identities (i.e., identities that are linked to specific roles, such as being a “professor” or a “parent”) through their links to authenticity. As Hitlin (2003, p. 123) notes: “Authenticity is a primary self-motive (Gecas, 1991); we feel authentic when we behave in keeping with our values.” As a result, we may take on role identities that allow us to authentically express important values. Our findings extend these ideas by showing how needs for authenticity may also be met by taking on collective identifications that allow the expression of deeply held values. Thus, while Hitlin focused on individual role identities as linked to authenticity and values, our findings suggest that the collective identity of Nascar also allowed individuals to express their true selves.

When needs for authenticity motivate collective identification. As noted in the Introduction, there is a deep well of research suggesting that perceived external prestige predicts collective identification because it satisfies individual needs for self-esteem enhancement (He & Brown, 2013). By contrast, our findings—showing that opportunity for authentic self-expression is a stronger predictor of identification with Nascar than is perceived external prestige—suggest that, at least in some situations, needs for authenticity (which may be satisfied when identifying with Nascar) may be more powerful motivators of collective identification than needs for self-esteem enhancement. Further, our findings suggest that future research should compare motives for self-esteem enhancement vs. authenticity as predictors of identification more directly.

In general, these findings are consistent with evidence that, in specific situations, other self-needs may dominate needs for self-esteem enhancement in identity construction (Vignoles et al., 2011). For example, Swann, Rentfrow, and Guinn (2003) have found that individuals may willingly give up opportunities for self-enhancement in order to self-verify firmly held, but negative, self-views. In other studies, researchers have found that individuals may provide more accurate but less positive self-assessments of their identities in situations where modesty and accuracy are desired (Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007).

Our findings extend these insights by identifying a different context in which needs, other than desires for self-enhancement, may dominate individuals’ identity definitions: *contexts that provide a rare opportunity to affirm an authentic self-concept related to an important value.* That is, our findings suggest that individuals will be motivated to authentically express dimensions of their identities (even if such self-expression is not self-enhancing) if they find themselves in a situation where they have the rare opportunity to do so. We would argue that there are, indeed, many examples of collectives that are comparable to Nascar in terms of how they might use “opportunity for authentic self-expression” to attract identifiers. For example, I could point out my husband’s favorite New York City deli, where a big part of the draw of going is to take part in the “authentic New York experience” of having the guys at the deli yell at you and schmoozing with the regulars in line about the Yankees. It’s not that the bagels are that great or the place is high prestige—it’s that it’s a rare place where you can express your authentic “New Yorker” values.

These findings suggest authentic self-expression may not always be easy. Thus, identification with Nascar represented one of the only ways that fans could engage in self-expression with relation to patriotism—without actually having to join the military or help defend the country. By contrast, individuals could find many other opportunities to express the values of family, competition, and tradition (i.e., Major League Baseball provides a family atmosphere with many traditions

and intense competition—yet it pales in its attention to patriotism compared to Nascar). In this manner, the general difficulty in expressing closely held values may provide a clue to when and where individuals engage in authentic self-expression, i.e., in situations where expressing those values is possible (or even welcome).

How authenticity signals personal identity. Finally, our findings have implications for how collectives allow individuals to signal their own personal identities to themselves and to others. Conceptually, it may be difficult to signal unique, personal values when you identify with high-status groups—because such identification can easily be explained through prestige. That is, from an identity signaling perspective, the problem with prestige is that it sends loud signals to others, who likely assume the association is based on status. This logic implies that authenticity is hardest to affirm in high-status organizations, where members gain self-enhancement through their association. From this perspective, if you really want to show you are being true to your authentic self, you need to find a less prestigious association to show it. Our results thus support the application of signaling theory to how individuals verify their personal values by exacting a “cost” in terms of status, i.e., moderate-prestige collectives permit individuals to provide reliable and credible signals of their authentic traits and characteristics (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011).

Methodological strengths and limitations

Our study has a number of methodological strengths, as well as a few important limitations and related opportunities for future research. In terms of strengths, our study combined qualitative and inductive theory elaboration with quantitative and deductive theory testing. Thus, we started with qualitative archival, observational and interview data to understand the puzzle of individuals’ identification with Nascar. We used these exploratory results to develop an initial framework depicting opportunity for authentic self-expression as a predictor of Nascar identification that is generally not discussed in the literature. We then tested this model empirically in a second, longitudinal study where we measured the predictors, mediators, and outcomes at different times to help rule out some alternative explanations for the results. In this way, our research starts with a phenomenon not accounted for by existing theories of identification, then moves from theory elaboration to theory testing (Fine & Elsbach, 2000).

