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Fan Communities and Subgroups: Exploring Individuals' Supporter Group Experiences

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FAN COMMUNITIES AND SUBGROUPS:
EXPLORING INDIVIDUALS' SUPPORTER GROUP EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation Presented

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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Isenberg School of Management

Department of Sport Management

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ABSTRACT

FAN COMMUNITIES AND SUBGROUPS: EXPLORING INDIVIDUALS' SUPPORTER GROUP EXPERIENCES

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The aggregate of a sport team's fans may be viewed as a consumption community that surrounds the team and its brand (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Hickman & Ward, 2007). Beneath this larger consumption umbrella, smaller groups of consumers may exist (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004), such as specific supporter groups for a team. Individuals thus may identify with multiple layers of the consumption group simultaneously (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Although past researchers have studied supporter groups (Giulianotti, 1996, 1999a; Parry & Malcolm, 2004) and consumption communities (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), there has been limited research on the interaction among subgroups within the superordinate group.

The current study examines the American Outlaws (AO), a supporter group for the United States men's national soccer team (USMNT). AO members belong to local AO chapters (subgroups) as well the national (superordinate) group. This structure

creates multiple levels of identification and is conducive to studying the phenomenon in question. Through employing a grounded theory methodology, data were collected via participant observation and ethnographic interviews over a two year period.

The current study identifies six prominent foci of identification among AO members: the USMNT, the United States of America (national identity), the sport of soccer, AO National, AO Local, and one's small social group. These identities are found to be mutually reinforcing and shape members' interactions with the team, the supporter group, and social groups therein. Specifically, the regional subgroups (AO Local chapters) create opportunities for social interaction, which fosters members' sense of community and group identification. In turn, this strengthens group cohesion at the subgroup and superordinate group levels. Further, supporter group members alter their team consumption experiences by creating places of prolonged identity salience at live games and when watching games on television. These events increase identification with the supporter group and its related identities. For practitioners, implications of this study include the understanding of supporter groups' impact on members' frequency and duration of brand-related consumption.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Spectator sport is a major source of leisure consumption. In the United States, over 200 million people annually watch or listen to sports (Humphries & Ruseski, 2010). Attendees spend approximately \$12 billion on tickets for live sporting events (Mintel, 2007), and consumers purchase \$10.09 billion in team-related paraphernalia (Mintel, 2007). For many, sport is not just an entertainment outlet — it is a source of social belonging (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Further, individuals define themselves through being part of larger social collectives of fans (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

Research has shown that many fans of sport teams identify with the team and internalize the team as part of their self-concept (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Benefits of this identification process include reducing social uncertainty regarding one's place within one's environment (Hogg, 2005) and maintaining or enhancing one's self-esteem (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1982). For example, an individual who strongly identifies with a team is seen as internalizing that team's performance, viewing team success as personal success (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Through consumption practices such as wearing team-licensed apparel and game attendance (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), individuals display their association to others, thereby outwardly expressing their identity (Cialdini et al., 1976). From a marketing standpoint, it is useful to understand this identification as it is believed to influence consumption.

Highly identified fans watch games with greater frequency (Pease & Zhang, 1996), spend more on team-related apparel (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), are more likely

to purchase sponsors' products (Madrigal, 2000), and are less sensitive to price changes or declines in team performance (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Likewise, highly identified consumers are more likely to champion the company to others (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bettencourt, 1997), are more resistant to negative information about the organization (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), and report higher levels of brand loyalty (McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003; Oliver, 1999; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). Given these benefits, it is useful for sport marketers to foster team identification among current and potential fans. One factor that has been suggested to drive identification with a team, as well as to enhance individuals' sport experiences, is the social aspect of consumption among sport fans (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Holt, 1995).

The social benefits of sport are well documented (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Guttman, 1986; Melnick, 1993; Wann, 1995). It is not surprising that sport fanship can be considered a group-level phenomenon as fans form common bonds with the team, players, the host city, and other elements surrounding sport organizations. The larger social aggregate of fans surrounding a sport team and its brand has been viewed as a consumption community (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Hickman & Ward, 2007). This community represents fans of a given team who share a physical or psychological connection (real or perceived) with each other and to the team, its players, or others involved in the organization. Beneath the larger consumption community umbrella, smaller collectives of consumers exist (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). One such body is the supporter group, a collective of fans who organize themselves into a defined social entity for the stated purpose of supporting a team.

Supporter groups generally provide visible displays of their fanship, particularly at or around live games, in order to encourage their teams' success in the games (Mason, 1980; Taylor, 1992). Supporter groups also serve roles such as arranging pregame events for fans and/or fundraising for the team. These groups exist in numerous forms. They may be formalized entities with bylaws and recognized standing within the fan community, or they may be informal collectives of fans. They may be hierarchical or egalitarian, centrally governed or distributed, instituted and managed by the sport organization or organically developed from within the fan community.

Supporter groups play an active role in the in-game experience for many sports, serving as de facto cheer leaders (Armstrong & Young, 2000), customizing the stadium through banners and decoration (Taylor, 1992), and even using games to spread messages of social change (Castro-Ramos, 2008; Guschwan, 2007). In many cases, supporter group activities extend beyond the confines of the stadium. Supporter groups may coordinate travel to away games or hold social functions that unite the group even when the team is not playing. Further, supporter groups exist at various levels of sport. They may form around a specific professional team (e.g., the Boca Juniors [Argentinean soccer team] La Doce supporters group), around national teams in a single sport (e.g., the Tartan Army, the supporter group for Scotland's soccer team), or around national teams across sports (e.g., the Fanatics, Australian fans who support Australian teams and athletes across multiple sports). In some cases, such as with England's Barmy Army, a supporter group primarily for cricket, national supporter groups have grown so prominent that they change the spectator culture of a sport (Parry & Malcolm, 2004). Not only are national supporter groups active during contests held on domestic soil, but these groups are also

known to travel en masse to international sporting events where their national teams are competing (Giulianotti, 1996, 1999a; Morgan, 2007).

Supporters of national teams have been the subject of research in which both the positive and negative outcomes of supporter group behavior have been discussed (Bradley, 2002; Giulianotti, 1999b; Parry & Malcolm, 2004; Williams, Dunning, & Murphy, 1984). On the positive side, national supporter groups have been observed to reinforce national identity (Bradley, 2002; Ward, 2009), bring together fans in a transcendence of disparate political views (Giulianotti, 1996; Vidacs, 2000), and serve as positive ambassadors of a country (Giulianotti, 1999b). Conversely, fan groups have garnered negative attention for their acts of hooliganism (Buford, 1992; Williams et al., 1984), racism (Back, Crabbe, & Solomos, 1998), and violence (Giulianotti, Bonney, & Hepworth, 1994). Hooliganism has been so linked to English supporters that Scotland's Tartan Army has specifically defined themselves and their behavior in opposition to the English-hooligan stereotype (Bradley, 2002; Finn & Giulianotti, 1998).

The study of supporter groups is complicated by the fluidity and overlap in membership. Individuals are not limited to belonging to or identifying with a single group and may be part of a series of multiple and/or interlocking groups. For example, an individual may be part of a supporter group for a domestic professional team and a national team simultaneously. Further, research has highlighted that consumers identify with smaller social groups that form within overarching communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fairley, 2003; Riketta & van Dick, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). As supporter groups are often central to fans' interaction with the sport organization, it is important for marketers understand these groups and the

interconnectedness among them. However, we know little about how individuals negotiate the identities stemming from smaller fan groups within a larger, superordinate group and negotiate the meaning of such groups.

The current study seeks to advance our understanding of supporter groups and the multiple foci of identification that exist within an overarching supporter group. In particular, this study provides insight into the interplay between smaller groups and their superordinate group. Research on supporter groups has typically examined supporters as being part of a single group (e.g., Nash, 2001; Parry & Malcolm, 2004). By exploring individuals' multiple foci of identification and interlocking group identities, this study helps to better understand the influence of subgroups within a larger group. Initial data collection efforts were guided by the following questions:

- How do fans derive meaning from their membership in and belonging to supporter groups?
- How do subgroups affect individuals' experiences with the overarching supporter group and the sport organization itself?
- How do fans negotiate their multiple and interlocking group identities?
- How are these multiple group identities important to individuals?

The current study examines nationwide supporter groups for the US men's national soccer team (USMNT). Three groups were identified: Sam's Army (SA), the American Outlaws (AO), and the US Soccer Supporters Club (USSSC). However, this study focuses on AO due to its multi-level membership structure. The study explores members' multiple foci of identification, specifically with their country, team, superordinate group, and subgroup. It also helps understand the role of the supporter

group for its members and how being an AO member affects the sport consumption experience.

From a practical standpoint, this research provides sport marketers with a better understanding of sport consumers' multiple foci of identification, as well as how different levels of group affect consumption. Proper application of this knowledge will help practitioners better market to their fans, reinforce their brand's connection with consumers, and foster identification among fans. Supporter groups may represent some of a team's most highly identified fans (Giulianotti, 2002; Guschwan, 2007). Given the numerous benefits of highly identified fans realized by the sport organization (Madrigal, 2000; Pease & Zhang, 1996; Sutton et al., 1997), this is a population to whom marketers must carefully cater.

Chapter 2 of this study begins by identifying relevant areas of scholarly inquiry. There is first a clarification of terminology that will be used in this study, followed by a review of literature on social identity and categorization. The section explains the ingroup/outgroup differentiation and the benefits of group membership, particularly in relation to sport fans and maintenance of self-esteem. The review continues by highlighting research on subgroups and general group behaviors. It concludes by examining the topics addressed in existing research on soccer supporter groups. The chapter provides background on areas useful for understanding the current study and identifies where gaps exist to which the current study may contribute.

Following the literature review, Chapter 3 details the methods used in this study. This study employs a grounded theory methodology in using data from participant observation and interviews. Nationwide supporter groups of the USMNT serve as the

context for the study,¹ with most attention dedicated to AO. AO's active role in facilitating interaction among members and its multilayered structure are conducive to capturing the role of subgroups within a larger group.

Chapter 4 through Chapter 6 present the results from the research. Chapter 4 profiles the six possible foci of identification that relate to being in AO. It explains how members negotiate their overlapping and interlocking social identities and how the consumption context changes identity salience. Chapter 5 details the considerable influence that being in AO has on members' USMNT consumption experiences. It pays close attention to supporters' efforts to create and define their shared space in which to interact. Chapter 6 reviews the sense of community felt by members of AO. In particular, it looks at how social interaction among members reinforces members' identification with the multiple levels of group.

Discussion of the findings occurs in Chapter 7. This chapter calls attention to results of the study within the larger context of brand communities and supporter groups. It emphasizes the ways in which multiple foci of identification serve to reinforce each other, particularly between the superordinate group and subgroup. This chapter also suggests practical implications of the findings and possible directions for future research.

¹ Please see Appendix A for a glossary of terms used in this study, particularly those pertaining to soccer, and see Appendix B for more information about the structure of global soccer competition, the relevance of the sport in the United States, and information on the World Cup.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption communities exist across many industries, including sports (Hickman & Ward, 2007). Understanding the actions of consumption community members is a growing area of academic inquiry (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), yet little research exists on smaller groups that exist within these communities (Dholakia & Algesheimer, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). This chapter begins by clarifying terminology used in past literature and how it is utilized in the current study. Specifically, the meanings of *group*, *community*, and *subculture* have been blurred through their use as interchangeable nouns or from varied definitions among social science disciplines. The chapter continues by reviewing Social Identity Theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), reasons for group membership (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cialdini et al., 1976; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the multiple foci of identification of sport fans (Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Ward, 2009). Smaller groups that form within larger fan collectives may serve as a point of identification for sport fans (Fairley, 2006). Therefore, this chapter also reviews how smaller groups can exist within a superordinate group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), the presence of group norms and rituals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rook, 1985; Shaw, 1981), and within group forms of interaction (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008).

Groups, Communities, Subgroups, and Subcultures

The terms *community* (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001), *group* (Hogg, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1987), *subgroup* (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), and *subculture* (Crosset & Beal, 1997; Donnelly, 1981) each refer to collectives of individuals. In referencing collectives of sport fans, scholars have not been consistent with the terminology employed. As the current study focuses on multiple layers of social collectives, it is important to understand the relationship among these layers and what is implied by each term.

This study conceptualizes community, group, and subgroup as three nested levels of social structure. At the highest level is *community*, referring to all US men’s national soccer team (USMNT) fans. Within the community are supporter groups: defined collectives of fans and their subordinate entities. *Supporter group* may be the national organization (e.g., American Outlaws (AO)) or a local chapter (e.g., AO Tulsa), depending on the context in which it is used. Though the national organization of AO could be considered a subgroup within the USMNT community, the current study reserves *subgroup* to refer to smaller, regionalized groups subsumed within AO (see Figure 1). Further explanation of these terms is offered below.

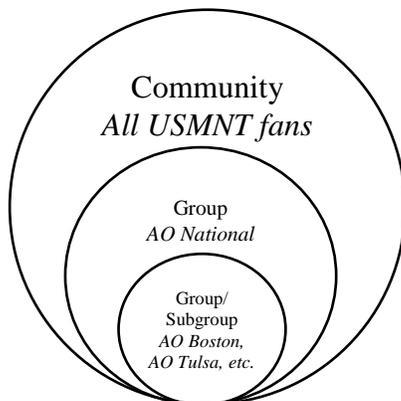


Figure 1: The current study’s use of the relationship among community, group, and subgroup.

Communities

Early conceptualizations of *community* described individuals as clustered within a particular place, such as a neighborhood, city, or region (e.g., Park, 1936). Coinciding with the development of postmodern society, the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of another form of community (Cova, 1997): the community of interest (Durkheim, 1964; Nasar & Julian, 1995). Numerous societal changes, such as variations in social interaction patterns, new urban planning strategies, and advances in technology, contributed to modern communities no longer being restricted by geographic boundaries. Communities based on *interests* now coexist with communities based on geography (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Dholakia et al., 2004; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002; Obst & White, 2004). These types of communities have also been referred to as subcultures (Green, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), network-based communities (Dholakia et al., 2004), social network communities (Wellman, 1999), or common identity communities (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994; Sassenberg, 2002).

Communities of interest may form around a shared interest in an activity (Arnould & Price, 1993; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), celebrity (Caldwell & Henry, 2005; Gamson, 1994; O'Guinn, 2000), television program (Kozinets, 2001), sport team (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1999; Crawford, 2004; Taylor, 1992; Wann et al., 2001), or company brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). In the last example, where a social group is comprised of admirers of a brand, the group may be referred to as a *brand community* (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). These communities have been observed across numerous brands, including Apple (Muñiz

& Schau, 2005), MG cars (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), and Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006). Sport teams represent branded organizations (Boone, Kochunny, & Wilkins, 1995; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden & Milne, 1999), and thus their fans have also been considered brand communities (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Hickman & Ward, 2007).

In some cases, scholars have used *subculture* to describe what the current study has labeled a *community* (cf. Gelder, 2007, pp. 147-149). Others have argued that sport subcultures are distinct, in part due to their marginalization within a dominant culture (Crosset & Beal, 1997), a viewpoint shared by the current study. This study views those in a subculture as embracing their marginalization (Crosset & Beal, 1997; Jenks, 2005), conforming to the deviance of the subculture, and in doing so potentially alienating themselves from the mainstream (Parsons, 1951). Unlike deviant subcultures, brand communities are not characterized by the community's place in relation to mainstream culture – brand communities are characterized by participants' relation to a focal brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In this way, they may bear greater resemblance to “dispersed social worlds” (Unruh, 1980, p. 289) than to subcultures, as social worlds are similarly defined by their relation to a social object (Crosset & Beal, 1997; Unruh, 1983). The current study does not suggest that other scholars' conceptualization of *subculture* is incorrect (e.g., Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), but only that the current study utilizes a more narrow definition. The current study uses the term *community* to refer to large, loosely bound collectives where individuals likely do not know one another. Individuals in a community will be conceptualized as sharing a common source of identification

based on a particular interest. However, this study views communities as lacking the demarcated boundaries that are present in a *group*, as explained in the following section.

Groups

In the social psychology literature, *group* historically referred to a small number of individuals among whom there is direct interaction (Hogg, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Citing Johnson and Johnson (1987), Hogg (1992, p. 4) offers several definitions that encompass various potential features of a group. He notes that a group may be defined as a collective of individuals who influence each other (Shaw, 1976), who join to achieve a goal (Mills, 1967), whose interactions are based on prescribed norms of behavior (Sherif & Sherif, 1956), or who perceive themselves as belonging to the group (Bales, 1950). These definitional traits were used for describing small groups in which members are aware of each other and can engage in interaction with other group members (Hogg, 1992).

Later work expanded that view to include groups that exist as cognitive representations in the minds of their members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Worchel & Coutant, 2003). This conceptualization acknowledges larger groups in which an individual may or may not have contact with other members (Abrams & Hogg, 2003; Hare, 1981). Collectives of sport fans have been called *groups*, both when referring to small fan groups that have direct interaction (e.g., Spaaij, 2007b) and larger fan groups existing as cognitive representations (e.g., Kolbe & James, 2000). A particular kind of sport fan group is the *supporter group*. This term may refer to local chapters of a few people or national bodies with thousands of members (Taylor, 1992). The current study recognizes that “group” may refer to collectives of varying sizes, and it thus defines a

group based on the collective having an explicit delineation of those who are part of the group (e.g., membership status).

Membership

The term *membership* has also been applied inconsistently. Some scholars consider individuals as group *members* without the individuals having achieved any recognized position within the group (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). In other cases, *membership* has implied a formalized standing, such as with museum members (Bhattacharya et al., 1995) or theatre-goers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

The current research uses the latter view, one in which *members* are a recognized part of a group. Membership in this case requires an acknowledgement of acceptance from group administrators and other members. The final term in need of clarification is subgroup.

Subgroups

Many larger groups have one or more layers of group nested within the larger collective. For example, a supporter group of a sport team may have subgroups within it that are tailored specifically for fans of certain ages. Scholars typically use the term “subgroup” when referring to a smaller group, which is part of a larger group, where individuals know most or all members of the smaller group and may have interaction among them (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Dholakia & Algesheimer, 2009; Royal & Rossi, 1996). As will be discussed below (see “Foci of Identification,” page 22), identity salience may be strongest with the subgroup in some situations, the larger group in other situations, or with both groups simultaneously

(Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Considering the context of this study as an example, there are multiple levels of group. The national supporter group (e.g., American Outlaws, or AO) is a group within the overall community of USMNT fans, but regional groups (e.g., AO Seattle, AO Brooklyn) are subgroups of their parent organization. Though there are many ways in which one could define subgroups within the larger AO organization, the current study will use *subgroup* in reference to the formalized regional chapters that are nested within the AO National supporter group. Many of the characteristics, motives, and behaviors of individuals in groups are similarly manifested within subgroups, though there are specific aspects of subgroups that are worth additional discussion.

Subgroup membership

Individuals who are members of subgroups are still members of the superordinate groups. They may experience a sense of microbelonging to the subgroup without sacrificing macrobelonging to the umbrella group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). This forms a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence between the sub and superordinate groups—the subgroup lacks meaning absent from the affiliation with the superordinate group, but subgroups may help maintain cohesion within the larger group or community. For example, in their study of Harley-Davidson bikers, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) found that riders had a strong attachment to their subgroup of about 10 riders while maintaining their attachment to the Harley-Davidson community overall. These small groups took regular rides together, but also shared coffee, went shopping, and partook in other non-biking related activities. Though their initial bond was the Harley brand, the small group evolved to incorporate social interaction not focused on the brand. The

riders still received benefits through their affiliation within the superordinate Harley community, but they now enjoyed multiple levels of affiliation.

Individuals are not limited to being in a single subgroup (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Consider the case of supporter groups for the Adelaide Crows, an Australian Rules Football team. The largest official group is the Crows Supporters Group, where members are from across Australia and the world. Within the larger group, however, are subgroups specific to various regions (e.g., Queensland Crows Supporters Group, New South Wales Crows Supporters Group) or populations (e.g., Birds of a Feather, an all-female supporter group; Crows Nest, a supporter group for children). A female fan in Brisbane could be part of the Queensland Crows Supporters Group and the Birds of a Feather group simultaneously. To better understand the influence of subgroups, one must also explore the factors that encourage membership in subgroups.

Why subgroups?

An individual can become a member in a subgroup in multiple ways. One way is to start as a member of the superordinate group. Given that individuals associate with groups in part because of needs fulfillment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), subsequent membership with a subgroup may imply that an individual is having needs fulfilled through the subgroup that were not met through membership in the larger group. A second way for one to become a subgroup member is for one's initial involvement to be at the subgroup level. An individual who joins and identifies with the subgroup directly may or may not choose to identify with the superordinate group. In either scenario, the subgroup raises two questions, the examination of which may help in researching why fans have multiple layers of group identity.

First, what needs are fulfilled by association with groups in general? Second, what do subgroups offer beyond what is available through association with the superordinate group? The former question will be addressed in the following section, with particular attention paid to uncertainty reduction and self-esteem enhancement. The latter question is one that will be explored in the current study, particularly in terms of how the subgroup affects the experience of AO members and members' social identity. To help understand these questions, we can consider existing research which suggests that subgroups offer greater cohesion through increased member homogeneity (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Hogg, 1992; Moreland & Levine, 2003; Obst et al., 2002).

There are positive characteristics associated with highly cohesive groups, including longevity and easier group decision-making among members (Hogg, 1992; Libo, 1953). Cohesion, or the feelings of personal attraction among group members (Moreland & Levine, 2003), is thus seen as something that groups strive to attain (Hogg, 1992). If group members have greater attraction to each other, it follows that there is increased cohesion within the group. One of the traits identified as increasing the attractiveness of others within the group is the homogeneity of group members (Hogg, 1992).

Scholars point to the increased homogeneity of group members as an advantage offered by subgroups beyond what is present in the superordinate group (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Moreland & Levine, 2003). Large groups and communities tend not to be homogeneous (Wiesenfeld, 1996). Often it is only a singular feature, such as a brand or activity (Dholakia et al., 2004), that unites these groups. As the group grows larger or its membership more diverse, it becomes more difficult to maintain cohesion among

disparate member interests (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Hare, 1981; Hogg, 2003b; Koch, 1983). However, a group that has multiple subgroups based on shared interests, characteristics, locations, and/or modes of behavior allows for homogeneity within the subgroups while maintaining association with the superordinate group (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

A nationally dispersed sport fan group can have thousands or millions of members. For researchers to gain a better understanding of fan identification with these types of groups, it may be of value to consider the benefits offered by relevant subgroups. Some scholars have examined smaller clusters within larger supporter groups (e.g., Bairner & Shirlow, 2001; Crawford, 2003; Giulianotti, 1999b), but their works did not consider a structure of formalized subgroups within the national supporter group. Thus, the current study explores groups with this structure and the potential symbiosis between subgroup and superordinate group. It also examines how individuals' identities are shaped by their belonging to social groups.

Identification with Groups

This section introduces social identity theory (SIT) and social categorization theory (SCT) as means of understanding why individuals integrate group level distinction into their self-concept. Further, these theories offer an explanation for certain group behaviors. SIT and SCT can be used to help understand why sport fans align with a group and the impact of the group on its members.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory understands individual and group behavior through multiple group-based viewpoints, such as self-categorization and social comparison

(Hogg, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT posits that individuals utilize group-based categorizations in developing their self-concept.

An individual's self-concept is the way in which one perceives oneself (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). According to SIT, a person's self-concept is comprised of multiple selves: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The *individual self*, or one's "self-identity," includes the qualities one uses to describe oneself (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2003b; Turner, 1982). These include personal characteristics, such as honest, funny, or short. The *relational self* is shaped by the "significant others in one's life" (Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 619), such as immediate family or very close friends. These are the people by whom one has been influenced and with whom one has considerable emotional investment. The *collective self*, or one's "social identity," is a statement of categorical membership that captures the social entities through which one defines oneself (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ashmore et al., 2004; Hogg, 2003b; Turner, 1982). The collective self is associated with alignment in social groups and may have descriptors such as "soccer fan" or "AO member." These social categorizations "provide a system of orientation for *self-reference*: they create and define the individual's place in society" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, pp. 15-16, emphasis in original).

