

International Conference on Social Identity in Sport (ICSIS 2022)

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

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Abstract

In sport, supporters gravitate towards successful teams (Cialdini et al., 1976). However, there is a lack of research exploring how social context relates to supporter evaluations of success. Furthermore, there is an absence of research about why winning championships advances in-group status, in addition to large objective advantages in competitions. In this study, we explore how supporters of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) evaluated their team's success during the COVID-19 enforced league postponement in 2020. At the point of postponement, LFC were 25-points clear and required 6-points to win the championship. We executed a custom web-scraper extracting 15,193 posts on a supporter-owned LFC forum. Through a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we elicited three themes. First, despite LFC's performance not changing, the shifting social context created by the postponement caused identity threat because of an asterisk – potentially – being attached to the club's first league win in 30-years. Second, being awarded the league title was additive to their objective competition advantage because it was perceived to *immortalise* LFC's status (i) in 2019-2020 permanently, and (ii) by adding a 19th title that could be used in comparisons about cumulative performance with salient out-groups. Third, winning the championship was important because it represented a moment at which supporters, players and coaches were completely interchangeable in achieving a shared goal. In exploring an unusual contextual situation, we offer novel insights about success and intergroup status comparisons that can inform future research into achievement.

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