Despite this full cycle theory elaboration, our studies have a number of limitations that point to opportunities for future research. First, although we studied actual fans and their reported investments of time and money into Nascar, it would be useful to validate that fans’ behaviors actually match their survey responses (e.g., that identifying fans actually spend more time watching and discussing races).

Second, although our findings *suggest* that the underlying motive for fan identification with Nascar was the *need for authenticity* (because the primary predictor of identification was “perceived opportunity for authentic self-expression”), it is important to note that we do not have direct empirical evidence of this underlying motive. Future research should more directly examine whether or not need for authenticity is an underlying motive for collective identification.

Third, there clearly are characteristics of Nascar that contributed to the results that we reported—including the particular value of patriotism. Further, Nascar is a unique sport in that the overall collective comprises many diverse groups including drivers, their teams, the tracks, the team sponsors, the fans, and the corporate headquarters. It is a highly unique setting. Thus, although Nascar provided a valuable setting in which to examine identification with a collective that is not prestigious (by members’ own admission), it would be valuable to confirm these results in other, more

common collectives (e.g., professional or industry associations) that nevertheless develop strong member identification.

Relatedly, it would be useful to examine the relative effects of prestige and opportunities for authentic self-expression on identification in employment relationships with individual firms. As noted earlier, in studying fan identification with Nascar, we examined how non-employees identified with a larger collective rather than how employees might identify with a specific firm. Investigating how motives such as authenticity relate to employee identification with individual firms would, thus, be a worthwhile endeavor.

Finally, in this initial investigation, we did not examine whether individual differences, such as differences in “needs for uniqueness” (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977), moderate the importance of authentic self-expression. Likewise, differences across collectives, such as the crystallization of a collective’s culture (Chatman, 1989) or the national culture in which the collective operates, also may moderate the role of authentic self-expression.

Conclusion

Our study of Nascar fans provides rare evidence that individuals may identify with collectives that are not viewed as high in prestige, if those collectives allow identifiers to express their authentic and true selves. These insights open a new line of inquiry for scholars studying collective identity and identification.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material is available for this article online.

Notes

1. In this paper, we examine the broad concept of *collective identification*, rather than the narrower concept of organizational identification. A collective may be defined as a social group whose members share some common interest, but who are not necessarily bound by formal rules or structures (Scott, 1987). Based on this definition, organizations are a type of collective. Our focus on collective identification stems from our research setting and goals, which involve study of a collective (i.e., Nascar) that does not fit some formal definitions of organizations (Scott, 1987).
2. These studies include the following: Bamber and Iyer (2002), Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong, and Joustra (2007), Bartels et al. (2009), Ciftcioglu (2010), Carmeli et al. (2006), Fuller et al. (2006, 2009), Jones and Volpe (2011) Smidts et al. (2001), and Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, and Garud (2001). While these studies do not involve perfect comparators to Nascar (i.e., they mostly involve employment organizations rather than large sports organizations), they are the only empirical studies available that use both the standardized measures of PEP and identification most commonly found in empirical research.
3. Note that, while identification with a sports collective may be associated with consumption of that sport, identification and consumption are not the same construct. Thus, while fans may *consume* many different sports, they may only identify with some of these sports.

4. We should note that our focus in this paper is on predictors of collective identification, rather than on the underlying motives that relate to these predictors. Thus, while we can suggest underlying motives based on extant research and theory, our study will not explicitly examine these motives. This remains an opportunity for future research.

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Appendix

Study 1, Phase 1 Interview Guide

1. Please provide your name, occupation, years working, age, gender, home city and state, how long you have been a Nascar fan? Do you attend races? (how many per year)? Do you watch on TV (how often)?
2. How would you define the identity of Nascar? Alternate forms of question or follow up if difficulty with concept of “identity”: What are the central, distinctive, and enduring features of Nascar? How would you define Nascar as a collective? How would you categorize Nascar?
3. Do you identify with Nascar? Why? How strongly? Why? With what do you identify and why? Why do you think most fans identify with Nascar? For each reason given: Please explain and provide examples of when and where you are aware of your identification. Also, what are the most important reasons that you/other fans identify with Nascar?
4. How do you express your identification with Nascar? Provide specific and detailed examples. How do other fans express their identification with Nascar? Provide specific and detailed examples.
5. How would you define Nascar’s general level of prestige? Do you think of Nascar as prestigious? Is Nascar more or less prestigious than other sports collectives, like Major League Baseball, Formula 1 Auto Racing, the National Football League? Explain why or why not. Is Nascar’s prestige relevant to your identification with the collective? Why or Why not?

Study 1, Phase 2 Interview Guide

Same questions as above plus the following added to question 3: How is Nascar distinctive (compared to other collectives) in motivating your identification. Can you provide an example in which their identification with Nascar was salient or was tested?