Classifying the self and others in this way is seen as part of social categorization theory (SCT), an underpinning of SIT (Hogg, 2003b). According to SCT, individuals are thought to make better sense of their social world through the use of classification techniques (Brewer, 1996). The systematic definition of others assists the individual by creating order in one's social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identifying with a

group facilitates the creation of an ingroup/outgroup dichotomy, albeit one that may change depending on the saliency of influences.

Ingroups and outgroups

Through the process of categorization, ingroup and outgroup distinctions are made. The *ingroup* describes those individuals who are part of a group and toward whom members show favoritism; the *outgroup* describes those individuals who are seen as not being part of the group (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The ingroup/outgroup classification should not be seen as immutable. Rather, it is a view that may change depending on the particular context or saliency of one's surroundings (Festinger, 1954). In considering the current study's context, for example, an AO member may see the ingroup as other soccer fans when compared with the general population of sport fans. However, when surrounded by only US national soccer team fans, the ingroup may be defined by one's standing as an AO member. This example illustrates the potential for multiple and overlapping levels of identification. The current study will therefore explore these multiple levels in order to better realize how supporters negotiate interlocking social identities. To help understand why these multiple group identities may be important, we can consider what SIT scholars have theorized as two main benefits of categorization and its associated social identity processes: uncertainty reduction and self-enhancement (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1982).

Uncertainty Reduction through Social Categorization

Social categorizations segment and classify one's social environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By providing order, self-categorization offers the benefit of reducing

social uncertainty regarding one's place within his or her environment (Hogg, 2005). Seeing other group members as being like oneself helps solidify one's identification with the group and minimize the social distance among group members (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998). At the same time, one seeks to accentuate the differences between the ingroup and the outgroup (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Maximizing homogeneity within the group and heterogeneity between groups provides metacontrast between the ingroup and outgroup (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Jetten et al., 1998). This process of metacontrast is enabled through prototypes, or the cognitive representations of a group's defining attributes or stereotypes (Jetten et al., 1998).

Prototypes capture the features of the group represented by exemplary members or by idealized abstractions of group features (Hogg, 2003b). The exemplary members are typically at the core of the group and possess the most information regarding the normative behaviors of those within the group; it is to these members that others first look for creation and modification of group characteristics (Donnelly, 1981; Unruh, 1980). The prototyping process is believed to lead to depersonalization whereby groups are no longer collections of individuals, but rather "embodiments of the relevant prototype" (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123; see also Abrams, Frings, & de Moura, 2005). For researchers seeking to understand the meaning derived through fan group membership, prototypes offer insight into what is most highly valued by the group. Prototypes' central role highlights the need for the current study to access the core members of the fan groups being studied, as these individuals are most likely to

comprehend and embody group values that surface in group prescriptive norms and rituals.

Self-esteem Maintenance and Enhancement through Social Categorization

A second benefit of being part of a group and internalizing the group identity is the potential to maintain or enhance one's self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Festinger, 1954; Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007; McClelland, 1951; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Aligning oneself with a group may allow one to make favorable social comparisons between one's positively distinct ingroup and any relevant outgroup (Festinger, 1954). As one views the favorable characteristics of the ingroup, the positive esteem afforded to the ingroup is thus transferred to its members (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986).

Individuals tend to more readily identify with successful groups. There are many ways in which sport fans can define success, as discussed below, but for it is often thought of as on-field success (Heere & James, 2007). A team's demonstrations of on-field success reflects positively on the fan base, allowing individuals to internalize the group's successes as their own successes and feel positive affect as a result (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004; Madrigal & Chen, 2008). Fans are known to align themselves more closely with a team following a win (Basking in Reflected Glory, or BIRGing) and distance themselves from the team after a loss (Cutting Off Reflected Failure, or CORFing) (Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder et al., 1986). When teams do lose, fans may turn to other sources for self-esteem enhancement, redefining success through focusing on the team's style of play (Jones, 2000), attractiveness of group members (Trail et al., 2003), or overall domain involvement (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). The USMNT, however, offers

an interesting case in that the team's on-field success has been mixed, both by objective measures (the team qualifies for the World Cup, but does not advance far in the tournament) and subjective evaluations (fans views' of the team differ). Therefore, it is informative to look at research on multiple foci of identification.

Foci of Identification

Individuals within groups and organizations are not limited to a single point of identification. Existing research on company employees has found multiple foci of identification in the form of the company itself, the department in which one works, and one's specific work-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Riketta & van Dick, 2005; van Dick, Wagner, & Lemmer, 2004; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Similarly, while the sport team itself has been viewed as the traditional point of identification for fans (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), there are several potential foci of identification. Trail et al. (2003) and Robinson and Trail (2005) note seven possible points of attachment with the organization: team, coach, community, university, players, level, and sport. Other research has also offered alternative points of attachment, including the players (Robinson, Trail, & Kwon, 2004; Wann et al., 1996), the facility (Hill & Green, 2000; Trujillo & Krisek, 1994; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995), the local geographic area (Wann et al., 1996), the sport domain (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk, Mahony, Nakazawa, & Hirakawa, 2001; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), the ethnic group associated with the team (Carmeli & Bar, 1999; Dimeo, 2001), a smaller social group (Fairley, 2006), and the country represented by the team (Giulianotti, 2000; Ward, 2009). Given the context of the current study, the latter two points of attachment (social group and country) warrant more detailed consideration.

Fan group identity

Fairley (2006) found that, among fans who traveled together to games, identification was strongest with the subgroup to which they belonged. Not surprisingly, research on sport fan consumption motivations (e.g., Sloan, 1989; Wann et al., 2001) has consistently identified group affiliation as a reason for consumption (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Guttman, 1986; Melnick, 1993; Wann, 1995). Further, through being immersed with others in that individual's ingroup (i.e., other fans of the team), an individual's identification with that group can be strengthened (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher, 2003).

Individuals may also enhance their identity by engaging in prolonged periods of identity salience with similarly identified others, as encompassing a shared space with one's ingroup fortifies group norms (Sherif, 1936; Postmes & Spears, 1998), deepens prototypical behavior (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Hogg, 2003b), and reinforces group salience (Reicher, 2003). In addition, being surrounded by one's ingroup may allow for the parading of one's identity (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Green & Chalip, 1998; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), which can further strengthen the salience of that identity for the individual. A fan partaking in a supporter group event is surrounded by similarly identified others, thus these events serve as venues in which identity enhancement can occur.

This view of the effects of a large group on an individual's identity is contrary to the theory of Le Bon (1895/1995), who posited that when individuals are part of a crowd (such as one that might be seen at a sporting event) they lose their individual identities to the collective mind of the crowd. Unlike Le Bon, the current view is more in line with

the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model; Postmes & Spears, 1998), which sees the ingroup immersion as an opportunity for bolstering of one's social identity. These periods of interaction serve to increase salience of that identity and provide affirmation of that identity to the group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

National identity

One's nation is a prominent category of collective identity (Bale, 1986; Marks, 1998). There are multiple interpretations of the term *nation*, thus it is first necessary to clarify how it is used here.

Two views of the term *nation* are highlighted by Smith (1991). He notes that the Western conceptualization sees a nation as a form of political community with a fairly well demarcated territory, shared laws and institutions, and some measure of shared civic ideology; in the non-Western view, which is based on ethnicity and common descent, individuals are ineluctable members of their community of birth (Smith, 1991). The Western approach views one's nation as mutable (e.g., an immigrant can adopt the new country as part of his or her national identity), something that is not possible in the non-Western view. Nationality and ethnicity can be orthogonal in the Western approach. For example, one's nationality may be American while his or her ethnicity is Pacific Islander, or one's nationality may be Turkish while his or her ethnicity is Kurdish. The current study employs the Western view: it uses one's *nation* to refer to one's country. This is appropriate in the context of world soccer, where matches between two countries are referred to as "international competition" (FIFA, n.d., "The history of FIFA," emphasis

added), and sport associations tend to favor a single national team per country (Allison, 2000).²

International clashes in sport allow for competition between entities delineated on nationality (Marks, 1998). Sport has been observed to function as a social institution symbolically representing the national identity of people (Bale, 1986; Hassan, 2006; Holmes, 1994; Goodger & Goodger, 1989; Zurcher & Meadow, 1967; Vidacs, 2000). It is therefore not surprising that individuals will often identify with a national sport team (Alabarces & Rodriguez, 2000; Chalip, 2006; Giulianotti, 2000; Russell, 1999; Ward, 2009), particularly around large-scale international events, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games. A country's national team can be seen as an extension of the people themselves and, to some, the team's results are referendums on the status of the country (Marks, 1998; Vidacs, 2000). The considerable cultural significance of the national team helps capture the interest of individuals who may not otherwise take an interest in the sport (Ward, 2009). Informants in this study are fans of the top American soccer team, one that represents the USA in premier international competitions, and for whom membership in the supporter group may be influenced by their identification with their country.

The sections above noted how SIT has been used frequently as a way of understanding fans' relationship with their teams (e.g., Fink et al., 2009; Jones, 2000; Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002; Wann & Grieve, 2005). Being a fan of a sport team is often an important part of an individual's social identity (Wann et al., 2001), and

² There are some exceptions where "international competition" does not refer to matches between countries. For example, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are all part of the United Kingdom (country), but they each have their own national team that can compete in the World Cup; there is no U.K. team in the World Cup. Where relevant, this study will call attention to such a distinction.

fan identification has been manifested through individuals' psychological and behavioral demonstrations of commitment and emotional attachment to sport organizations (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Madrigal, 1995; Sutton et al., 1997). As the previous sections have discussed some of the psychological factors associated with groups, we must also explore some of the behavioral impacts. The following sections consider behavior within groups, as well as how this behavior shapes group member interaction and provides meaning for those in the group.

Group Norms, Rituals, Folklore, and Language

Group behavior is often governed by norms, the understood rules and regulations that provide directives for those within the group (Shaw, 1981). Norms serve as models for how group members should act within a given situation (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). While a group cannot have norms that dictate behavior in every situation, norms that are of most value to the group persevere (Shaw, 1981). Enduring norms are likely to be those that contribute to the survival of the group, reduce the unpredictability of members, or give expression to the group's values (Feldman, 1984). Knowing what one can expect from other group members helps develop trust within the group while encouraging group cohesion (McMillan, 1996). For example, Donnelly and Young (1988) describe the norm within rock climbing communities wherein novices are expected to manifest qualities of "coolness" while on climbs, even those beyond their ability; one only admits to being scared when he or she is not actually frightened. By providing a guideline for how one should act in climbing situations, it makes member behavior more predictable, resulting in a safer experience for other members. Group

norms capture attitudes and behaviors that are most important to the group (Shaw, 1981), thus understanding these norms allows researchers to gain insight into the group itself.

Group norms may be adopted through formal channels, such as being set forth by group leaders, or informally as the result of key moments in the group's history or existing behaviors from prior situations (Feldman, 1984). Likewise, the reinforcement of group norms does not necessarily come from top-down edicts. It is often individuals of similar status who work to maintain social norms, particularly in egalitarian groups that lack a formal hierarchy. In their study of motorcycle riders in nonhierarchical groups, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) witnessed group members setting the norms of riding behavior for others: when some individuals would ride too fast ahead of the group, others would refuse to speed up, thereby drawing the speedy individuals back into the group. Other normative behavior within the group may have first started as a ritual (Rook, 1985).

A ritual is "a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (Rook, 1985, p. 252). Group rituals have particular significance to the group. These behaviors serve to transmit the meaning and culture of the group to its membership, and they serve as a signal of the group's culture to those outside the group (Foley, 1990; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Park & Burgess, 1921). A ritual may also be a rite of passage to help confirm a member's place within the group. In Donnelly and Young's (1988) description of a rugby team's rookie initiation night, the researchers detail how the rookies must complete challenges involving imbibing alcohol and dining on goldfish. These acts help rookies signal that their behavior conforms to the

rugby subculture's expectations. Rituals among sport fans, such as Texas A&M's "12th Man" and Cubs' fans practice of throwing back home run balls, are seen as important parts of the sport consumption experience for those individuals (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Rituals underlie the values of the group, and examining rituals may provide insight into the culture of the sport fan group. Group culture can also be conveyed through folklore promulgated by group members.

Folklore, which encompasses stories known by all or nearly all of those within a group, helps transmit the common history that is shared among group members (Bar-Tal, 1990; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The stories' meaning has been socially constructed by the group and it is central to the group's values (Bayard, 1953; Dundes, 1980). Members may not have directly participated in the making of that history, but it provides them with an emotional connection with the group. For example, in Fairley's (2003) study of fans who travel long distances by bus to follow their team, nostalgia and history of past group endeavors played an active role in the construction of current experiences. The sharing of previous experiences, through either reminiscing among those who took part in the history or regaling the stories to others, builds camaraderie among members and strengthens the overall group. As with rituals, the folklore that perseveres is that which holds the greatest meaning for the group (Dundes, 1980). Therefore, by learning the folklore of a group, researchers develop a more complete understanding of groups. Group folklore may be communicated through verbal or written communication, but regardless of the medium, the language used in relaying folklore bears its own importance.

The language utilized within a group often carries meaning that is central to that group. Brand community participants, for example, may differentiate themselves through being able to communicate their knowledge and appreciation of the brand's history. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) found that within the Ford Bronco community, participants felt a legitimacy and connection to other participants who could use the right language in discussing early-model Broncos. Those who lacked this ability were often seen as buying Broncos because they were trendy; those individuals were viewed as not appreciating the Bronco history and were held as outsiders. Likewise, Wheaton (2000) found that the language used by windsurfers revealed their status within the subculture. There was consistency in the language used by experts, while neophytes were more prone to using incorrect terminology. In fan groups, the language used may help to understand the group's influence on its members. Identification with a group, such as the AO supporter group, may be stronger for an individual who uses "we" when describing AO than a member who refers to AO by its name (Cialdini et al., 1976).

The above section notes the common types of behavior that are seen across social groups. A fan group's norms, rituals, folklore, and language convey the particularly meaningful elements of being in the group, and thus researchers can learn about the groups and the individual members through investigating these behaviors. Another area that may illuminate the understanding of these groups is examining the ways in which group members interact.

Within Group Interaction

There is no single format in which group members interact. Differences can occur in several areas, including spatial dimensions, temporal differences, or variations in

the intensity of interaction (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). Through observing group member interactions across these dimensions, one can more thoroughly understand the ways in which supporter group members relate to one another. This study utilizes multiple forms of data collection, as addressed in Chapter 3 (Method), in order to capture interactions across spatial, temporal, and intensity variations of group interaction.

Spatial dimensions of group interaction

Differences in spatial interaction among group members can be physical or virtual (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008); both modes have been shown to offer the same psychological sense of community to members (Obst et al., 2002). Physical interaction involves face-to-face meetings in which members are physically present in the same location (Kozinets, 2001; O'Guinn, 2000). Virtual interaction among group members typically occurs via internet-based communication, including blog posts and comments, chat rooms, and message boards (Mathwick, Wiertz, & de Ruyter, 2008). Some groups' interaction may cross spatial lines as members interact both in-person and online (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

Temporal dimensions of group interaction

Group interaction also varies along two temporal dimensions, frequency and synchronicity (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). *Frequency* refers to how often the members interact. Members may engage with each other on a weekly basis (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), on an annual basis (Kyle & Chick, 2002), or at any other time increment. *Synchronicity* relates to when members interact, either simultaneously or asynchronously. Simultaneous, or synchronous, interaction occurs when members are actively engaged together in a shared location (McAlexander et al., 2002), though the spatiality of that

interaction, physical or virtual, is orthogonal to this dimension. Asynchronous interaction describes member communication that occurs at different times (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). For example, DeWalt, a power tool manufacturer, includes narratives from users on its website as a way of reinforcing ties to the power tool user community (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). The users' personal anecdotes can be read and shared long after the actual experience, which creates the potential to reach a greater number of participants.

Intensity dimensions of interaction

The intensity of participation also varies. Saab drivers who wave to each other on the road illustrate passive interaction (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In other cases interactions can be more short-term, concentrated experiences. For example, McAlexander et al. (2002) observed a community of Jeep owners at a "brandfest," which is the annual gathering of Jeep drivers. Jeep owners come together over a few days to talk about their Jeeps with other owners, share knowledge on how to best use the Jeep to its full capabilities, and learn about new developments in the corporate strategy for the brand. While the participants may keep in touch with each other following the event, the primary manifestation of the brand community is in the brandfest that brings the participants together. Likewise, Arnould and Price (1993) noted group formation among individuals on river rafting tours. Though the duration of tours was only around a week, the event intensity created groups that lasted beyond the trip.

The above examples illustrate various ways in which scholars have observed interaction among group members. Cognizance of these dimensions is relevant so as to inform the current study of where and how supporter group interaction occurs. Group

members may share different information through different communication vehicles, thus coverage across these areas is important for a holistic understanding the group. In the current study, because of the phenomena under investigation, the focus is on a specific kind of group: the supporter group.

Supporter Groups

Soccer supporter groups have been an important part of the sport's culture for well over a century (Taylor, 1992). However, research on soccer supporters did not begin in earnest until the late 1960s and early 1970s and was primarily concerned with supporters as a source of violence related to sport (Giulianotti, 1999a). Focusing on the causes of soccer hooliganism through a Marxist perspective, Taylor (1970; 1991) believed broader economic forces and social changes were contributors to outbreaks of fan violence. He pointed to the commercialization of soccer as ostracizing the working class soccer fan. Ethnographic work by Marsh and colleagues (e.g., Marsh, 1978; Marsh, Rosser, & Harré, 1978) saw deviant supporter groups as an outlet for innate human aggression. The aggression was typically not acted upon, and was limited to boastful talk on the part of supporters, but acts of violence were observed as occurring in response to alienation by society. In the 1980s, sociologists such as Eric Dunning dominated scholarship as part of what some termed the "Leicester School" of research on fan behavior (Dunning, 1994). They viewed supporters as being left behind during the larger civilizing process within Western society (Dunning, 1993).

Modern researchers note the changes in English soccer fans, viewing the skinhead soccer hooligan as an anachronistic stereotype (Hughson & Poulton, 2008). Still, the influence of soccer's commercialization on supporters remains a subject of inquiry

(Gibbons & Lusted, 2007; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010; King, 1997; Nash, 2001). For example, stadium redevelopment has created more high-priced seating, changing the demographics of soccer fans and threatening access for “traditional,” working-class fans (Nash, 2001). Also, the Football Association’s (FA)³ creation in 2001 of an “official” English supporters group allowed the specific exclusion of fans with criminal histories. These actions have further segmented supporters into different organizations, some of which are part of national supporters’ associations while others are independent outfits. Noting the shift in supporter culture, some scholars have sought to delineate the new facets of soccer fandom (Giulianotti, 2002; Redhead, 1993; Tapp, 2002).

Researchers have attempted to better compartmentalize soccer fans into various typologies. Redhead (1993) identified “participatory” and “passive” forms of soccer fandom; Tapp (2002) had “carefree casuals,” “professional wanderers,” and “repertoire fans;” and Giulianotti (2002) created a taxonomy of fans into supporters, followers, fans, and flâneurs. However, Crawford (2003) criticized works such as these:

Typologies do not allow for the consideration of how the nature and composition of a supporter ‘community’ may change over time, and, significantly, how the composition and redefinition of patterns of support within this may be in constant flux. (p. 222)

Crawford felt that assignment of specific labels is too rigid for supporter groups that are constantly being redefined. This is a similar sentiment to that put forth by Malcolm (2000), who countered that “the football community is heterogeneous with different supporters wanting different things from their clubs at different times in their lives” (p.

³ The Football Association (FA) is the governing body for soccer in England. It is the English equivalent of the USSF.

102). These works highlight the heterogeneity within supporter group members, but unlike the current study, the research did not involve formalized subgroups.

Scholarly work on soccer supporter group members has focused primarily on greater sociological issues (Dunning, 1993; Giulianotti, 1994), the changing soccer fan in general (King, 1997; Nash, 2001), or the supporters' relationship with their teams (Brown & Walsh, 2000). Further, the preponderance of soccer supporter group research has been in places like England (Dunning, 1994; Robson, 2001; Russell, 1999; Taylor, 1992), Italy (Guschwan, 2007), Spain (Díaz, 2007), Argentina (Duke & Crolley, 2009), and Brazil (Lever, 1995). In all these countries, soccer dominates the sporting landscape. With the exception of a cursory inquiry as part of a larger work (Brown, S., 2007), there has been no direct academic research on supporter groups in America. Through investigating this population, we can deepen our understanding of the meaning derived through supporter group membership. Further, the structure of the American Outlaws supporter group is conducive for insight into members' overlapping and interlocking foci of identification.

Understanding US Soccer Supporter Groups

Considerable research has addressed the relationship between the consumer and the sport property (e.g., Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). Recently, there has been increasing academic exploration of the relationships within sport fan groups and the meaning of the sport organization to the fans (e.g., Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Fairley, 2003; Giulianotti, 1999b, 2002; Heere & James, 2007; Weed, 2006). This research can be viewed in conjunction with brand community research (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) to help understand fan communities. However, we know little about the

place of subgroups within a larger collective of sport fans. The current study builds upon the existing line of inquiry, specifically focusing on subgroups within a larger national body of USMNT supporters. It examines the creation and maintenance of consumer identities within subgroups and how these fit within the overall supporter group. As scholars and practitioners seek to better understand the relationship of fans with sport organizations, it is important to consider the influence of the multiple levels of identification that can shape fan identity and experiences.

The current chapter has recognized research on several constructs related to these issues (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Dholakia et al., 2004; Hogg, 2003b; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wann et al., 2001), yet the theoretical understanding of subgroups within a larger consumption community is still in its infancy. Therefore, in the absence of comprehensive extant theory, the current study employs an exploratory approach to try to better understand individuals' experience with, and the roles of, fan groups and their subgroups. Multiple levels of supporter group exist with USMNT soccer supporters, a phenomenon observed outside of sport as well (Dholakia et al., 2004). The current research is valuable to help both scholars and practitioners better sport consumers and the influence of multiple levels of group identification.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The previous chapter noted the dearth of scholarly inquiry into the role of subgroups in consumer groups. As we know little about the multiple levels of identification that consumers utilize, this study employs a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Data are collected using two methods. The first is participant observation of US men's national soccer team (USMNT) fans and supporter group members across various settings. The second method is ethnographic interviews with USMNT supporter group members and soccer industry professionals. Discussed in the following section are the specifics of grounded theory as utilized in this study. It is followed by the data coding methods utilized, my constructivist position, and the context in which the data were collected.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a form of qualitative research developed in opposition to the traditional positivist view (Suddaby, 2006). Where positivist research is conducted as an investigation of a priori hypotheses, grounded theory focuses on the generation of theory from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). It is particularly valuable in situations where existing theory is scant. Grounded theory researchers interpret a particular setting as it is produced and perceived by its participants; they let the behavior of the actors dictate the relevant findings. Through utilizing "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), the researcher

can note the ways in which social actors construct and understand meaning in their world. In this way, grounded theory is consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective.

In the symbolic interactionist view, humans are seen as acting in relation to the meanings they ascribe to other beings in their environment. Part of the current study is concerned with the meaning that fans derive through their belonging to supporter groups, and thus the symbolic interactionist view is an appropriate perspective through which to conduct the study. Individuals produce and interpret symbols through communication and use these meanings to guide their actions (Schwandt, 1994). Symbolic interactionism is concerned with “how” individuals make sense of their situations, not just “what” is taking place (Prasad, 2005). The grounded theory researcher looks beyond the specific experiences of actors to the theoretical insights that can be drawn through higher level abstractions from the data (Suddaby, 2006). This is accomplished in part by working dialectically between the data and relevant existing literature that may help inform the research.

Grounded theory is an iterative process, one that is both inductive and deductive, in which the researcher continually returns to the literature in order to glean a further understanding of the concepts that come through in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Weed, 2009). The nature of this research makes it impossible to know all the literature that may be relevant to a particular study until the study has been completed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Though data is used as the driver of theory development, existing theory and research should still serve to facilitate understanding of the phenomena. The grounded theory researcher is cautious to avoid framing data strictly

in terms of existing literature, and instead challenges, shapes, and/or extends existing literature based on the data.

The use of substantive theories from existing literature is preferable and often necessary in order to develop formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher must be familiar with the theories put forth in existing literature so as to understand current gaps and where his or her work may contribute. At the same time, one must avoid being so immersed in a particular line of thinking that he or she develops conscious or subconscious hypotheses based on the literature that cloud the collection and coding of data. One strategy to avoid this is to draw from several areas of relevant research that offer multiple viewpoints on the research context (Suddaby, 2006). The current study does this through the inclusion of marketing, social psychology, sociology, and sport management literature. Examining a topic from multiple disciplines creates a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

Though grounded theory was developed jointly by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the two scholars later refined the methodology in slightly different ways. Without becoming overly concerned with the specifics of the split (cf. Heath & Cowley, 2004), it should be noted that the current study resembles the Straussian view. This approach allows for an increased influence of existing literature in the earlier stages of the study, and it is more open to the expanding of existing theoretical constructs, not just the development of new theory. While the risk of existing theory dominating the present study exists, as is noted by Heath and Cowley (2004), the researcher can guard against this by engaging in the aforementioned practice of drawing from several substantive areas and retaining the capacity to “make the familiar strange” (Spindler & Spindler, 1982; Suddaby, 2006).

An additional divide between Glaser and Strauss is in their epistemological views. Glaser assumes a realist stance in which there is a single reality that is discoverable (Weed, 2009). The current study does not assume a single reality, but rather believes there are multiple realities that are formed through the interpretations of the individuals (Charmaz, 2006). This is a constructivist view that is a departure from the outlook of Glaser, yet is also not exactly Straussian either. Knowledge of these distinctions (i.e., Glaser versus Strauss) are valuable in helping to clarify the interpretive framework guiding the researcher's actions.

The Position of the Researcher

When reading qualitative works, one must understand from where the researcher is coming (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Weed, 2009). That is, how does the researcher view the social world? A phenomenon does not exist by itself, but it is brought into being by the way in which it is studied (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). It is the paradigm from which one conducts research that represents the nature of the world and where the individual exists in that world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Knowledge of this view clarifies the ontological, epistemological, and methodological nature of the research. These three areas are explained further below and particular focus is given to how each are understood in the constructivist paradigm from which the current study is conducted.

Constructivism and interpretivism share a common framework for human inquiry: the individual must interpret the world in order to understand its meaning (Schwandt, 1994). Specifically, constructivism assumes that knowledge is co-created by the participant and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, it is not just the "data"

from which reality is constructed, but the context and interactive process between researcher and subject that occurs (Charmaz, 2000). This investigative approach was developed in response to positivism, which views the world as fact and the investigator as separate from the subject. In a positivist world, there is an external reality that is forced upon the individuals within it, while an interpretivist views the reality of the world as being constructed based on the views of individuals within that world.

Ontology relates to the nature of reality and whether it is an external force imposed on an individual or the product of an individual's consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The constructivist researcher views reality as socially constructed by those engaging in a specific situation, unlike the positivist, who sees immutable laws that create a "true" world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). *Epistemology* is concerned with the relationship of what is known to *how* an individual comes to know that information. In line with the constructivist's ontological view of a *social* reality, the researcher believes that reality can only come to be known through the interpretations of human actors within a contextualized situation. Constructivism thus blurs epistemology and ontology because the researcher constructs the findings as part of his or her interpretation of that which is being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This position offers a minor departure from the Straussian epistemological view (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Strauss's post-positivist view of reality believes in an objective approach free from bias. Such objectivity is not attainable, nor desirable, for constructivists due to the active role of the researcher in the negotiation of meaning, as is prescribed in constructivist methodology (Charmaz, 2000). *Methodology* describes the research tactics in which one can best study the world while being consistent with the ontological and epistemological beliefs set forth. A

constructivist approach requires data to be derived from the interaction between the researcher and the respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, the researcher is actively engaged as part of the research and is not an objective outsider.

In the current study, I am a 33 year old, Caucasian male from a middle-class upbringing. I have completed over ten years of higher education and am a former college athlete. I do not describe myself as a soccer fan and prior to this study had not seen a USMNT game in the previous seven years.

Data Sample

A tenet of grounded theory is theoretical sampling, which is where one seeks “out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 202). While a population of focus may be defined at the inception of the study, the specific sample is identified as the study progresses through data collections and analysis; hence, theoretical sampling is a non-linear, concept-driven approach to data collection that is responsive to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The grounded theory researcher simultaneously collects and analyzes the data through a process known as “constant comparison” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the researcher analyzes the data and develops concepts, more questions emerge and existing questions are refined. Thus, the researcher identifies those within the target population who may provide insight to the questions being generated and seeks to include those individuals in the sample. Theoretical sampling works in conjunction with the constant comparison process as a way to further develop concepts and continually seek data until reaching saturation. The population of focus for this study was members of organized supporter groups for the USMNT.

Sport fans have been shown to identify with their team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Heere & James, 2007; Wann et al., 2001), interact in groups in support of the team (Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003; Sloan, 1989), and develop a sense of community with other fans (Kolbe & James, 2000; Lever, 1995). Thus, groups of sport fans are a useful source for understanding the processes of identification, group behavior, and sense of community. In particular, this study targeted individuals within the American Outlaws (AO), a supporter group for the USMNT. AO members belong to one or more national supporter groups, and the national AO group is further partitioned into regional subgroups to which individuals are also members. For this reason, these supporter groups are conducive for research on subgroups within a larger fan population.

The Sample: Background and History of USMNT Supporter Groups

Fans of the USMNT, specifically members of organized supporter groups, were the target population for this study. There are two primary, national supporter groups: Sam's Army (SA) and AO. SA and AO operate autonomously from the US Soccer Federation (USSF), the national governing body of soccer in the US. They were both started by fans and continue to function without governance from the USSF. There is communication and interaction between the USSF and the supporter groups, such as for purchasing tickets to US national team games. There is also a third group, US Soccer Supporters Club (USSSC), which was started by the USSF. Though the research began by looking at all three of these groups, AO members' active engagement with the group and multiple levels of identification lead this study to focus primarily on AO. A background of all three groups is given below, in order to provide necessary context to the research and data, with additional detail offered for AO.

Sam's Army

SA began in 1995 in response to a lack of coordinated fan participation at US national soccer team matches (Jackson, 1995). Prior to the formation of SA, there was no formal entity that brought together USMNT fans. Some fans had communicated via internet bulletin boards, though these were of limited popularity in the early 1990s. For the most part, fans remained isolated around the country. Initial SA membership drew from enrollees in a fan newsletter, members of the bulletin boards, and other vocal fans at USMNT games. The group aimed to “show the U.S. public how to be soccer fans” (Jackson, 1995).

The primary means of manifesting this idea was through the mobilization of “as many American fans in one part of the stadium so that... we could show the team that they had support in the stands” (M. Spacone, personal communication, June 9, 2011). SA leadership took the initial steps to create a dedicated supporter section within the stadium for US domestic games. SA purchased tickets in bulk from the USSF, who allocated space in the specific section, and in turn sold the tickets to SA members. This practice ensured that supporters could be surrounded by each other and could present a unified image to others in the stadium.

SA was formed as a supporter group to which members join the national group directly. Informants describe SA as a “top-down organization” (FN 20091118; FN 20091204), where actions on the part of the supporter group flow through SA leadership, who hold decision-making authority. SA later modified its structure to include some regional subgroups called “brigades.” However, the brigades idea is still nascent and has not developed traction within SA on a national level. They are not clearly defined and

the exact number of brigades is unavailable. One of SA's founders, Mark Spacone, remains the head of the organization.

American Outlaws

AO was founded in 2007 by Korey Donahoo and Justin Brunken, two friends in Lincoln, Nebraska. AO's formation was in response to soccer fans who felt that there was a reduction in engagement by SA leadership. Some fans "began to gripe that [SA] had gone soft, showing up in droves for 'big' games against teams like Mexico but neglecting lesser matches against, say, Venezuela and Guatemala" (Struby, 2010). Also, SA was said to be focused on the game day experience itself, whereas AO wanted to build a soccer supporter community in America that extended beyond just game days (FN 20091204).

AO views itself as an "organic" (FN 20110306) and "grassroots" (FN 20091118) organization and utilizes a decentralized group structure. There are defined national leaders, including Donahoo and Brunken, but a significant amount of AO actions and engagement are done through local chapters. Each chapter has its own leaders who are given the freedom to operate semi-autonomously from the national group. The local chapters are not assigned or formed at the national level – they develop based on the amount of interest in a given region. New members can sign up through AO National, and once a region has at least 25 AO members, those in that area can apply to be a chapter. The chapter boundaries may change as the chapter adds members. For example, supporters in AO North New Jersey were originally part of AO New York City, but in 2009 founded their own chapter once fan interest made doing so possible.

When referring to the national body of AO, this study uses *AO National*; the study refers to the local chapters by using the specific chapter name (e.g., AO Milwaukee) or the general term *AO Local*. The sections below highlight the functional roles of these two levels of the supporter group.

Functional roles of AO National

One of AO National's main roles is to serve as a centralized entity in organizing USMNT fans from across the country. Like SA, AO National interacts directly with the USSF to secure group tickets in the supporter section. AO National also helps coordinate and communicate member activities before and after the games. Further, AO National leverages its collective size of over 6,500 members to secure discounts for its members that make it easier to attend USMNT games.

Each of the over 70 AO chapters has at least 25 members, and some chapters have over 400 (e.g., AO Washington DC, AO Philadelphia), but most have around 100 members (K. Donahoo, personal communication, October 17, 2011). These individual groups have limited negotiating power but collectively represent a large consumer group. AO National acts on behalf of its chapters to arrange reduced rates via partnerships with Ten Dot travel agency, United Airlines, and Marriott hotels (AO "Members Only," n.d.). These efforts apply to domestic and international travel, such as to the World Cups in South Africa and Brazil. For the latter, taking place in 2014, there will be three chartered Boeing 737s for only AO members (AO "WorldCup," n.d.). It is of historical interest to note that AO National's role in facilitating travel to games mirrors the efforts of the original soccer supporter groups in Scotland. These groups, named "Brake Clubs" after the 20-man horse drawn "brakes" used to carry supporters, formed for the express

purpose of arranging travel for members to the teams' away games (Taylor, 1992). Though travel is an important function, AO National provides other services that assist the operations of local chapters.

AO National's guidance to AO Local chapters helps standardize AO across all the chapters. For example, AO chapter websites have a consistent look and feel and are located on AO National servers. With the premade website, no coding is required on the part of the local chapter leaders, which makes it easier to focus on local efforts. AO National also has dedicated individuals who fly to each new chapter and help it to establish its footing in the area. Further, the affiliation with AO National helps local chapters by providing a brand name that aids member recruitment and negotiations with local bars.

AO National provides valued services, but the quantity, geographic dispersion, and diversity of members creates the need for action on the local levels. The local chapters complement the functions fulfilled by the national group. According to co-founder Brunken, "having chapters is one of the most important things that we want to do" and "these chapters are what will grow US Soccer" (FN 20110306).

Functional roles of AO Local

One of the responsibilities for AO National is to ensure there are events for members at every domestic USMNT game, but national leaders often lack intimate knowledge of the venue and its surroundings. Thus, AO National entrusts much of the game-related activity planning to the local AO chapter. AO Local members have specialized knowledge of the area that create operational advantages. Chapter members have existing relationships with local bars, which is important for setting up the night-

before, pre-tailgate, and post-game parties. They are also likely familiar with the host venue and can identify the best place and method for tailgating before the game. Laws and stadium regulations can vary widely from one host city to the next. For example, AO National was allowed to provide beer for its tailgate at a game in East Hartford, CT, but members had to bring their own for another game played 90 miles away in Foxborough, MA (FN 20100525). For the latter case, AO Boston, thanks in large part to communications via AO National, made the restrictions known to AO members traveling to the game so that members could be adequately prepared (AO “Events,” n.d.). The knowledge and effort of local AO chapters helps to ensure that members have a shared space where they can interact in a way consistent with group norms and rituals.

Most of a chapter’s organizing efforts are directed toward organizing gamewatches that primarily benefit local members. Each local AO chapter is required to develop a relationship with a local bar to ensure a viewing space for USMNT games (AO “Eligibility,” n.d.). These arrangements are easier to manage and more symbiotic when there is direct, regular interaction between the bar owner and some level of AO leadership, hence why this task is handled by those on the local level. The gamewatch location provides AO members with a venue to watch games with fellow members. AO Local chapters may also organize other events for their members, such as casual soccer games or video game tournaments.

Finally, AO Local chapters serve as a localized recruitment force. New members can join AO though enrolling at AO Local events. For example, non-members may be at the bar during an AO gamewatch, become interested in AO by seeing the group, and can

enroll immediately. Whether enrolling through AO National or AO Local, all individuals who are members of the local chapters are also part of AO National.

The United States Soccer Supporters Club

The USSF launched its own supporter group, the USSSC, in 2009. The USSSC has been designated as the “official” supporter group and is managed by employees of the USSF (USFF, n.d.). The USSSC provides members with special benefits that include the opportunity to buy game tickets prior to them being on sale to the public, socializing with US players in meet-and-greet sessions, access to parts of the stadiums normally off-limits, a USSSC scarf, and discounts at the US Soccer store.

The USSSC does not, at this time, have the same engagement among members as seen in AO or SA. Informants who are members of the USSSC do not identify with or interact specifically with other USSSC members. Conversations with USSSC members and employees of the USSF clarified that the USSSC is not necessarily intended to appeal to the same audience as AO or SA. As stated by one executive, “USSSC is for a different segment of fans than Sam’s Army and American Outlaws. Some people want a different experience – they want to sit for the game” (SIP Francis⁴). Given these differing markets, and the fact that the Federation is not actively developing identification with the USSSC, discussion of the USSSC is included in the current study only where relevant to understand the other issues.

The Sample: Accessing Supporter Groups

Each supporter group has members throughout the United States, and some individuals are members of multiple supporter groups (e.g., SA and AO, or AO and

⁴ “SIP Francis” is a pseudonym for a Soccer Industry Professional interviewed as part of this research. See page 50 for further explanation.

USSSC). Although individuals are part of national supporter groups, their actions as members may occur with their regional subgroups, such as AO Baton Rouge or AO Detroit. As USMNT fans may belong to multiple national supporter groups, and they may belong to regional subgroups within the larger national supporter groups, these fans offer a setting conducive for research fans' multiple levels of identification and on the role of subgroups on fans' experiences.

I identified and contacted key informants within USMNT supporter groups, including the heads of AO, SA, and USSSC, and regional chapters of these organizations. I explained that I was conducting research on USMNT supporter groups. They welcomed me into group events and introduced me to other supporters. Through the research process, both core and non-core members of the groups were included in the sample, thereby contributing to a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study (Donnelly, 2006). As the research progressed, efforts narrowed to focus on AO.

Informant Types

Two types of individuals serve as informants in this research: national supporter group members and soccer industry professionals. National supporter group members are the primary population of interest for this research and represent the bulk of the data (e.g., 86% of the formal interviews). This study describes and refers to quotations from these individuals using "SGM" and a pseudonym in order to protect their anonymity. SGM's real names are used only when quoting from artifacts of public record, such as magazine articles, internet postings, or podcasts, or when explicit permission has been given. The study calls attention to these individuals' standing within the organization only when it is relevant to the data.

Soccer industry professionals were also interviewed. These individuals work within the soccer industry as executives or employees, including for the USSF; as consultants; as media pundits; or in other capacities that give these individuals valuable expertise that aided the research. Data from these individuals is used to provide further insight into American soccer and its fans. They and are referred to as “SIPs” within the study.

Research Methods

The data for this study were collected primarily through two methods: participant observation and interviews. In addition, reading of online communication among members (i.e., in message board forums, blogs, emails, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds) was done to supplement data gathered through the primary sources. As group interactions can occur across varying spatial, temporal, and intensity dimensions (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008), these methods of data collection helped deepen the understanding of the supporter groups being studied. Each method is addressed below.

Participant Observation

Participant observation involves locating oneself within a social situation, watching the actors in that situation, and becoming involved with the actors and their activities (Spradley, 1980; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Through extended observation sessions, a researcher begins to identify recognizable patterns of activity. Observations can help one learn elements such as norms of the setting, cultural meaning assigned to or derived from behaviors, and the importance of certain events to the participants.

There are varying degrees to which one can become involved as an observer, from no involvement (i.e., just watching) to full immersion. Spradley (1980) identifies five

levels of involvement including nonparticipation, passive, moderate, active, and complete. As a researcher becomes more actively engaged within the social setting, the researcher strives to actually do what others are doing in order to more fully learn the cultural rules of behavior (Spradley, 1980). While not necessary or even possible for all research, a somewhat active level of engagement is attainable and desirable for the current study.

In the current study, my role was one of a moderate-to-active participant observer (Spradley, 1980). In some early sessions, I was an outsider and was introduced as such by supporter group leaders. As the sessions progressed, I was able to more actively participate. By virtue of being in the supporter section at live games and in small rooms at gamewatches, passive involvement was inappropriate. For example, purchasing a ticket in the supporter section at games carries with it the explicit expectation that the purchaser will stand and cheer loudly for the whole game. Failing to adhere to rules and conventions could make respondents less likely to talk with me, or worse, modify their own behaviors in some way that would lead to observation of inauthentic practice. Thus active participation not only helped me assimilate and gain a degree of acceptance from the supporter group members, it facilitated a more accurate representation of social behaviors. The constructivist researcher views social reality as an unfolding process that is interactional and experiential, thus my interaction within the soccer fan group was necessary in order to investigate the social reality.

The focus of the participant observation sessions was on AO as this group's members are the most active of USMNT supporters. Observation also included AO members who were trying to gain local supporter group status, members of SA national,

and general fans who were unaffiliated with supporter groups. Observation was done at 14 venues in seven states (see Table 1). From Fall 2009 to Spring 2011, I joined USMNT fans at supporter group events, gamewatches at bars, and in the stands for live games. One of the supporter group events was the inaugural AO Rally, a weekend convention of AO members from throughout the country. The AO Rally included unstructured interaction among members and one day of formalized sessions with speeches by AO leaders, former USMNT player Alexi Lalas, Sports Illustrated soccer columnist Grant Wahl, one of AO's charity partners, and others affiliated with the supporter group. This event offered an intensive immersion period during which time I was able to have numerous conversations with supporters. All participant observation venues offered ample downtime, allowing me to conduct "casual interviews" at each event. The conversations were not recorded, but field notes were transcribed during or immediately after each session.⁵

I was open and forthcoming about my research intentions during observation. I took notes in a discrete manner, typically by typing brief notes on my phone or recording voice memos. The short notes were expanded to full field notes upon completion of the session. In some cases, direct quotations were written down on a pocket notepad during a conversation.

In addition to providing insight into the behaviors of the USMNT supporters, the participant observation sessions facilitated the collection of contacts for interviews. The events offered an opportunity for me to introduce myself and identify core and non-core individuals for subsequent conversation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Donnelly, 2006).

⁵ References to field notes are indicated by "FN" and the date of the observation in yyyyymmdd form. For example, "FN 20100605" refers to the gamewatch in Tampa, FL, which took place on June 5, 2010.

Table 1: Participant observation sessions.

Date	Event	Location	Opponent	Status	Attendees
Nov 18, 2009	Gamewatch	Hartford, CT	Denmark	Friendly	AO Hartford
Dec 4, 2009	Winter Ball	Boston, MA			AO Boston, AO Providence, AO Hartford, others
Jan 23, 2010	Gamewatch	Boston, MA	Honduras	Friendly	AO Boston
Feb 24, 2010	Gamewatch	Boston, MA	El Salvador	Friendly	AO Boston
Mar 3, 2010	Gamewatch	New York, NY	Netherlands	Friendly	AO New York
May 25, 2010	Bus trip to/from game	Boston, MA to/from East Hartford, CT			AO Boston, others
May 25, 2010	Live game and tailgate	East Hartford, CT	Czech Republic	Friendly	AO, SA, USSSC, others
May 29, 2010	Game pre-party	Philadelphia, PA			AO Philadelphia, others
May 29, 2010	Live game	Philadelphia, PA	Turkey	Friendly	AO, SA, USSSC, others
Jun 5, 2010	Gamewatch	Tampa, FL	Australia	Friendly	AO Tampa
Jun 12, 2010	Gamewatch	New York, NY	England	World Cup	AO, SA, USSSC, others
Jun 18, 2010	Gamewatch	Nashua, NH	Slovenia	World Cup	SA
Jun 23, 2010	Gamewatch	Orlando, FL	Algeria	World Cup	Varied (nascent supporter group)
Jun 26, 2010	Gamewatch	Key West, FL	Ghana	World Cup	General fans (no supporter group)
Mar 4 – 6, 2011	AO Rally	Las Vegas, NV			AO; SIPs

Interviews

Members and leaders of all three national groups were interviewed, as were members and leaders of various local subgroups. Specific individuals were selected as the study progressed based on theoretical sampling procedures recommended by the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In order to best understand the interviewee's perspective, the interviews had a low degree of structure and used open-ended questions; as I am seen as a participant in the

study, my actions actively shaped the interview (King, 2004). Qualitative interviews privilege the interviewee to allow him/her to focus on those aspects of the research topic that are most meaningful, as guided by the interviewer, and to raise issues of which the interviewer may not be aware (Silverman, 1993). Although participant observation and the more casual conversations yielded considerable data, these interviews offered a rich data source for conceptual insights on the social reality of supporter groups as constructed by their members.

Interviews were conducted with 30 individuals: 26 SGMs and four SIPs.

Interviewees were 83% male (17% female), ranged in age from low-20s to mid-60s, were predominantly Caucasian, and came from 14 states. Pseudonyms, basic demographic information, and USMNT supporter group membership status are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Informants from formal interviews.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age range	AO	SA	USSSC
SGM Allen	Male	45-55	x		x
SGM Beatrix	Female	55-65		x	x
SGM Benjamin	Male	25-35	x		
SGM Chris	Male	20-30	x		x
SGM Calvin	Male	25-35	x	x	x
SGM Daniel	Male	25-35	x		
SGM Erik	Male	25-35	x		
SGM Hal	Male	35-45	x	x	x
SGM Jonathon	Male	40-50	x	x	x
SGM Kathy	Female	40-50	x	x	x
SGM Kenny	Male	60-70	x	x	x
SGM Kyle	Male	25-35	x		x
SGM Lawrence	Male	25-35		x	x
SGM Leroy	Male	20-30	x		x
SGM Matthew	Male	25-35	x		x
SGM Paul	Male	25-35	x	x	

Pseudonym	Sex	Age range	AO	SA	USSSC
SGM Peter	Male	25-35	x		
SGM Randy	Male	40-50	x		
SGM Reginald	Male	40-50		x	
SGM Rick	Male	40-50		x	x
SGM Steven	Male	40-50		x	x
SGM Wayne	Male	25-35	x		
SGM Wendy	Female	20-30	x		
SGM Wesley	Male	30-40	x		
SGM Whitney	Female	30-40	x		
SGM William	Male	25-35	x		
SIP Francis	Male				
SIP Gerald	Male				
SIP Harry	Male				
SIP Valerie	Female				

Timeline

The time frame for data collection was from Fall 2009 through Fall 2011.

Participant observation sessions were completed by Spring 2011 and most interviews occurred through Fall 2011 (see Figure 2).

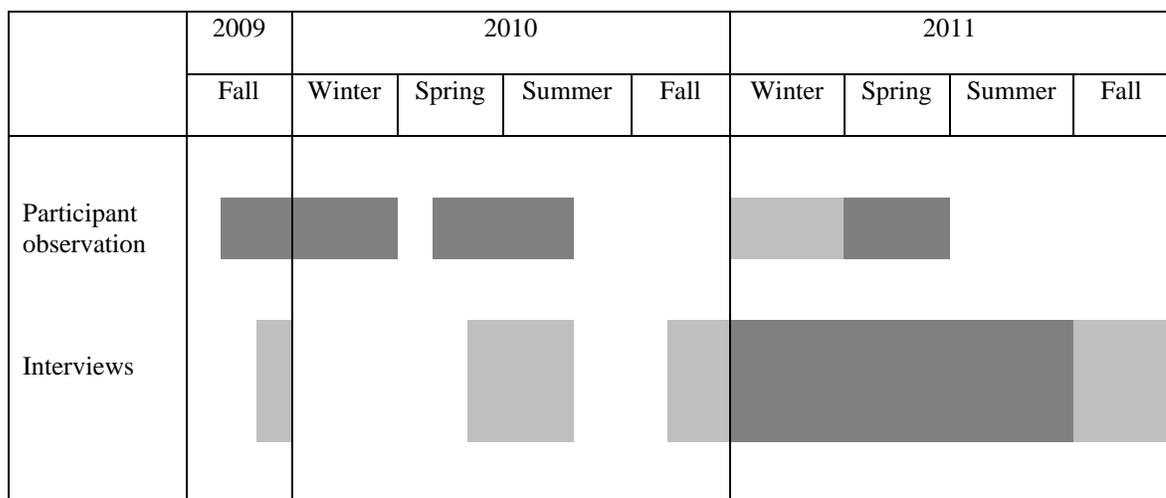


Figure 2: Timeline of data collection. Darker grey areas indicate more concentrated collection of that particular method.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in grounded theory occurs simultaneously with data collection. That is, dialectic data analysis takes place continually throughout the research process. The researcher engages in the constant comparison process of analyzing data while consulting existing literature (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Weed, 2009). The analyzed data gives further direction to the study as per the theoretical sampling approach inherent to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

For this study, transcriptions from interviews, fields notes from participant observation, and passages from online communications were entered into the MaxQDA 10 software program. These data were coded using open and axial methods simultaneously, as is recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008). In open coding, the researcher breaks apart data and delineates concepts that are expressed in the data. By working meticulously through data on a line-by-line basis, the focus remains on the properties and dimensions of each particular concept (Charmaz, 2000). Axial coding, done in conjunction with open coding, relates these concepts to one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher compares each concept to those that have been previously identified and examines how they may connect to or differentiate from each other. In this process, the researcher seeks to discover a higher level of abstraction than exists in the data themselves (Martin & Turner, 1986). It is by identifying plausible relationships among these abstract concepts that theory is developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Throughout collection, coding, and abstraction, the researcher continues the iterative process of exploring and/or revisiting existing literature, as per the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection, coding, and

abstraction continue until reaching theoretical saturation, which is when new data collected fail to provide additional theoretical insight (Charmaz, 2006). Though total saturation is never achieved, sufficient sampling occurs once the researcher determines that considerable depth and breadth have been achieved in understanding a phenomenon for a given study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data gleaned from the methods detailed above are divided into thematic areas that comprise the following three chapters. Chapter 4 begins by exploring AO members' multiple foci of identification related to AO and how these shape their social identities.

CHAPTER 4

MULTIPLE FOCI OF IDENTIFICATION

The term “US Men’s National Team (USMNT) supporter group” may lead one to assume that supporting the team would be the prime focus of American Outlaws (AO) members, and traditional thought on fan identification would suggest likewise (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). However, the results of the current study suggest that viewing a supporter’s identity as being only about the team is limiting.

Although it is true that the team itself is a common point of attachment that brings the group together, an individual’s focus of identification with a team is not limited to a single point (Trail et al., 2003). AO members exhibit one or multiple social identities, depending on each member’s own construction of his or her social self. The current research identifies six foci of identification that relate to being in AO: the USMNT, the United States of America (national identity), the sport of soccer, AO National, AO Local, and one’s small social group. This chapter discusses these identities and how individual members negotiate their interlocking and overlapping identities.

Focus of identification: The USMNT

One of the most common foci of identification for AO members is the USMNT itself, which is to be expected, given that a stated mission of the group is “To support the United States National Soccer Team” (AO “About,” n.d.). Consistent with past works based in Social Identity Theory (Van Leeuwen et al., 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), highly identified USMNT fans view the team as an extension of themselves. As said by one member, “I just felt like I could call the team us and we, whereas I can’t really feel

like that with any other team... I just really felt like the team represented me” (SGM Daniel). This informant’s use of the plural first person in describing the team illustrates his internalization of team into his own identity.

AO members tend to view the USMNT positively and take actions to make their USMNT identity known to others. For example, members frequently wear paraphernalia that offers an outward display of the USMNT, such as a team jersey or t-shirt (FN 20100525). As will be discussed in Chapter 5, it is the norm for AO members to dress in USMNT-branded clothing when attending live games or viewing parties at local bars. This practice of wearing team gear is common among highly-identified fans (Cialdini et al., 1976; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) as the apparel broadcasts one’s identity as a fan and provides a connection to others that are like oneself (i.e., part of the ingroup).

It should be noted that the focus of members’ identification is with the USMNT and not the US Soccer Federation (USSF), despite the USSF’s position as governing body over the USMNT. On the contrary, several members reported animosity toward the USSF for some of its decisions. Most egregious, in the view of AO members, was USSF’s creation of the US Soccer Supporters Club (USSSC): “it pisses me off, what US Soccer is doing right now, because I feel like they don’t give enough credit to the people who have started these supporters groups in the beginning” (SGM Kathy). Another informant expressed even stronger feelings:

I think it’s blackmail and it really angers me that they’d do it. And the day that I heard that they were going to do it, it really pissed me off and I really felt cheated by a Federation that we feel like we do everything to support. It felt like... a stab in the back. (SGM Daniel)

As the governing body for soccer in the US, the USSF’s responsibilities include more than just the USMNT, such as the US women’s national team and under-23 teams. AO

members mention wanting to grow a supporter presence at women's games (FN 20110306), but at this time, they do not identify with the team to the same degree as with the men's team.

Previous research on social identity has also noted the ways in which individuals' high level of identification with a group may manifest itself (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Highly identified individuals tend to internalize the positive external perceptions afforded to groups with which they identify and, therefore, assume some of the groups' successes as their own (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). In sports, this translates into increases in self-esteem for highly identified fans whose teams experience success (Wann, 2006). Conversely, negative views of the team or derogation from an outgroup can negatively affect these individuals' self-view. This latter point is of particular interest to this study due to soccer's diminutive standing in the US sporting landscape. As will be noted, the marginalization and minority status of US soccer fans is a particular risk for those who identify with the USMNT.

USMNT Identity: Supporters as the minority

The USMNT lacks broad-based support within the US (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). This often results in USMNT fans being in the minority, even at within the US, and feeling their USMNT-team identity is unaccepted by their peers (see Chapter 6, "A Place to be Normal"). Further, USMNT fans are often vastly outnumbered at home games (Brown, S., 2007). As said by one informant,

We friggin' hate going to games in LA or DC and you can't even get a home game or a home field advantage because... anyone else in CONCACAF that we're playing can draw a bigger crowd anywhere in the US except, perhaps, Ohio. And that, that pissed us off. (SGM Kathy)

Another informant described a comparable environment:

Gold Cup final, U.S. versus Mexico [in 2007], uh, the U.S. supporters in the crowd were almost, I would say 5% of the 100% total. It was almost entirely Mexico. Uh, and we tried to be as loud as we could, but certainly we were drowned out. (SGM Reginald)

The overwhelming visitors' section at home games could be demoralizing to supporters.

Their identity as USMNT fans could be threatened by the tremendous outgroup presence of opposing fans. In a summary of a game versus Honduras in Chicago, an AO member includes a description of approaching the stadium with his supporter group brethren:

It was all going very well and there was only jubilation for the marchers as we paraded onto the bridge, over Lake Drive [*sic*] and into the stadium grounds only to be met by hundreds of Honduran fans far outnumbering our group.... [S]omething was wrong and you could feel it. It was home game [*sic*] and yet we were clearly outnumbered by hundreds, possibly thousands. The Hondurans were everywhere, and for every red, white or blue shirt, there were 3 blue Honduran jerseys. The elation from moments earlier sunk even lower when we made our way to the Waldron Deck, an upper ramp of a south side parking lot. This is often where tailgates take place and both the American Outlaws and Sam's Army had said we would meet up there for pregame activities. We climbed the stairs to the top level and there was a group of about 10 US supporters tailgating and the rest of the lot was a sea of Honduran Blue. (Quarstad, 2009)

AO members' social identities should be considered against the backdrop of US fans being a minority, both within the stadium and the USA as a whole. Individuals seek to maintain a positive view of themselves and their identities (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), yet their identification as USMNT supporters is met with indifference, negativism, and at times hostility from outgroups (e.g., opposing fans, anti-soccer campaigners within the USA). USMNT supporters describe being viewed as "nutty" (SGM Kenny) and "crazy" (SGM Steven) by their peers and antagonized by opposing fans. While such marginalization has the potential to negatively affect individuals' self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 1990), existing marketing research has found

that social groups can be a source of refuge when one's consumption behavior is looked down upon (Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke, 2006; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). In this ways, being in the supporter group offers AO members a way to maintain and enhance their otherwise rejected USMNT identity and sustain their positive sense of self-worth. Within the stadium at live games, the USMNT identity supersedes that of members' individual supporter groups (i.e., AO National or AO Local group identities).

USMNT Identity: Primacy of the USMNT Identity at Live Games

While in the supporter section, the identity of being in separate local or national supporter groups is reduced and the salience of the overall USMNT identity takes prominence. Although there are still displays of supporter group identity (see section below, "Focus of identification: AO National"), the overall USMNT-based goals of cheering on the team and creating a more enjoyable game atmosphere supersede the distinctions that exist between supporter group identities. The chants and visual displays at games are focused on either the team or the country, not the individual supporter groups. This is exemplified in the color of shirts worn by supporters.

The founder of Sam's Army (SA) states that a purpose of forming a dedicated supporter section at USMNT games is to create a "sea of red" (M. Spacone, personal communication, June 9, 2011). SA members worked to achieve this by all wearing red to the games. However, when AO first started, its members differentiated themselves by wearing blue shirts. While still a color in the flag of the United States, among supporters, blue was distinctive to AO. The decision to wear blue was questioned by some AO members, as captured in this AO member's blog post:

The US supporters still have an identity problem. Sam's Army always wore red. When the American Outlaws started, they wore a royal blue which was being

pushed by Nike who supports them and US Soccer. Meanwhile other US supporters wear their white or dark blue US replica jerseys and still more will wear a kit of their favorite club team, usually from Europe. It's time that US Soccer, Nike, Sam's Army and American Outlaws all get their act together and wear red. It's distinctive and there are very few CONCACAF teams that use the color. (Quarstad, 2009).

Shortly after its founding, AO switched to red shirts (K. Donahoo, personal communication, December 10, 2009). This process illustrates supporters' multiple foci of identification and the challenges faced when negotiating those identities. AO National members initially used blue as a way to display their own identity as a distinct supporter group from SA, but their common USMNT identity led them to adopt red. As stated in the last line in the quote above, red offers a point of distinction in comparison to the attire of other regional opponents and their fans. The adoption of a single color creates metacontrast (Jetten et al., 1998) between those who identify with the USMNT and those who identify with the opposing team. In the presence of an outgroup of opposing fans, red helps maximize the ingroup identity.

The current section addressed the role of the team itself as a source of identification. In addition to the team, USMNT supporters were also observed to identify with the country that the team represents.

Focus of identification: The United States of America (National Identity)

Many AO members point to their nationality as the reason they became fans of the USMNT, and they see the supporter group as a way to intensify that fanship. AO members often express that being part of a supporter group allows them to contribute more to supporting their country than would be possible as an individual fan. That patriotic sentiment is captured in this supporter's comments, which tie the supporter

groups' efforts to increase USMNT success to their efforts to increase America's standing in the world:

I interpret it as being able to show support. Like you see every other country showing support for its team.... Showing the world that we do care about soccer. I think that's kind of important. The American identity. We are still the city upon the hill. Even if people think our image is tarnished, we still like to be the best at everything and that includes showing support for our sports teams, specifically a soccer team. (SGM Peter)

This view is echoed by the chapter head of AO Austin, who describes his work with the group as follows:

That's patriotic for me. You know, I'm a history teacher and I, for better or for worse, American history is our history and all of that and I love America and I love everything about it, for better or for worse. But it's also just, yeah, I mean I feel a sense of accomplishment. (D. Wiersema, personal communication, March 5, 2011)

In fact, etymologic investigation of the supporter group names reveals their nationalistic sources. The name Sam's Army refers to Uncle Sam (SA "FAQ's," n.d.), the personification of the United States (Hicks, 2007). "American Outlaws" alludes to the notorious outlaws of America's "wild west" (AO "About," n.d.). The name reinforces AO members' perception of themselves as outliers while capturing an iconic American image.

Being a part of a supporter group can be also interpreted by one's peers as an outward expression of national pride. One informant, a federal government employee, received encouragement from coworkers for his membership in AO, even if they did not like soccer, because supporter group membership was seen as supporting America. He felt a further connection while traveling to the World Cup when the AO members played a game of soccer against another country's supporters:

We actually got to play a pickup game. I got to play in that game that they filmed in one of the previews in the documentary. And that was special even though we were all, you know, out of shape and playing at like 6,000 feet up, you know. It was pretty cool to be wearing the U.S. jerseys and then to trade them at the end. I still have the neon yellow jersey in my closet. So, yeah, stuff like that, it's, we're all a team. (SGM Leroy)

While playing in the inter-supporter group soccer game, he saw himself as representing the US and could display his national identity. Supporters also see the USMNT players as truly representing America, not just playing for their own benefit as some perceive them to do in other professional sport leagues. Members feel that the players identify with the US in the same way that the supporters do, and they carry that patriotism on to the pitch:

In professional sports, I would say you like, or you always see players who don't, or really live for the team or really believe in what they're doing as much. Like, if you watch in the Premier league for instance, um, there's all these players that are getting paid these outrageous amounts of money, and you know, they'll wear the shirt and they'll pretend like they love the team, but when it comes down to it, they really don't care that much. Well, with the U.S. team, what I really like to see are players who are really living for the badge, you know, playing for pride. And I think the U.S. team embodies that more than almost any team I can think of in any sport. (SGM Daniel)

AO member William feels that supporters' actions offer an opportunity for gratitude for hardships players faced representing America:

Soccer, unlike any other sport, takes our players around the world, and in many instances to places where Americans are viewed in a negative light. So here are these guys [and] girls, representing us in a foreign country. The least we can do is support them when they are home. To know that we appreciate their hard work and dedication. (SGM William)

The supporter group helps facilitate displays of national identity and pride in one's country. The section below focuses on AO members' visual displays through their use of national colors, symbols, and signs. The subsequent section offers examples of auditory displays of national identity.

National Identity: Visual Displays of National Identity

When AO members attend live games or gamewatches, the colors they choose to display are almost exclusively the colors of the American flag: red, white, and/or blue.

Earlier we noted AO's decision to make its shirts in red in order to match those of SA.

While the dominant shirt color in the supporter section at live games is red, the colors of white and blue are also represented, as seen in this description:

Once in the supporter section, nearly everyone was wearing a top of red, white, or blue. The most popular choice was a red t-shirt. The red t-shirts were all about the same shade, but there were several varieties of shirt; they all displayed some form of the USMNT logo, the SA logo, or the AO logo. This was different from those wearing white or blue. Those in white or blue were almost all wearing official USMNT gear (e.g., replica USMNT jerseys, shirts from the US Soccer store with the USMNT crest, etc.). There were a few individuals wearing generic US Soccer shirts, like those sold at Dick's Sporting Goods, but they were in the minority. Some supplemented their outfit with adornments like a USMNT/supporter group scarf; a red, white, and blue top hat; a US flag worn as a cape; and/or tying a flag bandana (also a symbol of AO membership) around their face, head, or neck. The color consistency usually did not extend to the lower half of their clothing. Most people wore khaki shorts, jeans, or other attire that was not patriotic-themed. However, I did see some supporters with more purposeful attire, including star-spangled pants and one AO member in a red and blue kilt (it matched his head, which was painted half red and half blue). (FN 20100525)

Supporters' clothing is not the only way they display the national colors during games.

Some of those in the supporter section bring visual props, such as smoke bombs and confetti, to augment the scene:

A few of the people in the supporter section set off red and blue smoke bombs within the section. This first occurred while the US players were being announced, and then again after the US scored a goal. I'm not sure if the smoke bombs were allowed in the stadium (in some places they are banned), but no one seemed to get in trouble. Also after each score, the guy to my right (immigrated here from Poland) launched handfuls of red, white, and blue confetti into the air. He was relatively reserved for most of the game, but he got excited about "making it rain" after the goals. (FN 20100525)

The patriotic colors are further enhanced by supporters' displays of national symbols.

AO members use symbols as a way to celebrate their shared national identity.

The most obvious of these is the ubiquity of US flags. At live games, one ritual is to unfurl a giant American flag across the first few dozen rows of the supporter section at the start of each game, as shown in Figure 3. Using the network of AO members across the country, members ensure that the giant flag is present for each game (SGM Kathy).

Though AO gamewatches lack the giant flag, many smaller flags are present:

Hanging on the upper walls of the bar were several flags. One was for the bar owner's favorite club soccer team, but the rest were related to supporting the national team. There were two American flags (on opposite sides), a "Don't Tread on Me" flag,⁶ a USMNT flag, and an AO flag.... Several fans wore American flags as capes. One fan took down the "Don't Tread on Me" flag and waved it around before using it as a cape too (he put it back on the wall after the game). A few of the girls had American flag temporary tattoos on their cheeks. (FN 20100612)



Figure 3: Picture on left shows the flag from outside the supporter section (AO "Past Fan Picture Uploads," n.d.). Picture on right shows view underneath the flag (FN 20100525).

AO members may also use other, non-flag-based symbols to display their national identity. For example, some members play on American stereotypes by wearing revolutionary-style tri-corner hats or dressing up as American icons (FN 20100525). One of the best examples of costuming is from a band of AO members who come to games with their instruments:

The band members all wore "hyper-American" outfits. One had on a Captain America muscle-suit, complete with mask. Another had an old-style vest with a

⁶ Otherwise known as the "Gadsden Flag," this was a flag carried by troops during the American Revolution. It has a rattlesnake on a yellow field with the words, "Don't tread on me." The snake logo is used on some USMNT apparel, including as part of the official USMNT jerseys from Nike.

tri-corner (going for the Ben Franklin look?). There was a Boy Scout outfit, an Uncle Sam outfit, and a guy in a Dixieland vest with star-spangled top hat. There was a girl in a Statue of Liberty outfit, and though she was around the guys in the band, she didn't have any instruments. (FN 20100529)

AO members also display their national identity through making signs to display at live games. These signs allow for communication of more specific messages than can be communicated through visual images such as the colors or flag. For example, a popular sign held up by supporters at the domestic USMNT World Cup tune-up games blended US and USMNT history by depicting a beheaded Wayne Rooney, a star player for the English national team (see Figure 4). The sign parodied an English poster of Rooney and the years reference historical US-English clashes: the Revolutionary War of 1776, the 1-0 USMNT World Cup victory over England in 1950, and the upcoming 2010 World Cup match against England (FN 20100525). By boasting of past, future, and morbidly fake US triumphs, the sign inflates the positive identity of the ingroup (Americans). Visual signs of members' nationality are likewise augmented through the auditory means, as discussed in the following section.



Figure 4: Poster of Landon Donovan appearing to have beheaded Wayne Rooney. The poster is a parody of a Wayne Rooney poster and was displayed at US games prior to US-England match.

National Identity: Auditory Displays of National Identity

The supporter section at live games is governed by certain norms of behavior (see Chapter 5), among which is the directive “To be loud. To stand, sing and cheer our boys on” (AO “Membership,” n.d.). AO members follow this edict at live games, at chapter bar gamewatches, and during other supporter events. Many of the group’s chants and songs are intended to call attention to group members’ national identity.

Most North American sporting events start with the playing of the national anthem. The usual response of spectators is respectful, but lacking enthusiasm. The reaction at USMNT games, particularly among supporters, is far more dynamic. Where fans of baseball may claim the need to be in the stadium “in time for the first pitch,” USMNT supporters insist on being in the stadium in time for the national anthem (SGM Beatrix). Some even pointed to singing the anthem within the supporter section as one of the highlights of the entire game experience. In the heightened state of national identity salience experienced in the supporter section, the national anthem can trigger a more emotional reaction than it might otherwise, such as for this supporter:

There’s just, the excitement, again, look at your country and you can’t be more proud. Being at the game and singing the national anthem, we’ve been to a lot of sporting events and there is nothing like singing the national anthem at the US soccer match.... It’s just at the US soccer you’re screaming it and you’re, I’m crying and you know, you just feel like you’re defending your country. (SGM Whitney)

Collectively singing the national anthem has particular importance because of its paramount national symbolism, yet there are many other nationalistic songs and chants that are part of the supporter repertoire.

A popular source of nationalistic tunes or songs are those that were prominent during American wars, such as “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” and “Over there” (FN 20100525; Romanowski, 2010). These songs, whose primary meaning is in support

of the country when in battle, are co-opted by fans to be in support of the team representing the country. Sport and war are frequently analogized (End, Kretschmar, Campbell, Mueller, & Dietz-Uhler, 2003; Kellett, 2002), and supporters see the team as battling against another country on the soccer pitch (SGM Randy; SGM Whitney). Other nationalistic chants include the simple “Superpower, Superpower, U.S.A.! Superpower, Superpower, U.S.A.!” (FN 20100529), paraphrasing the Wu Tang Clan with “U.S.A. ain’t nothin’ to fuck with” (FN 20100525), the antiphonic “Everywhere we go / people want to know / who we are / so we tell them / We are the U.S. (We are the U.S.) / The mighty, mighty U.S. (The mighty, fucking U.S.)” (FN 20100525; Romanowski, 2010). These examples all focus on only the United States, glorifying the ingroup. Other chants and songs seek to elevate the US status through references to outgroups – the opposing countries, teams, or players.

The opposing team-specific chants vary depending on the opponent, and are thus not heard at games with the same frequency as the strictly pro-American songs. For example, against Mexico fans may sing “Aye, yi, yi, yi, Oh my sombrero. / Some no good Pat, has stolen my hat, and now I have nothing to wear-o!” to the tune of “Cielito lindo” (Romanowski, 2010). Against England, fans can chant (to tune of “If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands”), “Had it not been for the Yanks you’d all be Krauts (clap clap). / Had it not been for the Yanks you’d all be Krauts (clap clap). / Had it not been for the Yanks, Had it not been for the Yanks, Had it not been for the Yanks you’d all be Krauts (clap clap)” (FN 20100612). Chants relating to the historical or cultural features of the opposing country (i.e., the outgroup) further call attention to saliency of the supporters’ own identity as Americans.

These chants offer an illustration of how being in AO helps members celebrate their national identity. In the quote below, SGM Chris discusses how the energy of the supporter section (i.e., “that mob”) deepens one’s nationalistic sentiments:

Definitely when you get that mob, you know a huge group of people together, everyone is completely decked out, going crazy and over-the-top patriotic. It kind of enhances that in you and it kind of, it almost makes it stronger. You go from just watching the sport, you know, like you watch the American figure skaters or the American bobsledders, and it changes it to more of a mania. You care a lot more about it. Not only about yourself, you know, if we’re playing against Russia or whatever. It becomes more of like, it become a lot more of a country pride thing. It kind of happened, you know, with the U.S. vs. Soviet Union. Everyone really, really cared because it wasn’t really about just winning the game. It was about showing it, showing it out, you know, being proud of America in general, and beating your rival. It kind of creates that kind of element that wouldn’t be there otherwise. (SGM Chris)

SGM Chris’ described experience and feelings are consistent with the SIDE model of group behavior in which ingroup immersion is posited to bolster one’s social identity (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Similar identity reinforcement has been observed in other communities, such as flag football players (Green & Chalip, 1998) and motorcycle riders (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In all these cases, similarly identified individuals converge and can parade their social identities.

Live games and gamewatches are the primary places in which AO members gather (see Chapter 5). While the live game experiences offer a larger crowd than at other AO gatherings, patriotic songs and chants are still part of other AO parties. The national identity vocalizations of AO members at the gamewatches and pre-game parties mimic those practiced at live games. Supporters in the bar shout chants and cheers, including those where the focus is on the country. They can be pro-America, such as “USA! USA!” (FN 20100623). Or the chants can be directed against an opponent, even

when that outgroup is not present. An example of the latter was observed at a gamewatch in Tampa, Florida:

Although the game was against Australia, there were no any anti-Australian chants. Instead, the chants were directed at Team USA's next opponent, England [the first World Cup match]. The chants included... "America, fuck yeah! England, fuck you!" and "US Army came and saved your ass, do dah, do dah..." (FN 20100605)

Not surprisingly, the "hyper-American" band of AO members mentioned above plays songs that trigger members' sense of national identity. One instance of observing this was at a pre-game bar party in Philadelphia:

There was a stage in the patio area outside. A small rock band played cover songs, drowning out the music from inside the bar. Every 20 minutes or so, and at one point for an extended period, Corey [AO Philly chapter leader] or another AO member would take to the stage and lead cheers. Eventually, the rock band yielded to the patriotic band and their instruments, which included drums, brass instruments, and a saxophone. The AO band played patriotic songs like "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic," to which the rest of the AO crowd sang along. (FN 20100529)

These examples of cues both visual (e.g., red shirts, blue smoke bombs) and auditory (i.e., patriotic chants and songs) exemplify how members use the supporter group as a means to fortify their shared identity as Americans. Individuals often identify with a national sport team (Alabarces & Rodriguez, 2000; Chalip, 2006; Giulianotti, 2000; Russell, 1999; Ward, 2009), and national identity is indeed apparent among USMNT supporter group members. Past research has found national identity to be particularly prominent when countries compete against each other in sport (Bale, 1986; Marks, 1998). For many soccer supporter group members, the multiple USMNT games per year offer the chance to parade and celebrate that national identity on more frequent intervals than quadrennial World Cups or Olympic Games.

The two points of identification discussed thus far, team and country, are common among national supporter groups (Giulianotti, 1994). The next section looks at the sport of soccer itself. While the overall sport domain is not an unusual focus of identification, its prominence within AO stands out as distinctive.

Focus of identification: The sport of soccer

Existing research has noted the sport itself can serve as a point of attachment for fans (Funk et al., 2001; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). This was found in the current study as well, where the domain of soccer is a source of members' social identity. However, the current study offers a unique condition in which a fan's identification is influenced by their concern for the future status of the sport overall. Soccer lacks primacy within the American sport culture, and soccer fans are in the minority within the USA (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). The body of existing literature on soccer supporter groups has not investigated the influence of supporting the sport itself through supporter group engagement, yet it is an important factor for those who are part of USMNT supporter groups.

AO members define themselves in part as evangelists for the sport of soccer within the United States (SGM Kyle). They view the supporter group as a way in which they can contribute to the popularity of the game. Their identity is thus tied, in part, to seeing soccer grow. In describing the personal reward felt from his supporter group role, one informant states,

The biggest thing is just drawing and promoting attention to the game of soccer that over the years has been so lacking... I would hope that [supporter group members] think they're playing a vital role in growing the game in this country. (SGM Steven)

Other supporters were more direct, boasting that it was the supporters section that made the game experience attractive to other fans (SGM Paul; SGM Rick). One way that supporters attempt to grow soccer is by attempting to remedy the perceived soccer ignorance of non-fans.

AO members see educating new fans as a part of increasing overall interest in soccer (SGM Kathy; SGM Matthew). They feel that with mainstream sports, a basic understanding and appreciation of the game permeates through sport fans without requiring concentrated effort, and this base level of knowledge is lacking with soccer. They hope to leverage the fun environment promulgated by the supporter group as an opportunity to educate others about the sport. One SGM member states that “educating everyone that comes to the door is very crucial for the survival of American Outlaws” (SGM Wayne). This position illustrates the cyclical view of group members’ efforts: the supporter group helps grow interest in the soccer domain, and a growing interest in soccer bolsters membership in the supporter group, which then further increases soccer’s popularity, and so on. Part of the mission for AO is to facilitate fanship. As stated by AO co-founder Brunken, “We’re trying to make it easier to be a soccer fan, everywhere in the country” (J. Brunken, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Growing overall soccer interest can have self-serving benefits for supporter groups. Succinctly stated by Free Beer Movement’s (FBM) founder Wiersema, “New soccer fans = new USMNT fans = new AO members” (FN 20110306). In this way, the supporter group helps nurture members’ identity as a soccer fan. AO provides a channel through which one can interact with other soccer-focused individuals while growing the ingroup of soccer fans.

Growing general interest in soccer is viewed as a grassroots approach to growing the USMNT fan base, from whom the supporter groups can attract more members. In some ways the supporter group resembles a religious institution, and the members are evangelists for the cause of soccer. As stated by SGM Daniel, “it feels really rewarding at games, to see like that I’ve contributed in a way to growing, or, I don’t know, it sounds like spreading a religion, and kind of, in a way, it kind of is.” Supporter group members speak passionately about their recruiting of new fans, hoisting their “conversions” as badges of pride. They frequently discuss their drive to spread the word of soccer, and members from across the country stress the welcoming culture of AO. SGM Randy, from the west coast, describes his entrance to the group with “they were very accepting. You could write to them, you could go out and meet them. They were easy to find, and they were very open to new people coming in.” This is echoed by SGM Allen, from an east coast chapter, when comparing AO to other supporter groups: “[AO] seemed to be... more welcoming to all different types of people.” Whereas past research on supporter groups highlighted the exclusionary practices of supporters who look down on new fans (King, 1997; Nash, 2001), the current study shows that not to be the case within the AO supporter group. The AO Code of Conduct, a codification of the group’s norms, even espouses egalitarianism among members. It states, “There is no class of US fan. We are all in it for the same reason, regardless of your number of caps⁷ or club affiliation” (AO “Code of conduct – Act above,” n.d.). While some supporters acknowledge an increase in fans who just see soccer as “cool” and an alternative to the American sports of an older

⁷ The term “caps” refers to “games attended.” This edict thus means that those who have been supporters longer should not be seen as better than those new to the sport.

generation, thereby lacking an appreciation for the game itself, they still welcome those fans because doing so means increasing the support for soccer in America.

The perceived need of members to grow US soccer fandom, and in turn grow AO membership, shapes the ethos of the supporter group. The “soccer fan” identity unites AO members and transcends the divisions of seniority, commitment, or knowledge that have been observed in other soccer supporter groups (cf., Giulianotti, 2002; Nash, 2001). This unity is furthered by a common identity as being an AO member. Being an AO member implies multiple, nested identities. Individuals identify with the national organization (AO National) and their individual chapters (AO Local). The next two sections examine these identities, beginning with the overarching national group before examining identification with local subgroups.

Focus of identification: AO National

AO members express strong identification with the supporter group. AO National unites members in a “nationwide brotherhood” (SGM William) and “reinforces being a part of something bigger than just yourself or... your city” (SGM Wayne). Being part of the larger group offers members a defined place within the world of American soccer fans. It gives them an immediate connection with other members from across the country, rather than having only disjointed, localized groups. Defining one’s place in society helps reduce social uncertainty (Hewitt, 2006; Hogg, 2005), and members identify with the large ingroup of other AO members (see Chapter 6, “Sense of Community within the Supporter Group”). Further, a sport fan’s identity often includes seeing oneself as contributing directly to team success (Wolfson, Wakelin, & Lewis, 2005), and supporters see themselves as consummate USMNT fans. AO members derive

meaning through their supporter status by seeing the group as being an effective means of showcasing their identity as supporters of the USMNT and more directly helping the team.

AO National Identity: Importance of being a Supporter

For AO members, their place within the supporter group is viewed as a way to accentuate their high USMNT identification in a way that is not possible through fanship as an individual. When asked what it meant to be in the AO Supporter group, one informant said, “Well, I think that it shows that you truly are more than just a fan” (SGM William). A way in which AO members want to be “more than just a fan” is through seeing themselves as better contributing to the team’s success than fans who are not in supporter groups. In the following quote, the informant states the importance of being part of the supporter group during live games:

Being a part of that group [the supporter section], and knowing that, as a whole we can send a very powerful and loud message [to the players] that “We’re here and we’re behind you,” sometimes quite literally, is really important to me. And again, not that other people sprinkled throughout the stadium can’t send some of that message, but... the supporters section is the only place that can kind of send that soundwave or burst of color or burst of support in American soccer in 2011. So for me like being a part of that and knowing that the larger we become and the more recognizable we become, the louder the message we send, whether it could be to the players or to the other people in the stands. (SGM Wayne)

Beyond the two hours at live games, AO members see their efforts contributing to the “behind-the-scenes” work of the US Soccer Federation (USSF). They see the supporter group, specifically actions they take as members, as helping to build the team itself. One informant explains the connection as follows:

With greater support comes greater sponsorship deals and finances for our team. Better facilities better scouting. I mean there is no end to what it could mean if numbers are big enough. So, I can’t imagine how much of a part I play in that but at the same time everyone does a little bit by pitching in the 15 bucks, showing

their support and showing up for the games and waving their flags. And being real loud when the opposing team is in your half. And the rest will take care of itself. (SGM Peter)

When being a fan of the team is part of one's social identity, one views the team as being an extension of oneself (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). It follows that these fans would search for ways to enhance the success of the team as doing so improves their own self-image. As evidenced in the quotes above, AO members feel as though their AO group participation offers a way of enhancing their USMNT fan identity. That identity is further enhanced through connecting with others via outward displays of the AO identity.

AO National Identity: Displaying AO National Identity

Though outward displays of AO National membership, AO members can signal their place within the ingroup to those who share the social identity:

If I am in Columbus, I can walk up to a group of guys I have never met before, but may be wearing an AO bandanna, and say "I'm William, from AO [Jacksonville], nice to meet you." They'll tell me what chapter they're with, we'll share a beer and hang out for a while. So, it gives you the immediate "in" to be able to talk to stranger. (SGM William)

This signaling as a AO member does not necessarily eliminate displays of other related identities. Multiple social identities can coexist within a single setting (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), and aforementioned identities overlap with the AO National identity. This is exemplified through a USMNT jersey sold exclusively through AO National. It was an official team jersey, but an AO patch was added to the sleeve. This allows AO members to simultaneously display their USMNT and AO National identities. In the example shown in Figure 5, the buyer customized the jersey

with the number 76 and the “player name” of seventeen (i.e., 1776, the year the United States became an independent country), thus accentuating his national identity as well.



Figure 5: USMNT jersey with AO patch on the sleeve. Front (left) shows the USMNT crest and AO patch; back (right) shows customized player “name” and number. (FCDrunk 2012a, 2012b)

Another way in which individuals are known to display the significance of their social identities is through permanent tattoos (Velliquette, Murray, & Evers, 2006).

There are many AO members with AO-related tattoos, and the tattoos were particularly common among the highly identified attendees at the AO Rally:

One of the frequent topics of conversation at the bar was about everyone's tattoos. Anyone I saw with at least one tattoo had some kind of soccer-related tattoo. Examples included the US Soccer crest, AO logo, Don't Tread on Me logo, a red and blue shield, and a soccer ball with the red and blue stars. For the AO logo, a few people had the half-soccer ball with triangle American flag logo, and others had the AO Eagle crest. An AO Rochester member combined the half-soccer ball logo with the "Don't tread on me" snake - it stretched from the top of his left shoulder to his elbow. (FN 20100305; see Figure 6 for sample photos of the tattoos on different AO members)

When asked about his AO tattoos (he has three), SGM Hal explained them as follows:

It's just something I love... It's part of my life so it's always, I always like to talk about it and, you know, tattoos are always a cool thing that people always ask questions about. Or they always say, “Why did you get that tattoo?” It always starts the story about American Outlaws, especially if you're looking at my sleeves [slang for tattooed arms]. So, that's the kind of stuff I like to talk about especially if you're going up to people that don't know anything about US Soccer or American Outlaws. (SGM Hal)



Figure 6: Tattoos of AO logos (FN 20100305⁸).

Another AO member already had a US Soccer-related tattoo, but he added another tattoo that displayed the AO insignia. When asked why he got the tattoo, he said,

[The tattoo] identifies who I am and what I'm into.... It says I am a US supporter and I'm with American Outlaws, the group that supports them more than any other group. (SGM Wesley)

The tattoos provide permanent displays of an individual's identity as an AO member.

The tattoos have limited reach in terms of conveying one's identity to a larger audience, and AO opt for other methods to make their AO National identity visible in the supporter section at live games.

AO National Identity: Displaying AO National Identity with the Supporter Section

It was noted earlier that the USMNT identity at live games supersedes the identity of individual supporter groups. However, this does not mean that the identity as "AO National member" ceases all recognizability within the supporter section. Just as the identities of being a USMNT fan and an American overlap while in the supporter section, so too does the identity of being an AO National member.

Amidst the red shirts and unified chanting of the supporter section are displays of AO National identity. Prior to games, AO (and SA) leaders negotiate advanced access to the stadium in order to hang their group banner in the front of the section (see left side of

⁸ Two of the photos were from FN 20100305. The middle photo is of an AO member who showed me that tattoo at the bar that night, but I did not get a photo of it at the time. I retrieved this photo from AO "US Soccer Tattoo Contest – WINNERS!" (2010).

Figure 3 on page 67; FN 20100529). Some AO members also bring in their own AO-focused signs, though these are not as large as the ones that line the front railings of sections. Far more prevalent are soccer scarves and bandanas (see Figure 7):

Many of those within the supporter section wore or carried their scarves. These were not scarves for warmth (it was over 70 degrees at gametime) or style (no one in the section was dressed in "stylish" clothes like one might see in Manhattan or Milan), but were scarves like the soccer fans in Europe have for their club teams—thick, heavy weave, a few feet long, tasseled edges. All the scarves were some combination of red, white, and blue. Most of the scarves had the supporter group name on one side (e.g., "American Outlaws," "US Soccer Supporters Club") and "United States" on the other.... Although there were a lot of people wearing the AO bandana [an American flag bandana that comes with each AO membership], I saw plenty of people in AO gear (t-shirts, scarves) who were not wearing the bandana. Further, of those that were wearing it, very few had it over their mouth and nose "bank robber"-style. More often it was folded and tied around the head, neck, or arm. (FN 2010525)

While those within the section are aware of the different group markers, these displays of AO National membership are subtle or imperceptible to those outside the section.



Figure 7: Scarves and bandanas of AO fans in the supporter section at live games (FN 20100525, AO "Past Fan Picture Uploads," n.d.).

As the distinctions are not easily perceived by others, AO members express frustration when their group is not properly acknowledged as contributing to the supporter section. AO members feel slighted, as captured by this field note:

[The AO member] complained about the TV commentator for an earlier game (Philly or Hartford) saying something like "Sam's Army is out in force" multiple times, but he knew much of the supporter section was really American Outlaws. (FN 20100605)

It also was written in online discussions among each other (AO, May 25, 2010, all emphasis and phrasing in original):

Keaton Köch: And They [TV commentators] Have Failed To Mention THE American Outlaws. I am truly getting tired of this. American Outlaws, you need, no, YOU HAVE TO have a talk with ESPN and the Disney Company. If we want true respect, true honor, true dignity, then they need to say, the supporter CLUBS of THE American Outlaws and Sams Army. This Is Just pissing every member off. Please take this into consideration.

Scott Disney: Third mention of Sam's Army 15 minutes into ESPN's coverage, how about a little respect for the Outlaws.

Keaton Köch: agreed, look at comment above

Paul Ballenger: I noticed that, they kept showing the outlaws but would give props to Sams, either way looked like there was a lot of support out last night. Good work.

AO members also took to blog posts to voice their frustrations:

One huge problem I do have, however, is when ESPN, the world's largest sporting network and supposed proponent of soccer, can't even get the name of the supporters group that the loudest, most passionate fans belong to. We are the American Outlaws. Our banners say so, our shirts and scarves display it clear as day, and we are official members - dues paid and all. Proper credit needs to be given where it's due. (Edwards, 2010)

AO is not an official part of the US Soccer Federation (USSF), and thus it lacks official recognition from the governing body. This unofficial status could potentially threaten members' identity as a national supporter group. In which case, members can turn to recognition from outsiders as a way to affirm group legitimacy.

AO National Identity: Affirmation of Identity from Players, Administrators, and the

Media

The USSF views all supporter groups similarly and makes a conscious effort to not favor one over the others (SIP Harry), except for the special treatment afforded to the USSSC (e.g., early access to tickets, meet-and-greets with players). Thus, any collective

of individuals can unite to call itself a supporter group. In such an environment, supporters who view themselves as part of more influential groups can look to external entities for affirmation of their supporter group identity.

The most visible recognition of the supporters is by players at the end of the game:

After the game ended, and after shaking hands with the Czech players, the USMNT players came over to the area in front of the supporter section. They briefly applauded, clapping their hand above their heads; some blew kisses. These gestures were the players' way of acknowledging the supporters. (FN 20100525)

While other fans in the stadium may leave after the final whistle, supporters will stay and continue to chant until the players give their salute. One supporter expressed his appreciation for the recognition by saying,

I really enjoy that the uh, team members will come over after a match towards our section and clap as if they're clapping for us as we've been clapping for them the whole game before.... That shows they know we're there and that we're making a difference. That they appreciate that we're out there and driving them on. (SGM Reginald)

During the AO Rally in Las Vegas, former player Alexi Lalas appealed to the crowd in his address titled "A love letter from me to you," where "you" referred to the US soccer supporters. He prefaced his remarks with "You're going to get a lot of ass-kissing, but it's not lip service," and included lines like "US Soccer players understand that without you [fans], we are nothing," "I feed off of you. You have passion from the bottom of your soul," and that the supporters "who have done the work off the field have done as much or more than those on the field for propelling the sport" (FN 20110306). This speech offered specific anecdotes of thanks and was viewed as a top highlight by the AO members in attendance. Those in attendance then shared the highlights of the speech

with other AO members in their local chapters. Not knowing that I was in attendance, an informant who was not at the Rally told me about Lalas' speech during our conversation, citing it with pride in the group's accomplishments (SGM Chris). This type of acknowledgement drives supporters to continue their efforts, as noted by AO co-founder Brunken: "We have heard from a few players, and they like what we are doing and encourage us to keep on trucking. That always keeps us motivated" (Original Winger, 2010). He later said, "Feedback from the Team really keeps us going, because it takes a lot of work, and sometimes without a ton of reward. But we have gotten some great acknowledgment and support from current and past players" (Moruzzi, 2011). The AO members give the gift of their fanship to the players, and that gift is reciprocated by acknowledging the supporters' efforts (Crosset, 1999). That recognition reinforces AO members' self-view as actually providing support to the team.

The acknowledgement can also come from others involved with US soccer besides the players. For example, an impromptu "thank you" speech from USSF president Sunil Gulati is cited by AO members as one of the key moments in the organization's history (Quarstad, 2009). His appreciation of the supporters gave the nascent AO organization an early boost in legitimacy, and the speech was referred to by AO co-founder Donahoo as "the cherry on top of one of my favorite days being an Outlaw" (Original Winger, 2010). Recognition from the media is also valued, as captured in this statement: "A small part of me appreciates the recognition, you know, when the color commentator or whatever says like 'Wow, can you see that support there?' You know like, 'Those guys are doing a great job'" (SGM Wayne). That sentiment was endorsed by SGM Peter, who said, "I feel like with each ESPN broadcast

they give a shout out to the Outlaws.... It's a good feeling to see that kind of support from people in the media." The importance of media acknowledgement is all the more evident when the recognition is misattributed, as was noted above in ESPN's broadcast references to SA only. The acknowledgement from all those involved with US soccer validates the AO National's presence and is perceived as a testament that their actions are, in fact, contributing to the on-field results. This positive reinforcement serves to bolster the AO National identity.

AO National's status as an unofficial USMNT supporter group can bring challenges, as described above, but it also permits AO to develop its own identity independent of the USSF. It is an autonomous entity not controlled by the USSF, and this autonomy is a critical piece of AO's structure and culture.

AO National Identity: Being Ourselves – AO Autonomy

Some sport marketers develop mechanisms to facilitate direct interaction among the teams' fans. By facilitating fan interaction under the auspices of the sport property, marketers are able to create and monitor dialogue with their fans while increasing fans' feeling of connection with the team (Mahan, 2011). In doing so, however, individuals' ownership of and identification with the supporter group may be sacrificed.

Historically, there has existed tension between supporter groups and governing bodies of soccer. Despite the massive commitment and indispensable fundraising on the part of early English supporter groups, they were all but ignored by the Football Association (FA) and Football League (Taylor, 1992). It was not until the 1970s that meaningful dialogue occurred between the FA and supporters. In the last decade, the FA has attempted to transform the "official" England national team fan base, a move that

some have criticized as commercially savvy but Orwellian (Crabbe, 2004; Hughson & Poulton, 2008). The US Soccer Federation (USSF) created its own supporter group (USSSC), but at this time, the USSSC has different goals and activities than AO. The USSF works with AO National, yet the supporter group is autonomous and functions as its own entity, which supporters value for creating their own group identity.

Among informants for the current study, there is the view that the supporter group experience must be a product of fan devotion, not something created by a governing body. Said one informant, “I don’t think there’s a lot of credibility when a team makes their own supporters group” (SGM Benjamin). The governing body may assist where possible, but the supporter groups must be self-driven, independent entities. One soccer industry professional described the approach to supporter groups as follows:

The soccer experience happens organically and is created by the fans... I think the role of the organization is to help foster and facilitate that. It’s not necessarily to develop it, to create it, it’s not necessarily to help execute it, it’s just to provide the environment that can help the fans be fans... In some ways, the job of the organization is to help support the fans, but then almost get out of the way, and let them be fans in the way they naturally want to support the team. (SIP Gerald).

Those within AO felt similarly, as captured in this comment:

Supporters groups by tradition, by history, are independent of the organizations that run the teams. Now they have connections and relationships with those teams and those organizations, but they should never be run in house. That’s why FIFA rules even say, in a larger thing, the government isn’t involved in the soccer federation. Like those sorts of things, because you don’t want to exercise control. You don’t want to exercise censorship. (SGM Wayne).

In the informant’s comment above, he expresses concern regarding the potential for censorship by the Federation. Were the Federation responsible for the actions of AO members, it may see the need for censorship in order to maintain a certain image and protect its brand. Those restrictions could alter how AO members construct their group identity and stifle the displays of identity.

The autonomous structure allows AO National to determine its own actions and gives members a greater feeling of ownership of the group. In turn, AO National grants autonomy to its various subgroups, which contributes to similar outcomes among members at local AO chapters.

Focus of identification: AO Local

Within the national AO organization are nested over 70 individual AO Local chapters (AO “Official Chapters,” n.d.). When AO was in its infancy, the founders felt this structure would be more conducive given the physical dispersion of USMNT fans across the US (K. Donahoo, personal communication, October 17, 2011). An outcome of having subgroups like this is that events where AO members physically interact with just AO Local are considerably more frequent than events with all of AO National. Physical interaction with AO National is limited to events around live games (and special events like the AO Rally) and is inhibited by the cost and time of traveling to the events. In contrast, there are frequent opportunities for AO Local interaction. Chapters host events including gamewatches, charity dances, and video game tournaments that bring together members within local AO chapters (FN 20091204; FN 20110306; SGM Calvin; SGM Hal). These activities further the connection of AO Local members to each other, deepening their identification with AO Local. To recognize the importance of these activities to members, and how being part of a local subgroup affects the overall consumption experience, it is useful to first compare the AO experience to that of SA. Specifically, these regular opportunities for engagement are unavailable under the single-body system of SA and are seen as one of the main reasons for AO’s rise and the diminishing value of SA.

SA existed for 12 years as a national supporters group prior to the founding of AO. Yet some informants reported never feeling the same identification with SA as they feel with AO. Put simply by one supporter, “I never felt like a Sammer” (SGM Paul). The reasons the identification did not develop were varied, but informants frequently lamented SA’s failure to cultivate a local presence, as captured here:

That was the problem with the previous incarnation of a supporters group in Sam’s Army. It’s that they had a national, but they didn’t, you know, they didn’t have any of these local, and even with the national, they didn’t have any motivated people to create a local, on the ground sort of feeling for the national organization.... How, I mean, can you call Sam’s Army a national organization pre-2007 without them having any local support? (SGM Wayne)

SA allowed for supporters to unite during games, but there was minimal opportunity for interaction otherwise. In contrast, the subgroups within AO allow for regular social interaction, which known to help in fortifying group norms and identities (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Postmes & Spears, 1998). The national group’s promotion of local chapters is central to AO’s structure.

AO National grants considerable autonomy to each local AO chapter. Hence, each chapter can develop its own identity, as is suggested by one chapter leader in the quote below:

We are all part of AO National, just with our local flair. I think of it like the Hells Angels, or another 1%’er biker group, minus the meth, crime and racism. We are all under the umbrella, just have our local gang. So, it gives our own sense of self. We take pride in our chapter, because it is ours. I think if we were just all part of AO, it wouldn’t be the same. Kind of like Sam’s Army, which has pretty much fizzled out.... I think being just part of a very large group can be kind of lonely, for lack of a better word. You’re just a fan, like everybody else. But I think having your own, smaller group, who are part of the larger group, allows you to forge stronger relationships locally, and feel like you are contributing to the overall support of the team. It’s the difference of going to a soccer game and being in the supporters section, versus sitting somewhere else. Sure you are at the same game, but it’s a completely different experience. (SGM William)

The ability of local chapters to forge their own identity means that AO chapters from different regions of the country can embrace the norms of the area. One AO member suggested that Midwestern chapters “embody the generic Midwestern norms, you know, more rural, more suburban characteristics that accompany the Midwest” (SGM Paul). He implied that the Midwestern chapters were more relaxed, which he compared to groups like AO Boston and AO Philly, who “embody sort of a northeastern, gritty, northeast corridor, gritty urban characteristics, with also a touch of typical northeastern elitist sentiments” (SGM Paul). Another member related the distribution of AO to America as a whole:

It localizes the group, probably makes it tighter knit and gives each local group its own democratic way of existing. Whatever numbers that group wants, however they want to exist, however often they want to meet, whatever identity they want to create for themselves. American Outlaws establishes, sort of, minimum requirements for becoming a chapter but, and sort of rules to follow, but then within that structure, each chapter can kind of exist on its own terms and I think that's good. I mean we are one America, but we have a lot of slight subcultures within that larger America. (SGM Kyle)

Even at events surrounding live games, where identification with AO National is prominent, members still carry and display their AO Local identities. The interplay between these two social identities is apparent at the bar party the night before the game. In the example below, SGM Hal notes that the night before party offers a space for parading AO Local identities within the larger collective of AO National:

Each chapter can make their own shirts. And it's just a, it's a cool way, you know, when you're going to a night before party, each chapter usually wears their chapter shirts individually. That way it's kind of like, “Oh, you're from LA,” or “You're from Wisconsin,” or “You're from Tampa,” something like that. (SGM Hal)

In addition to t-shirts, members may also bring their local chapter banners to display, as seen in Figure 8 (SGM Calvin; SGM Erik). AO National provides funding to each

chapter for its own banner and encourages chapters to develop its own AO Local logo to display on the banner (see Figure 9). Thus, even while identifying with AO National, members can still simultaneously categorize themselves and others according to their AO Local subgroup.



Figure 8: Regional banner from AO New Jersey displayed at a live game (AO “Past Fan Picture Uploads,” n.d.).



Figure 9: Chapter logos of AO Brooklyn, AO Washington DC, and AO Jacksonville. The logos show the integration of local elements with AO National symbols.

AO National Identity Overlap in the AO Local Setting

While the local subgroup is the most frequent source of engagement for members, the superordinate group provides meaning for its subgroup and remains a level of group with which members identify. For many, their initial membership in AO Local was a result of their interest in the superordinate AO National. Informants explain that small, independent local supporter groups are challenging to start and maintain in all but the largest metropolitan areas, such as New York, Boston, and Los Angeles (SGM Kathy;

SGM Kenny). For most cities within the United States, the local groups need the draw of a national brand. AO National's visibility on television during USMNT games and strong social media presence introduces the supporter group to even casual USMNT fans. In the quote below, the supporter talks about how AO has helped grow the membership for his local chapter:

SGM Chris: AO is so big and prevalent now, that if someone interested in following soccer wants to meet the fans, they'll do Google search American Outlaws because that's the name in the news. That's the name that they've heard of. So by being affiliated with them, ...it helps us with our recruiting. It helps us getting our name out there, getting more people involved, than if we had our own name.

Researcher: So is it the brand then?

SGM Chris: Yeah, at this point. I mean, when AO probably first started, it probably wasn't like that. But when AO first started it was a couple of guys in their dorm room. So it was more like our subgroup is now. ...Now it's more of a brand that... makes it easy for different groups to find people that love soccer.

The brand recognition of AO National often helps bring individuals into AO Local, and from there, those members can develop identification with the subgroup. However, even in settings where the AO Local identity is most salient, there may be overlap with the AO National identity.

As noted in the section above, AO National attire is worn by attendees at AO Local gamewatches (FN 20110224). Moreover, those at the gamewatch make connections between themselves and AO members at the game:

At the beginning of the broadcast (before the game started), the TV camera showed some shots of the crowd, including the supporter section. In close-ups of the section, AO gear was clearly visible, particularly the scarves and bandanas. The people in the bar cheered whenever AO was shown on TV, shouting comments like "Look at us!," "We're representing tonight!," and "There we are!" Later in the game, when AO was shown again, [SGM Paul] approached the TV for a closer look and said, "Oh, I know some of those guys. I know him, and him,

and him;" he later said that he'd met some of them on a trip to a World Cup qualifier game in Guatemala. (FN 20110224)

This field note captures comments at the gamewatch referring to those at the game in the first person plural. Using “we” and “us” in reference to the section of AO members in the stands demonstrates how even when surrounded only by those in the local AO group, members simultaneously see the entire AO National organization as an extension of themselves. Finally, the connection to the USMNT may be even more narrow, with other members serving as the point of attachment.

Focus of identification: One’s social group

At the most narrow level, AO members may identify with the social group with whom they regularly interact. The immediate social group is seen as a point of identification in two scenarios: as heavily overlapped with the AO National and/or AO Local identity, or as the sole reason for presenting oneself as part of other social groups. In the first case, AO members demonstrate identification with the social groups profiled above (e.g., USMNT Supporter, AO National member), but their engagement is driven extensively by the elements of sociability provided therein. This aspect of consumption is discussed in depth in Chapter 6 (see “Sense of Community within the Supporter Group”).

The second scenario, while present in the research, did not appear common. In this scenario, individuals outwardly feign a level of identification with the USMNT or AO in order to be part of the social group. For example, SGM Lori’s husband is active in AO and she joins him at some of the events, but she is involved only for the social aspects: “[SGM Lori] said that she has watched a total of three USMNT games in her life

and is not a soccer fan. She likes going to the social events, but she doesn't really watch the games” (FN 20091204). This was confirmed at a live game – she was at the pregame tailgate, wearing an AO shirt and socializing with other AO members, but went home when everyone else went into the game” (FN 20100525). A similar case was observed with another individual at the pregame party for a different live game:

[Jennifer] said that she scrambled that morning to find something red to wear in order to fit in with the group; she landed on a red Phillies t-shirt. She was also given an AO scarf and red, white, and blue wristbands by [SGM Finn] (her ex-boyfriend and one of the AO [Local] leaders). She said she was not a soccer fan, but she was enjoying the pregame party and thought she'd like the supporter section because of the people she was going to be with. (FN 20100529)

These situations underscore the importance of the social group in shaping individuals' consumption behaviors.

The particular cases of non-USMNT fans taking part in AO activities (i.e., Lori and Jennifer) are extreme examples of having a point of attachment separate from the team or organization. However, for nearly all AO members, the position of the social group as an overlapping point of identification is still profound. As will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the connections made with others at live games and gamewatches increase the frequency of USMNT consumption and are a primary reason for being a member of AO.

Identity Saliency

Sport teams are understood to help form part of individuals' social identities (Cialdini et al., 1976). With supporter group members, one may assume the team is the focus of their identification, such as was endorsed by SIP Gerald: “I mean people join these organizations for a lot of reasons, but ultimately it's about supporting... the US

national team.” Yet, it is not always the team itself with which people identify. There may be other points of identification, including the players (Robinson et al., 2004), social groups of fans (Fairley, 2006), and the country represented by the team (Giulianotti, 2000). Further, as shown in this chapter, fans hold interlocking and overlapping foci of identification, most of which are separate from the actual team. Members of the AO supporter group identify strongly with fellow group members, both locally and nationally, as well as the sport of soccer and the USA.

The saliency of the six points of identification noted in this chapter vary depending on the individual and the priming within his or her surroundings. One factor that helps to both define some of these identities and affects their saliency is soccer’s place within the American sporting landscape. This was noted as a contributing factor for individuals’ identity as USMNT fans, soccer fans, and members in AO National and AO Local. Specifically, the USMNT supporter groups exist because of the challenges of being a USMNT fan within America. This is a factor that distinguishes the AO member from national supporter groups studied in other research (e.g., Alabarces & Rodriguez, 2000; Dunning, 1994; Giulianotti, 2000). For example, soccer’s subordinate cultural relevance provides a common goal for those identified as supporters of the USMNT and of soccer itself; this often supersedes the identity of being part of AO. However, the identity salience is heavily influenced by one’s surroundings.

The presence of outgroups, and how those outgroups are defined, shape the identities that individuals use to define themselves (Festinger, 1954). As the outgroup changes, the definition of the ingroup adjusts accordingly, thus changing the salient social identity for the individual. This is particularly apparent on game days where AO Local

and National identities are salient at the pre-game party, but the USMNT identity takes prominence once in the stadium and surrounded by opposing fans. Not only do the various social identities help members define themselves and others, but they have considerable influence in the ways that AO members consume USMNT games. Chapter 5 details the impact that members' various social identities have on their USMNT consumption experiences.

CHAPTER 5

THE SUPPORTER GROUP MEMBER EXPERIENCE

American Outlaws (AO) members seek opportunities in which to parade their various identities along with those who are similarly identified. They often struggle to find places to share their identity outside of supporter group events, thus making the work of AO National and AO Local all the more important for members. Around live games and at local gamewatches, AO members create dedicated spaces that further supporter group interaction and identity reinforcement. These events “exten[d] the life of a 90 minute game to include 48, 72 hours” (SGM Wayne), prolonging the saliency of identities such as “AO National member,” “USMNT supporter” and “soccer fan.”

Because the supporter group plays a significant role in members’ experience with the team, it is valuable for marketers to understand the influence and importance of these groups in shaping the experiences that encompass much more than the game itself. It also offers insight into the ways in which members create identity-reinforcing environments. This chapter explores the experiences surrounding the two primary ways in which AO members interact – attending live games and watching televised games with other AO members. Within these settings, we see how the identities introduced in Chapter 4 are manifested and celebrated.

Attending USMNT Games in Person

A regulation US men’s national soccer team (USMNT) game last about two hours, but for AO members, attending a live game is usually a multi-day event. Being

part of AO significantly alters the USMNT consumption experience. The following quote captures the typical way AO members describe the weekend:

We fly in, if the game's on a Saturday, we fly in Friday night and go straight to the – [AO sets] up a night before party, and you know, it's just loud and crazy. [They] try to set up something that's fun. There's chants going on, there's drinking, everything like that. And sure enough, Saturday morning comes around and people are up right again to start tailgating. Then you go to this bar and do a march from the bar to the stadium with, you know, drums, and, you know, doing whatever, with flares and walking through the streets. I mean, we took over the whole downtown Chicago which is just insane. And then we did a tailgate. It's just intense. People getting excited, doing chants. And they take that all the way to the stadium when we march to the stadium, and it just continues all the way through the game. You're pretty exhausted, but it's a good exhaustion after a game. (SGM Benjamin)

Many informants point to the events *around* the game as a significant reason for their membership in the group. These events are not considered ancillary, but rather a normal part of going to the game (SGM Calvin).

The fan base for the USMNT is relatively sparse and spread across the country. Live USMNT games, of which there are only about four per year within the USA, offer a rare convergence of USMNT fans. Therefore, supporters seek to maximize their time with fellow supporters by creating dedicated spaces for supporter interaction. These spaces prolong the salience of related identities, giving members more opportunities to parade and celebrate their identities with likeminded others. This section will first detail the dedicated supporter space during the game itself and then the manufacture of supporter space at events surrounding the game.

Attending Live Games: The Atmosphere, Norms, and Rituals of the Supporter Section

For domestic games, supporter group members sit together in a defined space behind one of the goals. Supporters purchase tickets through their respective groups and

unite with other supporters in an area designated as the “supporter section.” The supporter section is governed by certain norms and rituals that are known to those within the section and quickly learned by neophytes. These norms and ritual cultivate a game atmosphere that differentiates supporters from other USMNT game attendees, beginning with how fans find their viewing location. Whereas tickets in the of stadium provide attendees with designated seats, the supporter section takes a more communal approach.

For most games, the supporter section is declared a general admission area. That is, there are no assigned seats – fans simply fill the section as they enter the stadium, and those who arrive earliest are in the front. Even for games in which seats are assigned by the ticketing agency or stadium, the norm of the group takes precedence and supporters adopt a general admission approach (AO email, personal communication, June 23, 2011). This could mean that someone whose ticket is for the front row will end up in row 10, but the actual seat is seen as less important than just being in the supporter section.

The supporter section is intended to be a “participatory event” (SGM Steven), a vibrant place of standing and cheering. Indeed, the behavior of those within the supporter section differs significantly from that of other game attendees:

The AO members began filling the supporter section about 30 minutes before the game started (after their march in from the parking lot). The rest of the stadium didn't fill out until well after the game started, but almost everyone in the supporter section was in there by 6:40 (kick-off was shortly after 7:00)....

The vibe in the rest of the stadium was very different from that in the supporter section. When I observed the game from other parts of the stadium, the atmosphere felt very relaxed. People were sitting back in their seats, eating, and conversing. They were watching the game, but they cheered only for key events like corners, shots, goals, fouls, or strong defensive plays. Except for an occasional "Let's go US," there was very little chanting (and no singing) from others within the stadium. It lacked the sense of importance, enthusiasm, and urgency displayed by those in the supporter section. Those in the supporter

section sang songs, chanted, and cheered beginning as soon as they entered the stadium. They continued throughout the game. (FN 20100525)

The noise and activity in the supporter section are meant to inspire the players and demonstrate fan support, but that atmosphere also helps the fans feel like they are contributing to the game. One supporter put it this way: “being a fan and part of a supporter group kind of gives me a chance for participation even as a fan. So I like that part of it. It’s not just... inactive sitting and watching. It’s more active participation” (SGM Reginald). He views himself as participating in the construction of the event. This participation is a norm of those who are in the supporter section for games.

Within the supporter section, fans are expected to stand for the duration of the game. Put simply, “sitting is not allowed” (SGM Daniel). Specific instructions to that effect are included with tickets to the supporter section, and the password for one to purchase supporter section tickets through Ticketmaster is “STAND” (AO email, personal communication, March 9, 2011). Norms express a group’s values (Feldman, 1984; Shaw, 1981), and for supporter group members, standing demonstrates their commitment to being visible at games (SGM Beatrix; SGM Wesley). Supporters’ actions help create a vocal, visual presence at games. AO and Sam’s Army (SA) both see the success of this section as a primary part of their mission (AO “Code of conduct – Act above,” n.d.; SA “Match guidelines,” n.d.). Being viewed as a more dedicated fan is an important part of the supporter identity, and standing during games allows supporters to portray that identity. One informant describes standing as the base expectations of members: “All you have to be willing to do is travel to US games, stand for 90 minutes, sing, and participate. That’s all that’s - If you have the motivation to do those things,

then come into the section” (SGM Steven). Notice that, in addition to standing, the explicit norms of the group include singing and participating within the supporter section.

Songs and chants at games may be led by supporters with instruments in the stands, by a *capo* (an individual designated in advance as the chant-leader), or by any loud-voiced supporter within the section. For USMNT games, the latter form of chant-leading is most common:

There was no specific leader of chants within the supporter section. Usually, one person (typically someone in the first five rows) would start the chant and others would quickly join in. Or, if the chant were antiphonic, the one person would give the call and others would give the response. Other times, a small group of people standing around each other would coordinate a chant and then start it together, amplifying the volume and appearance of mass conformity within the section. There were also chants that were known to be done at certain points in the game (i.e., rituals) and thus did not have any leaders or prompts. For example, during the opposing goalie’s goal kicks, supporters yelled “Ohhhhhh” (same as before a kickoff in college football) and, upon his kicking of the ball, “You suck, asshole!” (FN 20100525)

The cheers that develop organically within the supporter section are often started by the same individuals who take on temporary, semi-*capo* status. However, this may change as norms within the US supporter culture further develop, and the use of official *capos* is a current topic of debate within AO (FN 20110306; AO, 2011).

In addition to the norms of standing and unified cheering for the team, there are other conventions that govern behavior within the supporter section. These actions differ from those in the rest of the stadium. Conventional in-stadium protocol dictates that one’s actions should not adversely affect the viewing experience of those in the surrounding area. In contrast, supporters bring props into the stands, including signs, flags, smoke bombs, confetti, streamers, and musical instruments:

The “ultra-American” band that had been at the pregame bar and part of the march to the stadium was situated near the front of the section. They played their same

repertoire, regularly turning away from the field to face the supporter section. They didn't play all the time, but they would burst into tune when there was a lull in others' chant-leading, or they could augment the chant with backup, or there was a key play on the field. The instruments (particularly the sousaphone and trombone) surely impeded the view of those around them, but no one seemed to mind. Given that supporters also had to look past flags, scarves, and flying streamers, I suppose a brass instrument isn't much different. (FN 20100529)

The supporter section atmosphere often obscures and/or distracts from the sights or sounds of the on-field action, yet this behavior is encouraged. In comparing the two experiences, one informant described his experience as a fan prior to joining the supporter group:

Moving to the supporters section totally changed the game experience. ... On one hand, just sitting down and watching the game [in another part of the stadium]... is kind of more peaceful. I actually kind of like that sometimes because I do like to watch soccer. We don't do a lot of watching in the supporters section because you're too busy screaming and dodging people, ... you're standing the whole game, you're singing, you're meeting and talking to people. ... It's almost like a second party [after the one in the parking lot] all over again. It's a lot more fun. (SGM Chris)

In this quote, the informant acknowledges the drawbacks of the supporter section, but he chooses to be in the supporter section because of the dedicated supporter space it offers.

The supporter section lets individuals parade their USMNT Supporter and national identities along with those who are similarly identified. In addition, it creates a social atmosphere that furthers members' enjoyment.

The social atmosphere offered within the supporter section at games is a central part of supporters' game day experiences (see Chapter 6 for much greater detail regarding the role of social interaction at games). One fan described her first experience seeing the supporter section:

We ended up sitting right behind the... supporter section for the last half of the game. And it looked like they were having a lot of fun. So we were like "We have to work harder at getting connected with these people because definitely the

supporter section is having a ton more fun than we are during the game, independently.” So we needed to try and get connected with these crazy people. (SGM Kathy)

The supporters are attracted to a scene similar to what Holt (1995) described as “carnavalesque.” The mass interaction among a large group of similarly identified individuals creates what the supporter member in the above quote perceived as a more enjoyable experience than was available to her sitting with just her partner in the stands. In the supporter section fans are able to converse with each other, as was previously mentioned: “you’re meeting and talking to people, but they’re, you know, people around, you are meeting people that way” (SGM Chris). While the game itself offers about two hours of time with other supporters, most supporter interaction around live games occurs outside of the game itself.

Attending Live Games: Supporter space outside of the game

The supporter section allows for more fluidity of movement than is available in a traditional, seated game-viewing experience (cf. Melnick, 1993). However, the spatial constrictions of the stadium environment still limit the social interaction available to spectators. Further, the continuous play of soccer and environment of the supporter section leave little time for dedicated conversation. These factors increase the importance of the external events for facilitating sociability among supporters. As such, a main benefit of events like the night-before party and morning tailgate is to give supporters the opportunity to interact with each other.

The night before the game, AO leaders designate a specific bar as the place for US soccer fans to meet. Local chapter leaders assume this responsibility as they have knowledge of the area and an existing relationship with local bars (SGM Erik; also see

“Watching Televised Games: The Home Bar” later in this chapter). For example, AO Kansas City (AOKC) organized the night-before event at Johnny’s Tavern prior to the US-Guadeloupe game. AOKC leaders discussed the event with the bar owner and communicated the venue to other supporters through the AOKC website, emails sent from the national AO body to all AO members, and postings on Facebook and Twitter.

The bar party has multiple elements that reinforce the social identities of the AO members in attendance. One of these is in the apparel worn by bar party attendees, whose gear themes the bar as group space. Supporters don markers of their USMNT fan or supporter group identity, such as USMNT t-shirts, AO scarves, and red, white, and blue hoodies (Caito, 2010; FN 20100529). Such clothing may not be typical “going-out” attire, but being around other supporter group members changes the social norms under which individuals operate. Dressing in that style is encouraged, expected, and sometimes mandatory, such as when apparel is used as a marker to grant access to an exclusive area of the bar:

Expecting a large crowd for the upcoming England game, the owner of the bar talked to [the AO coordinator] and they’re thinking of making the upstairs a “VIP only” area. [The AO coordinator] wasn’t sure what that meant: ... Would everyone have to wear the AO shirt as a way of getting upstairs? It was still up in the air, but it was something that had been discussed. (FN 20100224)

The bar may also hang team banners, play patriotic music, and/or serve special AO-themed drinks (C. Donahoo, personal communication, July 26, 2011). These efforts by the bar create an atmosphere that reaffirms members’ various social identities.

A similar environment is created in the hours before kickoff. AO members meet up at a bar, usually the same bar as the previous night (FN 20100529); at a tailgate party in the stadium parking lot (FN 2010525); or both (Quarstad, 2009). As with the night-

before party, the space is themed with fans clad in USMNT and/or AO-branded attire. The pre-game event is also the origination point for the supporter march into the stadium, a ritual of the game day experience (SGM Benjamin; SGM Leroy; SGM Wesley; Quarstad, 2009; Struby, 2010). Supporters traverse en masse to the stadium, making considerable effort to draw attention to themselves through singing, chanting, and any other form of noisemaking:

People leaving the bar congregated on the other side of the iron fence, between McFadden's and the stadium. Eventually, a few of the AO members yelled something (I couldn't hear it from my position), everyone cheered, and the front part of the group began making their way toward the stadium. The American band was near front and started playing again as soon as group began moving. The "march," as it's known, was not a march as one might see by a high school band in a town parade (synchronized, coordinated movements), but rather an amorphous migration of predominantly red shirts moving in the same general direction. People were comfortably spaced out - there was no crush to be first. It was not a dense cluster, but rather a long trickle of AO members chanting, cheering, singing, banging on drums, playing instruments, whooping, etc. There were frequently multiple cheers going on simultaneously as the front couldn't hear the middle or back (and vice versa). Other fans who were tailgating in the parking lot as we passed cheered back, high fived, and/or took pictures -- or they quietly looked at the group with a face of half-confusion, half-amusement. (FN 20100529)

Past marches, particularly one in Chicago that included an impromptu speech by USSF president Sunil Gulati, have become folklore within the supporter community (Quarstad, 2009). AO activities within the supporter section are similar to earlier efforts by SA. However, the march to the stadium was started by AO. Thus, having the march as part of the game day ritual reinforces the AO identity among group members.

The pre-game events are central to supporters' gameday experience. It is the best time for supporters to get together (SGM Lawrence) and draws more attendees than the night-before party (SGM Finn). One informant states, "It's so exciting to go to the tailgate and I just can't get enough of it" (SGM Kathy). For many supporters, these

events and the social experiences they provide supersede the game itself in importance, as captured in this quote:

One of the reasons we fly to all these, fly out to all these games and spend all this money to go out there per person, is less for the game and more for the, the people we're going to meet there. Um, the tailgating parties, the parties at the bar the night before. Just the social networking of it benefits a lot. (SGM Chris)

The primacy of supporter events outside the game itself is a commonly held view (see Chapter 6). Supporters value the opportunity for interaction among others within the group.

The shared space outside of the game itself provides extended opportunities for supporter group members to interact with others within their ingroup. Rather than just being with other USMNT supporters for three hours in the stadium, external supporter events yield prolonged periods of supporter group identity salience. SIT posits that an individual's social identity can be enhanced through encompassing a shared space with one's ingroup (Hogg, 2003b; Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher, 2003). Being entrenched among other supporters makes salient the supporter identity and emphasizes the supporter group as one's ingroup. Specifically, consider the AO tailgate before the game. One can assume that the majority of individuals in the stadium's parking lot identify themselves as some level of USMNT fan. Yet, AO members coalesce with each other at the AO tailgate, and in doing so narrow their ingroup from "USMNT fans" to "AO members." The tailgate and AO march to the stadium reinforce the AO identity among group members by making that identity salient.

AO members unable to attend the game live can watch the game on television with those in their local AO chapter. They are physically separate from the game, still

AO members at local gamewatches attempt to recreate elements of the live game experience within their home bar, including a dedicated space for being an AO member.

Watching Televised USMNT Games with the Local Chapter

Given almost all USMNT games are played outside of a fan's home area, supporters watch most games on television. Informants frequently stressed the importance of understanding the evolution of watching the USMNT in order to understand the current supporter television viewing experience. Therefore, the section below first offers the past experiences of informants watching the USMNT, then presents the experience during the time of data collection. In addition to logistical challenges limiting game attendance for USMNT games, an overall trend in sport consumption is fans opting for televised viewing over live game attendance (Mintel, 2011). Therefore, understanding the gamewatch environment and the meaning it holds for supporter group members has potential value for both scholars and practitioners.

Past Experiences of Watching Televised Games

Soccer's relative lack of popularity in the US means that fans have faced challenges when trying to watch all the USMNT games. USMNT games may not be televised or are aired only on specialized sport stations. Most fans did not have the ability to watch games at home and instead sought out sports bars that would have access to the sport packages.

Unfortunately for the fans, even if the bar subscribed to the channel and could show the game, it often would choose to screen more popular sports like baseball and football (SGM Reginald). Just as US television stations did not want to air programming that fails to attract viewers, bars did not want to show games in which customers have

little interest. One supporter member describes his challenges in a mid-size Midwestern city during the mid-2000s:

We had a hell of a time... ever trying to find a soccer game on TV, because no bar would play it, and if they did play it, it would be on this tiny screen in the corner with no sound because there's this NFL game going on, so you can't have sound. So we're like, this is stupid because we want to have a beer, we want to have, you know, we want to watch it with, I don't know, twenty different of our friends. You can't do that at a house very easily. So we had a hell of a time and couldn't do it. (SGM Benjamin)

Even in the 2010s, it is rare for a game to be shown on free-to-air television,⁹ which has the largest distribution reach. For example, during 2010 World Cup pool play, the only free-to-air USMNT broadcast was the game against England; the rest aired on ESPN. During the 2011 Gold Cup, all US games aired on Fox Soccer Channel, a station that is available only as part of a sport package on most cable systems. Still, this is a marked improvement over previous access, and in 2011 all USMNT games were televised within the US. Further, today's AO members have secured designated venues in which they will be able to watch USMNT games.

Watching Televised Games: The Home Bar

One of the primary mandates for AO chapters is to provide access to televised games. AO's chapter eligibility standards state that chapters must "Have a 'home base' bar, where fans can expect to meet to watch each game... [and] Host a viewing party at said bar for EVERY GAME" (AO "Eligibility," n.d., emphasis in original). This mandate is in direct response to the historical challenges faced by members. AO's organization, brand strength, and leverage of their membership numbers allow them to provide a place for fans to gather and know that they will be able to see the games. In the

⁹ Details from a contract announced on August 10, 2011, reveal that two USMNT games per year will air on NBC beginning in 2012 ("Major League Soccer games," 2011)

process, AO creates dedicated, symbolic homes for their members. The section below first explains how the home bars develop; it follows with a description of the norms and rituals enacted within gamewatches at the home bar to replicate the live game environment.

Building the AO Local bar

The home bar for an AO chapter is determined based on a relationship between the chapter and the bar's owner or manager. A local chapter representative, usually the president, negotiates terms of the agreement with the bar (SGM Wayne). Typically the president offers the bar a guarantee of patrons in return for the bar's promise to show every game. The bar will also often include drink specials for supporter members and allow US soccer paraphernalia as decorations in the venue. The bar benefits by having customers on game days, frequently at off-times such as mid-day on Saturday or a Tuesday night. The supporter group benefits by having a home venue for games. The bars at which games are shown are often those who already exhibit a proclivity toward soccer (FN 20100303; FN 20100525). They may be bars that cater to European ex-pats and/or bars owned by European immigrants, such as many British or Irish pubs. Or they may be new bars who are looking to establish a customer base (SGM Paul).

The AO Local chapter bars are formed independently of each other and are not necessarily the official US Soccer-endorsed bars. The USSF has a program in which bars receive ad space on ussoccer.com and recognition as an "Official U.S. Soccer establishment" in exchange for meeting certain requirements and paying an annual fee (USSF "Official U.S. Soccer bar program," n.d.). This USSF endorsement is not highly valued by those in AO: "The US Soccer Official Bar program charges a lot of money and

doesn't give them [the bars] much. AO wants to create an official bar program that's better" (FN 20110306). Chapters instead form their own relationships with bars at the local level, and in doing so develop their own space organically. In this way, members feel a connection to the bar and take efforts to develop its identity as a home for the group (see section below, "Theming the home bar through sight and sound"). It is interesting to observe the clear preference for the AO-endorsed bar. While one might assume that highly identified UMSNT fans would patronize the USSF-endorsed venue, in this case, the AO Local identity takes prominence and members choose to view the games with other AO Local members.

The system of AO Local home bars is possible due to the subgroup structure of AO. A national-only supporter group would lack the local leadership that would allow for groups to maintain these home bars, as is explained in the following passage:

You can have a nationwide organization, but if there's not the smaller chapters, it's just too much. I mean, if we were in a country that wasn't as gargantuanly large as the United States is – We're not necessarily the biggest country in the world, but when you compare us with, like, with England, or Italy, or Germany, we're a gigantic, gigantic mass of space with people from everywhere. And if you were to try to just have just one organization and then have them say, "Ok, well we've been speaking with this bar in this city and they're going to do something," and everyone just kind of show up? It's very disjointed.

Whereas when you have the local chapter [leaders]... they're the faces of that specific chapter.... And they're the ones who talk to the bars. The bars get on a first name basis with them.... [If there is a problem,] because they have these relationships with the leaders of our organization, ...rather than the bartender calling someone he's never actually interacted with in AO National and complaining about it and possibly us being banned from the bar, he know, "Ok, this is going on, this the organization that's here, I know exactly who I go speak with."... [With only AO National, you] can't talk with someone face-to-face. You can't have the personal relationship. (SGM Erik)

In each case observed during participant observation or discussed with SGMs, the bar owner or manager had a positive, collaborative relationship with the AO group. The owner of the AO bar in New York interacted jovially with the AO members:

At one point in the first half, a man came through from the door behind the bar (I later learned he was the owner of Jack Demsey's). He was met with warm cheers from the AO members and greeted several of them by name. He sat down and watched about half the game with the group” (FN 20100303).

The owner of the AO bar in Cambridge (MA) took a road trip on a bus with the group to attend the USMNT game in East Hartford (FN 20100525). The manager of Johnny’s in Kansas City worked with AOKC leadership to create the red, white, and blue “Outlaw Bomb” drink for AO gamewatches (AOKC, 2011; C. Donahoo, personal communication, July 26, 2011). These interactions exemplified the bars’ acceptance as the AO chapter home, which is a marked difference from the historical standard of soccer fans being allocated a muted television in the corner of the bar. Further, AO members make the gamewatch environment more like the live game supporter section experience through theming.

Theming the home bar through sight and sound

The home bars of AO chapters become the symbolic homes of the group. For this reason, each group seeks to make the bar its own through theming. A primary means of theming involves hanging flags like those that would hang in the supporter section of the stadium. In addition to the USA-themed flags discussed in Chapter 4 (see National Identity: Visual Displays of National Identity), AO members hang flags with USMNT logos and their AO chapter banners:

Frankie pointed out the US Soccer flag hanging to our right. He said that he brought that in to add the decor of the bar during USMNT games, but now it is now going to be a permanent fixture. (FN 20100303)

When I arrived, Garrett was hanging flags around the bar. One from the Mexican-American War, one from the Revolutionary War period (13 stars in a circle), and another was a US Soccer flag. At the end of the game, he pulled the flags down and put them in his backpack. He had put the flags up specifically for the game and they were not part of the bar's normal decoration. (FN 20100224)

In both situations, the décor is provided by AO members themselves. The theming of the bar reinforces that space's position as an AO home bar and increases the salience of members' identities. This environment is further enhanced by supporters' own outward displays of identity that mimic the live game experience.

The norms governing AO members' behavior within the bar are similar to those seen in the supporter group section at the games, specifically in terms of wearing paraphernalia, singing songs, and chanting. The norm for gamewatch attire includes one or more items that display markers of the USA, the USMNT, or AO, as seen in the following field note:

About 80% of the attendees are wearing some form of USMNT or AO attire. A few of the people have team scarves, but most of the team-branded gear is either a short-sleeved replica jersey or a t-shirt. The jerseys, which are most common, are either blue or white. Most of the t-shirts are red, although there are some older AO shirts in the "original blue." Only about 5-6 of the attendees do not have some type of logo-ed attire. (FN 20100224)

As with the supporter section at live games, chanting in the bar before and during the game is frequent, as was observed at the gamewatch for the USA-England match:

There were a few chants early on, but not much. Most people were just watching the other games, eating, drinking, and chatting. Once the room started to get more crowded, however, the chanting became more frequent. By the time the room was filled (about 1:30 PM [1 hour before the game]), chants or songs were almost non-stop through kick-off. The chants were similar to those heard at the Turkey & Czech games [live games attended prior to this game], but there were more frequent anti-England cheers. There were several rounds of "5 British Redcoats on the hill;" they sang "Freedom from tyranny" to the tune of "Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay," an American vaudeville song from 1890s; and the crowd cheered for the Dodge Challenger commercial in which the forefathers drive Dodge vehicles against the British redcoats (the commercial, titled "Freedom," was created

specifically with the US-England game in mind). The chanting continued throughout the game, though as with the live games, people rested a bit during halftime. (FN 20100612)

The players on the field cannot see or hear the fans in the bars, yet AO members believe these outward demonstrations are part of AO's identity as the premier supporters for the USMNT. The cheering and singing are ritualized supporter behaviors, and partaking in this vocalization reinforces one's place as a prototypical supporter group member. This sentiment was captured by one informant, who equated the gamewatch influence to the in-stadium influence in saying,

We help build excitement. We're part of the excitement. Regardless of whether we're at the viewing party [gamewatch] or we're at the stadium, we're out there with our flags and our drums and our banners and our scarves. We're out there making our presence known, and I know that's, uh, the players do appreciate it. (SGM Randy)

At the end of this quote, the informant notes his feeling that the "players do appreciate" the support given by fans. Part of AO members' identity is the role of actively supporting the team. The players' appreciation, or at least members' perception of it, affirms that part of the supporter group identity. The perceived connection with the team is made possible by the formalized AO group and its subgroups. These groups foster the ritualized behavior of members and, thus, enhance the member experience.

The Supporter Member Experience: Places for Social Identities

The first part of this chapter noted that within the supporter section at live games National and USMNT Supporter identities are prominent. The second part explained how gamewatches differ, specifically remarking that the saliency of the AO identity is also high during game consumption in this environment. The supporter section at live games brings together members of different supporter groups, but gamewatches are

organized by AO Local and communicated through AO Local channels (e.g., member email lists, tweets on AO Local Twitter accounts). This situation results in gamewatch attendees being nearly exclusively AO members. The events are advertised as AO gamewatches (as opposed to USMNT gamewatches), and the gamewatches are used as recruitment vehicles for attracting new members. Thus, when compared with the supporter section at live games, the gamewatches feature a greater overlap of the AO National and Local identities with members' other social identities.

Both modes of UMSNT consumption, at/around live games and at gamewatches, offer the higher levels of identity salience for AO members than available via other avenues. In these environments, members are surrounded by those who are similarly identified. Chapter 4 revealed AO members' various social identities, and Chapter 5 showed how members construct shared social spaces. These spaces provide the opportunity for members to parade their multiple social identities while celebrating those identities with likeminded others. These social interactions with other AO members are highly valued by those within the group and recognized as a leading reason for identifying oneself as an AO member. Chapter 6 explains the sense of community offered through AO and how it encourages further consumption as members feel their identities reinforced.

CHAPTER 6

SENSE OF COMMUNITY WITHIN THE SUPPORTER GROUP

The results shown in the previous chapters detail the multiple foci of identification utilized by members of American Outlaws (AO), AO's influence on identity salience at live games and during gamewatches, and how the supporter group affects members' consumption experiences. Taken as a whole, AO membership offers a place in society in which members can parade and share identities that are otherwise viewed unfavorably or with indifference within the US sporting landscape. AO provides its members with a sense of community, fostered through social interaction with likeminded others, and gives members emotional support.

The current chapter details the sense of community experienced by AO members and how it contributes to AO's role in supporting members' multiple foci of identification. The supporter group allows individuals to enjoy common experiences together with similarly identified others, and it serves as a source of camaraderie that transcends US Men's National Team (USMNT) events.

Sense of Community: Feeling a Connection to AO National Members

The multi-leveled structure of AO membership means that when an individual joins a local chapter, he or she is also a member of the national organization. Inclusion within AO National offers more than just a membership number – it offers members a psychological place within the larger group. One supporter explains, “I think the way we look at it, or at least the way it feels to me, we're a part of a bigger collective” (SGM Randy). Another notes that AO is “about building a community. It's about being with

others you have a connection with” (SGM Leroy). Free Beer Movement (FBM) founder Wiersema adds, “What AO and FBM builds is more than just support for the national team; it builds a community; a good time, a place people want to be at” (FN 20110306). AO members enjoy the feeling of being part of a larger social aggregate, feeling a psychological sense of community, and mention it frequently as a positive outcome of membership.

When compared with those not in one’s group, group members will generally show favoritism to individuals within their ingroup (Allport, 1954; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Turner, 1985). This is found among AO National members, even in cases where members had no prior interaction, as members are apt to be welcoming other AO National members and view the group a close-knit collective. This is captured in the following quote:

The American Outlaws is more along the lines of a say, a family, than a supporters group.... The way it's a family is, I mean, you can go anywhere in the US to all these 69 cities that we have chapters and you can call somebody or, you know, email them or get in touch with their chapter leader, some of the guys from that chapter, and then you can go have a beer with them. ...I mean, you can go to any chapter and it’s amazing the network and networking you can do and then the group of friends that you can get out of this, that's the big thing, it’s more like a family. (SGM Hal)

AO members are friendly and trusting with strangers based solely on those individuals’ inclusion within the ingroup. Beyond that, AO supporters feel a sense of duty to other members and take actions that help members to engage with the group, as depicted in this anecdote:

It's like, American Outlaws is like a giant family. When I wanted to go to the convention in Vegas, it was NASCAR weekend and I seriously could not afford to fly [directly] to Vegas, [but I could fly] to LA really cheap, but then I'd have to find a ride. I just went on the American Outlaw's website and contacted the chapter contact for AO LA, and I was like “Hey, I'm coming from [the

Midwest].” They'd never met me, never heard of me, or seen me at a game, they had no connection to me. It's like a giant fraternity. That's all I had to do is say "Hey, I'm from AO, I need a ride." And they gave me a ride.... I figured it was safe. Soccer supporters are generally really cool people. ...When I see another... American Outlaws member, I know that if I need something... they're going to help me do it because we all want to help people meet their need for soccer. (SGM Kathy)

The interactions among group members are not isolated to AO or USMNT events.

While AO facilitates ingroup contact, these exchanges provide opportunities for developing deeper friendships. As stated by one member,

I've definitely met a lot more people, fans, not just in the [Chicago] area, but all throughout the whole country, and that's a positive thing to me. So that was definitely the most important thing that happened in joining the American Outlaws. (SGM Allen)

Another member's comments reinforce this point:

To me, the American Outlaws was the über supporters crew.... You know, we've made some, met some amazing people that we wouldn't have otherwise met had we not been a part of American Outlaws.... People have started to invite us to their own events that have nothing to do with AO, but because we met through AO we've become friends. It's a wonderful thing. AO has really, it's really broadened our social life. It's really, really provided a vehicle or mechanism to meet great people that, you know, that we wouldn't have met otherwise. (SGM Randy)

The quote above notes how relationships formed through interactions with other supporters extend beyond the supporter group. Initial contact may be through AO, but the friendships and further interactions can occur outside the realm of USMNT games. SGM Erik stated, “I make a new friend through American Outlaws at every game that I go to,” and another respondent said AO was invaluable when she moved to a new city:

We moved here when we were older, we weren't in college. Kind of harder to meet people. But when you can find a common ground, like a love of soccer, it was easier for us to make friends and I think that helped draw us in too. We heard about American Outlaws in [our old city], went online, saw that [our new city had] a chapter, went to [the home bar], ...and then the rest is history. So it was just easy to make friends by joining American Outlaws. (SGM Wendy)

Another member describes her friendships as stemming from her supporter group interactions that began with an ex-boyfriend:

She got into AO because she was dating a guy and he brought her to watch the games with the group. She's no longer dating him, but now she's friends with all these other people who she met at the gamewatches (those are the people she was with at the gamewatch this night). She now is friends with these people and hangs out with them (even outside of AO), describing them as some of her "closest friends." But she doesn't hang out with the other guy (her ex-boyfriend). (FN 20100123)

AO membership affords individuals the opportunity to become part of a larger collective and form friendships with similarly identified others. More than just being part of a group, AO members develop a sense of community with other AO members.

Building on this notion, this chapter will later highlight the ways in which AO members protect their sense of identity by allowing individuals to safely display their social identity and decrease the dissonance and self-doubt that often arise when one's social identity is seen negatively by others (Cooper, Kelly, & Weaver, 2003). First, however, this study will explore the social interaction with likeminded others that is enabled through AO, particularly at the subgroup level.

Reinforcing Sense of Community through Social Interaction

Supporter group members' sense of community is fostered through social interaction among those within the group. For both Sam's Army (SA) and AO, a driving impetus behind their founding was the desire to connect USMNT fans with each other.

As recounted by one SA member,

The number one function [of SA] is to unite all US soccer fans.... Since it originated back in the early 90s, before really anyone was on any sort of bandwagon here for soccer, let alone the national team, it was just to really bring together any fans that were out there, which were very few back in the early 90s. ...[To have a forum] where people could talk with each other and be able to email

with each other. Well there wasn't email back then, but connect with each other and have a common passion that they could share. ...I can only talk soccer when I'm at these games or when I'm talking with Sam's Army guys because you don't find many US national team soccer fans out there, so they have this way for everybody to kind of be able to talk together and come together and share a passion. (SGM Lawrence)

SA was the first successful effort to unify American soccer fans, but the group was not able to fulfill all its members' desire for interaction. Hence AO's formation was rooted in members' desire for communication and social interaction, as discussed by AO co-founder Brunken:

It's just something to bring them together. Some way to communicate that there are more of us out there. So we can, this is where we're going to watch the game at. It's like a communication that we help start. It's not just us that created all this soccer culture around the country. I think we're just kind of facilitating it. (J. Brunken, personal communication, December 10, 2009)

AO works to enable communication among members, relying heavily on social media tools. Each AO chapter has its own Facebook page, Twitter account, and subdomain on theamericanoutlaws.com (e.g., akron.theamericanoutlaws.com or milwaukee.theamericanoutlaws.com). AO National and local chapters also have dedicated space on BigSoccer.com, a popular internet message board. The group regularly pushes information to its members through emails and updates to its website. Talking and other interaction within AO allows members to parade and share their identities, particularly that of being a soccer fan.

Soccer's lower popularity as a spectator sport in the US creates challenges in terms of celebrating and sharing one's identity as a soccer fan (see section in Chapter 4: "Focus of identification: The sport of soccer"). The social opportunities enabled by AO help overcome that challenge, particularly those available through AO Local: "you're just able to connect and find somebody that knows soccer and be able to talk to them and do

something with them every week rather than once or twice a year” (SGM Jonathon).

Another informant expressed a similar view:

You can call it selfish needs, but it’s more like local needs. There needs to be that kind of dialogue about soccer. Not a lot of great outlets for conversation about soccer in the work place. Most people don’t watch it, it’s just a fact of life so when you get people in your community that care about the same thing together it tends to be a lot of fun. So it’s about getting the local community to interact and to discuss what we love. (SGM Peter)

The localized subgroup serves as an outlet for conversation around televised games.

Even for games televised on basic cable, when watching at home is a viable option for fans, being able to talk about the game in an environment of similarly identified others

leads AO members to watch with their local AO chapter:

You definitely want to talk about what’s going on, just kind of discuss what’s going on in the game, to be able to cheer and get mad and that kind of stuff. It’s sort of no fun doing that, sitting by yourself in front of a TV at home, it’s a lot better to kind of share that experience with other people so you can celebrate together and commiserate together, that type of thing. I’d rather do it that way than sit at home and watch a game by myself. (SGM Allen)

The same feelings apply for attending the events surrounding live games where members are interacting with the superordinate level of the group:

It’s a time where all these soccer fans can actually just get together, talk, talk about rumors, talk about all this soccer, you know. There’s not that much, there’s not like a sports forum just for soccer, and there’s not, there’s not as much stuff as with football or baseball. These people create their own conversations. (SGM Benjamin)

In fact, much of supporters’ conversations involve creating opportunities for the physical interaction time in which one can be surrounded by similarly identified others.

Interaction within groups can occur across varying dimensions of time, place, and intensity (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008), and these different modes were observed within AO. For example, AO members regularly engage in asynchronous communication via

discussions on AO Facebook pages and BigSoccer.com message boards. However, it has been suggested that sense of community can be better achieved through synchronous communication among those within a group (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). When AO members gather in the same place, such as for a party the night before a live game or at a chapter bar for a gamewatch, it creates the opportunity for synchronous communication. The interaction at these events thus is likely to help build relationships among members and deepen members' overall sense of community with AO. This is beneficial for AO members, but it also benefits the sport property by increasing the frequency and duration of USMNT consumption.

The Effects of Sense of Community and Social Interaction on Consumption

The sense of community and social interaction among members increase consumption of not only AO events, but USMNT games as well. As said by one supporter in describing a hypothetical life without AO, "I'd still be a fan, but I probably wouldn't be as engaged" (SGM Randy). The USMNT's national geographic reach and infrequent match schedule mean that interactions with other fans are uncommon. Thus, supporters look forward to interacting with friends made at previous games. One informant describes how these events provide the opportunity for rekindling connections among members: "the best time for us to get together is the tailgate party, prior to the game.... You start seeing familiar faces at the tailgates" (SGM Lawrence). The AO social spaces created around live games can lead to members attending with greater frequency than they might otherwise. For instance, when asked about the social interaction component of game weekends, an SGM from the west coast stated,

I think it's very important because if I didn't have that social interaction and as much fun, I probably wouldn't go to games that often. I would go less. I go more now because of it, and I travel further, I mean I've traveled back to Hartford and Philly. I'm going to Kansas City Monday, and uh, I know I'm going to have a good time when I'm there even though it's against a small team called Guadalupe you know, it'll be good.... I would say the social aspect drives me more to go to the games especially when they're further. (SGM Kenny)

Similarly, when asked what attracted him to AO, a member replied, "the camaraderie, especially people coming from all over the country and meeting up for a couple days to support the US and BBQ" (SGM Matthew).

AO members see added value in the social interaction and how it alters the entire game attending experience. That idea is captured in the following quote about being part of AO versus just being a fan; this informant lived in the New York area, and thus could attend a local USMNT game about once a year, which he had done several games prior to joining AO:

It totally changes everything.... It was one of those things where, if the game was local, you could go to it, you'd have a good time but it was, you know, that's just all it was. It was like going to a Giants game or going to any other kind of, you know, just regular sports game.... Once we got involved with AO and really got involved with the big community as a whole, suddenly it was not just about, you know, going to the, going, suddenly the tailgates weren't just about eating cheap food and having some fun before the game. Suddenly it was a huge party, a big event that you, you desperately wanted to go to, to the point where you'd blow hundreds of dollars on tickets and a hotel, just to be there because it was so much fun. It totally changed everything. (SGM Chris)

Fans who do not live in a frequented market like New York may be further removed from the sport. One fan expressed despondence felt regarding the isolation experienced in the time before joining AO:

It...It affected me like, "Why bother?" When I was living in [east Texas], it felt like I was the only person watching the match. It felt like I was the only one watching the 2006 World Cup. At that time in 2006, the Dallas Mavericks were in the NBA finals so it seemed like all the locals there were more in tune to that than the World Cup and it kind it made it a rather lonely situation. (SGM Matthew)

The informant did not see the point in following the USMNT when there were not others with whom to share his social identity as a USMNT supporter. This importance of social consumption is captured by FBM founder Wiersema, who wrote, “The greatest assets that AO (beyond the success of the National Team) has is *[sic]* its game day events and the atmosphere at chapter bars. The community it has created is a powerful and attractive *[sic]* to potential new fans” (Wiersema, 2011). AO co-founder Brunken described a similar view, as expressed from non-soccer fans who he convinced to travel by bus to nearby games: “they’re telling us it’s like the best time they’ve ever had. And that’s before the game... that’s when they grow to love soccer” (J. Brunken, personal communication, December 10, 2009). The social atmosphere facilitated by the supporter groups, and the sense of community it engenders, attracts individuals to the games and encourages them to take further part in supporter group activities.

Even some of the soccer fans interviewed felt that attending games would be dull were it not for the social consumption element. Quotes from supporter group members included, “I can’t watch the sport by myself because it gets boring” (FN 20100303), “there’s the fun aspect of it of meeting new people and getting together and having a good time. There’s no real reason to go to the games if it’s not going to be fun to go” (SGM Chris), and along similar lines, “you’re not going to go if you don’t have fun” (SGM Kenny). This sentiment even extends to supporter group leadership, as evidenced in the following statement from one chapter leader on the influence of AO:

All these towns all over that have never been like, you know, soccer towns. You know, they’ve never been to, they’ve never had a group to go to U.S. games with. If they went to U.S. games they’d be by themselves. They wouldn’t know anyone else that was there, they wouldn’t have any group that they could, you know, hang out with, you know, talk about soccer. If they go by themselves, that’s pretty boring to go to a U.S. game, but now, like, even in these small towns they can get

together all the other games, create friends, and there you go, now you have a traveling partner to go to the World Cup, or some game in L.A. or Netherlands. (SGM Benjamin)

The social interactions created through AO immerse members with an ingroup of similarly identified others. They are opportunities for members to parade and celebrate their identity with likeminded others, which is known to strengthen individuals' identification with the group (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher, 2003). This identification bonds the group together and helps foster a sense of community among its members. Members' sense of community offers practitioners a potential resource through which to increase consumption. In this case, the US Soccer Federation (USSF) benefits because the social scene facilitated through AO positively affects members' decision to attend live games and watch games on TV. The sociability found through AO offers a different game experience than would be available were it not for the supporter group. It is an experience members perceive as being better, thus giving the USSF more satisfied consumers. In addition, the sense of community found within AO helps members to locate themselves within an ingroup of likeminded others.

A Place to be Normal

Though many sports are not at the forefront of American consciousness (e.g., lacrosse, volleyball), fans of soccer see themselves as being particularly looked down upon by the typical American sport fan (Brown, S., 2007; Collins, 2006; Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). They frequently relayed stories of being openly mocked by others for their fanship, as seen in this exchange:

Researcher: Do they ever give you... a hard time for liking the U.S. soccer team?

SGM Daniel: Oh, god, every day. Yeah, um, I don't know. The guys that I hang out with the most at work, um, like to make fun of me for liking it, and tell me that it's never gonna be important.

Another informant mentioned the World Cup to a coworker, who responded jeeringly with, "That something Burger King is giving away?" (SGM Whitney). Supporter group members described themselves in the eyes of others with comments like, "people just kind of thought we were crazy" (SGM Kathy), "they think I'm nuts" (SGM Bonnie), "I'm an oddball" (SGM Reginald), and "fans who traveled out of their area code to catch a U.S. soccer game were freaks" (Struby, 2010). Another supporter said, "It's kind of weird. When I was first just a soccer fan in general, I always felt that I was like a nerd, type of thing, like if you were a soccer fan you were nerd" (SGM Benjamin). SGM Wayne stated a similar idea: "I always joke that being a soccer fan is kind of like being a science fiction [fan]." In his AO Rally address, co-founder Donahoo openly acknowledged that the public image is that "soccer fans are a bunch of nerds" (FN 20110306). Individuals internalize group identities, and when one of their social groups (e.g., soccer fans) is disparaged or viewed negatively, it can negatively affect their self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). In part because of their status as nuts, oddballs, nerds, or freaks, USMNT fans "coalesced around each other" (SGM Wayne) and could seek sanctuary within the supporter group.

The welcoming ingroup of AO gives fans a place of refuge from a society in which their social identities are mocked. AO members take an interest in one another and feel empathy toward a similar past of ostracization. As is normal with ingroups (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), AO members see those within the group as being more similar to themselves than those in the outgroup. Within AO, their social identities

are celebrated, not mocked. In describing interaction within AO, SGM Leroy stated, “there were a lot of people that are just, you can tell that they care a lot and they seem to sympathize with people that feel the same.” SGM Benjamin, who was quoted above as feeling like a “nerd” for liking soccer, said this about the confidence provided through AO:

It seems like people were kind of scared to be soccer fans, and be that nerd, like I don’t want other people to think like I’m this big soccer fan. But now, people just don’t care. I’m proud to say that I’m a soccer nerd.... There are these soccer fans everywhere, but they’re just - they’ve never gone out. Out in public in these big groups. And now that they have something to unite over, to bring everyone together. (SGM Benjamin)

His comment captures the success of supporter groups in alleviating isolation felt by fans. Prior to supporter groups, “for a long time, you [soccer fans] were just kind of spread out everywhere, you know. You were all alone. And now there’s a home for that” (SGM Wayne). The ingroup of supporters offers members a place to connect with similar others and be surrounded by people like themselves.

Informants regularly speak of the supporter group as an opportunity to be around likeminded others. No longer did fans need to hide behind a “secret identity” (SGM Wayne); they can partake in a group that brought together those of a similar disposition. The perceived likeness of ingroup members is captured by this informant’s statement:

What I really love about American Outlaws... is that American Outlaws is growing, and it seems to attract the same level of misfit that I am. You’ve got people from all walks of life that all feel the same way about our sport, our brand of football. (SGM Randy)

Another informant expressed analogous views. As stated in the passage below, SGM Kathy’s dedication to the USMNT was a source of derision in daily life but source of pride among supporters:

It's getting together with all these likeminded people, that's the part I like. There's people who appreciate how insane I am, whereas with my everyday life I'm kind of like this freak that has been to five World Cups. "Why would you do that? Why would you spend all of your time and money on following these things around, and like with games?"... [but supporter group members say] "You've been to five World Cups?! That is so cool." It's just being a part of a community of likeminded people, and it's so exciting to go to the tailgate and I just can't get enough of it. (SGM Kathy)

One supporter recounted the inception of his local chapter by saying,

So, my new found love of the game had me searching for people to watch with. Myself and two others connected on Big Soccer, and we started going to watch parties together at a local bar.... So, in essence, our group was founded out of the need to fill a gap in each of our lives. Just likeminded individuals who wanted to watch US Soccer matches together. (SGM William)

Through being around likeminded others, fans can engage in mutual support of the USMNT while having being buttressed against derogation from the outgroup. They are part of a more homogenous group of individuals and feel free to promote their various USMNT-related social identities. To better understand AO within a larger context, we next explore the ways in which AO members' sense of community influences and positions the group as a brand community.

Sense of Community: Understanding AO as a Brand Community

A particular type of community is the brand community, one in which a social collective is comprised of admirers of a brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In instances of brand communities related to spectator sport teams, researchers have viewed the focal brand as the team itself (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Hickman & Ward, 2007). Yet, within the current study, we can view the supporter group as a brand community that encompasses multiple points of identification. This section

demonstrates how the sense of community experienced through AO can be understood within the context of brand communities as outlined by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001).

Through their shared identification with AO National, AO members report feeling a connection among members of the community, even those who may have never met. They often express this feeling in talking about feeling a sense of community and being part of a larger social aggregate. It is exemplified in this comment:

The way we look at it, or at least the way it feels to me, we're a part of a bigger collective. You know, we're all just like spokes on a big hub, turning this big wheel that's pushing that big soccer ball up in the sky. You know, everybody is, I don't feel any different, I feel like I could go to a city or chapter and you know, maybe in San Diego, or I could go to Dallas or elsewhere with American Outlaws, or even Lincoln, Nebraska, and I would be welcome. Without knowing a soul, that's just how cool American Outlaws is. It's open to everybody. (SGM Randy)

AO members' communal attitude satisfies the first marker of a brand community: a *consciousness of kind* (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Supporters in AO are connected through their shared social identities, specifically their place as AO members. However, as was discussed in Chapter 4, AO members also experience an overlapping of identities (e.g., with the USMNT and with each other) by which the group comes to represent a consumer-to-consumer-to-brand triadic brand relationship (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Data in the current study also reveal the many common rituals and traditions that permeate throughout AO, both at the national and local levels. These are exhibited through events surrounding game consumption, chants within the supporter section, and the consistency of actions at gamewatches transcending location. Such behaviors fulfill the second brand community marker, *shared rituals and traditions* (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This marker encompasses the repeated behaviors and stories through which the meaning of the brand community is transmitted through the community and to those

outside of it. They further the sense of community by supporting the shared emotional connectedness among individuals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For example, the events surrounding live USMNT games communicate the prominence of social interaction among members as a key feature of AO culture. The tradition of marching to the stadium is meant to announce the presence of the group to other fans and draw attention to its ethos. These shared customs work to maintain the culture within the group.

Within AO, there is the view, sometimes overt and sometimes subtle, of needing to come together for the greater good of supporting the sport of soccer or the good of the group. One industry professional told me, “Soccer, David, in some way is a little bit of a cause” (SIP Gerald). This *sense of moral responsibility* among individuals within the community, the third marker of a brand community, helps drive the actions of AO members and contributes to the group cohesion. By assisting each other with challenges that arise through consumption of the brand, such as by voluntarily assisting other members and engaging in behaviors that are beneficial for the group, members create a better experience with the brand for other members (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Many AO members showed considerable domain involvement and were motivated to join the supporter group because of a desire to further soccer within America. Whether through buying free beer for non-fans (Dan Wiersema of the Free Beer Movement), negotiating soccer broadcasts with local bars (AO Local chapters), or providing transportation to strangers just because they are members of another AO chapter (SGM Kathy), supporters work to “make it easier to be a soccer fan” (J. Brunken, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Supporters continue to face challenges in consuming soccer, but feel a duty to work with and for each other to alleviate those struggles. Being a supporter

of soccer is an important part of AO members' identities, and the group caters to that through its actions.

Most existing research on brand communities focuses on the community as a singular collective of consumers around a particular brand (e.g., Leigh et al., 2006; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). The data within the current study illustrate the group's role as a focal point of identification. Further, they show the influence of members' social interaction with smaller subgroups in lieu of or in addition to the larger group, particularly as it affects members' multiple foci of identification.

Strengthening Multiple Foci of Identification through Within-group Social Interaction

As has been detailed, interactions among AO Local groups further identification with the superordinate AO National. This is consistent with previous research, which has suggested that the social interactions facilitated by small groups within a larger community simultaneously strengthen members' identification with the superordinate group (or brand) and the subgroup (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Brodsky & Marx, 2001). However, the AO case expands on the superordinate-subordinate relationship by revealing that social interaction and sense of community can support members' identification with *multiple* foci of identification, beyond just the group-subgroup dyad.

In Chapter 4, this study identified six foci of identification that relate to being in AO: the USMNT, the United States of America (national identity), the sport of soccer, AO National, AO Local, and one's small social group. The social spaces created by AO, norms and rituals promoted within those environs, and sense of community among members reinforce identification with each of these identities. For example, consider the

USMNT identity. Members discuss the general lack of interest in the USMNT when compared with other teams with which their peers identify, which leads them to question their own identity as USMNT fans (see SGM Matthew, page 121). The social interaction fostered by AO Local gamewatches and events creates opportunities for dialogue about the team, and conversations among similarly identified individuals (such as is the case here) strengthen individuals' social identity with the team (Underwood et al., 2001). The ritual of meeting up with other AO National members at events around live games helps members feel part of a larger social aggregate of USMNT supporters. Like the social gatherings observed in other groups (cf. Gibson et al., 2002; Green & Chalip, 1998; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), these events strengthen the salience of the USMNT identity.

Likewise, members feel their identity as a soccer fan is marginalized, but that feeling is abated through their interactions within AO. Fans of mainstream spectator sports have numerous outlets in which to engage in social consumption with likeminded others, such as watching on TV with friends (Eastman & Riggs, 1994) or catching the game at a local sports bar (Weed, 2007). Historically, those options have not been readily available to American soccer fans. Interactions provided through AO enhance members' self-esteem by normalizing their soccer fan identity. Given that self-esteem enhancement is seen to strengthen one's identification with the group (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), it follows that the sense of community achieved through AO would lead to a strengthening of one's identity as a soccer fan overall.

The current chapter emphasizes the importance of social interaction to AO members and sense of community it engenders. AO helps serve its members through its

role as an overarching entity that ties together members' multiple foci of identification. In the final chapter, the study synthesizes the results chapters and highlights how this research contributes to existing scholarship. Specifically, this study expands work on multiple foci of identification, calling particular attention to the influential role of subgroups within brand communities. It also notes how overlapping and interlocking foci of identification can serve to reinforce individuals' related identities, which in turn may benefit the focal brand.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

Within existing literature, a brand community tends to be conceptualized as a single collective of consumers (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Thompson & Sinha, 2008), and individuals are generally viewed as part of a large, brand-centric social collective. Some research has recognized that within these larger communities are subgroups of consumers who have multiple levels of identification related to the brand (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004; Leigh et al., 2006). However, this line of inquiry is still in its early stages and much remains unknown. The current study sought to better understand the influence of multiple foci of identification through studying supporter groups for the US Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT). Specifically, it focused on the American Outlaws (AO), a supporter group with a multi-level membership structure.

As is the case with other forms of consumption-based groups, a supporter group is typically seen as being a single collective to which individuals are members (e.g., Nash, 2001; Parry & Malcolm, 2004). The current study's examination of AO's superordinate group/subgroup structure found it conducive for encouraging multiple points of identification. The current chapter discusses how these interlocking and overlapping foci of identification can serve to reinforce each other, especially as was observed in the relationship between members' superordinate group and subgroup identities. It further details how sport organizations may realize benefits from individuals' increased identification with the related supporter group identities.

The Reciprocal Relationship between Group and Subgroup

In the limited extant research on subgroups within communities of interest (see Chapter 2), scholars have focused on subgroups that developed informally within the larger group structure (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The current study expands on that research by examining a superordinate group (AO National) whose structure is predicated on formalized subgroups (AO Local chapters) and members' multiple levels of identification. The majority of individuals in AO are simultaneously members of AO National and AO Local. This means that there is considerable overlap of AO National and AO Local identities. Rather than pulling against each other, however, the two identities reinforce each other. The current section discusses how identification at the subgroup and superordinate levels develops a symbiotic interplay between AO National and AO Local. Through better understanding this dynamic, we can better understand consumption communities and their members.

This study reveals that there are two primary ways in which subgroups strengthen a brand community. First, subgroups provide more opportunities for social interaction within a shared space. These interactions further members' sense of community and deepen their identification with the subgroup, and in turn, the superordinate group. The second advantage of subgroups is that they offer greater homogeneity than is possible in larger groups (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Moreland & Levine, 2003). The more homogeneous a group, the more likely it is for that group to be cohesive (Hogg, 1992; Moreland & Levine, 2003; Obst et al., 2002). However, as groups increase in size, membership becomes more diverse in terms of member interests and behaviors, thereby sacrificing group homogeneity (Hogg, 2003b; Koch, 1983). Through creating smaller

subgroups where members see others as more like themselves, the subgroups are able to offer greater perceived ingroup homogeneity (Hare, 1981). However, as discussed below, the relationship between the superordinate group and subgroup is one of mutual dependence.

Reciprocal Relationship: The Superordinate Group

The current study detailed the ways in which individuals benefit from identifying with a national group of similarly identified others and highlighted that one principal gain for members is the feeling of being part of a larger social aggregate. Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorization Theory (SCT) posit that individuals seek to make sense of their world through social categorization (Brewer, 1996; Hogg, 2003b; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identification with social collectives, therefore, is thought to help individuals reduce social uncertainty and enhance self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hogg, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). AO National allows members to achieve these benefits by providing a sense of community with likeminded individuals who share similar beliefs and behaviors. Likewise, it reinforces common norms and rituals through efforts like the AO tailgate at live games, sharing song lyrics on its website, and offering guidance to chapter leaders on how to host gamewatches. When AO National members interact at events surrounding live games, even if they have never met previously, they already have a consistent AO National identity through which they share knowledge, values, and best practices, and further cultivate norms within and across AO Local chapters.

However, the infrequency of these interactions and minimal number of attendees limits their effectiveness in shaping overall group identity. Moreover, a sense of

community and common modes of behavior are challenging to maintain within large groups (Hare, 1981; Wiesenfeld, 1996), as was observed in the current study with Sam's Army (SA). SA members had few shared spaces in which they were able to celebrate their related identities. Live USMNT games, which were the only times in which SA members congregated, were infrequent and geographically dispersed. Members were not able to engage in regular social interaction within a communal space, and some members' sense of community with SA waned (or failed to develop in the first place). In contrast, AO eschewed the single group structure for a network of localized subgroups.

Reciprocal Relationship: Subgroups

AO's structure allows it to thrive in a way that SA was not able. Individual AO subgroups are more cohesive than the national organization, in part due to the homogeneity possible within each group. Also, AO members' sense of community and multiple foci of identification are reinforced through the interactions provided through AO Local chapters. The subgroups host regular events, such as gamewatches, that bring together similarly identified others. These benefits of subgroup homogeneity and social interaction among subgroup members are discussed below.

A group that encourages identification with multiple subgroups based on shared interests, characteristics, locations, and/or modes of behavior allows for homogeneity within the subgroups while maintaining association with the superordinate group (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). In the current study, this homogeneity is seen in the variation among AO Local cultures and how those cultures reflect each subgroup's membership. As AO matures and grows, the subgroup structure has alleviated the challenges of divergent interests that plague large groups. The fluidity and ease with which more AO

subgroups can form allows for controlled splintering to maximize ingroup similarity. That is, if there is a critical mass (at least 25) of likeminded individuals, they are able to form their own supporter subgroup by establishing a new locale (e.g., AO Portland) or splitting from an existing group to form a new group within the same region (e.g., the original members of AO North New Jersey were formerly part of AO New York). Each subgroup that forms within AO creates a more defined homogeneous entity, which should enjoy greater group cohesion (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Hogg, 1992; Moreland & Levine, 2003; Obst et al., 2002). Thus, the data suggest that the homogeneity and cohesion lost by growing a consumption community may be retained through deploying subgroups with the autonomy to forge their own identities.

AO encourages members to take ownership in their subgroup by granting a degree of autonomy to subgroups and reducing barriers to subgroup formation. The self-governance afforded to subgroups permits each subgroup to develop its own norms and rituals that express the subgroup's values and transmit the meaning and culture of the subgroup to members (Feldman, 1984; Rook, 1985). These norms heighten perceived similarity among members within the subgroup – i.e., ingroup homogeneity. However, fostering homogeneity within subgroups and heterogeneity between subgroups has the potential to lead to metacontrast among subgroups (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Jetten et al., 1998), which could divide an organization. The current study suggests that this does not happen with AO because the subgroups are subsumed within the larger group, and it is from this larger group that the subgroups have coopted meaning.

Members in different AO Local chapters identify with their respective chapters, but they also share a common point of identification with AO National. For example,

each AO chapter logo provides visible symbols of the subgroup's identity that differentiates it from other chapters. Yet, by incorporating symbols of AO National into the logos, chapter members demonstrate their simultaneous identification with the superordinate group. The shared superordinate identity helps subgroup members perceive those across subgroups as having similar characteristics. In addition, members share other identities beyond just AO National members, such as being a soccer fan. As will be discussed (see below, "Multiple Foci of Identification"), the norms and goals of these other identities help to further tie members within the group to each other.

The second major role of subgroups is the opportunity they offer for social interaction among members. The AO Local group events create opportunities for members to parade and celebrate the related identities, a feature lacking from SA. Interacting with a likeminded ingroup can increase group identification (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Underwood et al., 2001), and the frequent interactions at AO chapter events were seen as strengthening members' AO-related identities. Identifying with a group can enhance one's self-esteem, affirming that identity and normalizing his or her beliefs and actions (Ellemers et al., 2002). As discussed further below (see page 141), the subgroup provides an emotionally supportive role to its members, which is particularly important in the current study due to members' perceived standing within the American sport landscape. In these ways, subgroups offer advantages to the traditional single group model that may have positive implications for consumption communities.

Reciprocal Relationship: The Multi-layered Structure as a Model for Brand Communities

Past research has shown that individuals can experience the feeling of microbelonging to a subgroup while retaining macrobelonging to the parent group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). That finding was supported in the current study, which found sense of community with one's local subgroup as well as with the superordinate group. The AO National identity offers meaning in excess of the identity provided by only a regionalized group of otherwise unaffiliated supporters. By considering AO National identity along with AO Local identity, we can see that the overlapping identities provide simultaneous value to AO members and the potential for extended sustainability for the supporter group.

This study suggests that a multi-layered structure is conducive to maintaining multiple levels of identification among its members while facilitating group and subgroup cohesion. If cohesion can be maintained, it will likely increase group longevity (Hogg, 1992; Libo, 1953). Coupled with the aforementioned social and self-esteem benefits provided by both the local subgroups and national community, AO may serve as a model for other sport teams' supporter groups, but also other brands seeking to further identification among their consumers. The current research further builds on previous findings (cf. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) by exploring the effects of multiple foci of identification beyond just the group-subgroup dyad.

Multiple Foci of Identification

Research on brand communities generally centers around a single focus of members' identification, as seen in tangible products like Apple (Muñiz & Schau, 2005) and Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) or experiential products like museum attendance (Bhattacharya et al., 1995) and sport teams (Hickman & Ward,

2007). Members of supporter groups are also typically viewed as being identified primarily with the team itself (e.g., Guschwan, 2007; Robson, 2001). Yet this study reveals that it is more than just the team that defines the identities of supporter group members. As they categorize themselves and others, they do so based on multiple points of identification.

This study found six foci of identification that relate to being in the AO supporter group: the USMNT, the United States of America (national identity), the sport of soccer, AO National, AO Local, and one's small social group. Some of these findings merely confirm what would have been expected. For example, the team itself is regularly noted as central to supporters (Brown, A., 2007; Russell, 1999), and national identity is known to be celebrated within national team supporter groups (Marks, 1998; Parry & Malcolm, 2004). However, by considering these identities in combination, we can see how multiple foci of identification interact and reinforce each other.

The current study detailed the ways in which AO norms and beliefs encourage the multiple social identities shared by members of the group. These include arranging discounts to travel to see live games (USMNT identity), bringing a giant flag into the supporter section (nationality), and educating neophytes on the intricacies of soccer (sport of soccer). Rather than seeing the group as being united only by a single point of identification (i.e., only the team), members recognize the additional shared identities among those within the group. In particular, the role of soccer as a point of identification is instructive.

Multiple Foci of Identification: Soccer Fan Identity and AO

Being a soccer fan is an important identity for many who are part of the AO supporter group. It serves as a common point of identification for AO members, and AO bolsters one's identity as a soccer fan. This finding further illustrates the way in which multiple foci of identity reinforce each other, in particular through the presence of a superordinate goal.

Soccer fandom serves as an overarching identity that helps unite AO members. As soccer is "crowded out" as a spectator sport in the US by baseball and football (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001), its fans see the need to organize in order to overcome the sport's relegation to secondary status. AO thus appeals to members by incorporating growing interest in soccer into its norms and values, such as by educating new fans, buying beers to entice potential converts, and reducing barriers to game viewing. In turn, members see the group as an effective means through which to increase spectatorship of the sport within the US. The AO identity and soccer fan identities are thus mutually reinforcing – individuals' identification with soccer builds a stronger tie to AO, and being part of AO bolsters their self-image as supporters of the sport.

On a more narrow level, the influence of supporting the sport itself through supporter group membership has not been fully recognized within past research on soccer supporter groups (e.g., Dunning, 1993; Giulianotti, 2002; Nash, 2001). Researchers' emphasis on soccer supporters' identity has been the redefinition of supporters in light of soccer's "modernization," noting the influx of new fans to the sports (e.g., Crawford, 2003; Hughson & Poulton, 2008; Nash, 2001). The research has seen soccer supporter groups divided on the basis of fans' perceived authenticity. In the current study, we see that individuals' identity as soccer fans helps unite AO members. Their desire to grow

soccer adds to existing supporter group literature by introducing a superordinate goal previously unexamined in the evaluations of soccer supporter group membership. Given that members' identities as a USMNT fan, soccer fan, and AO National member are threatened within the mainstream population, the importance of the AO Local identity is further heightened.

Multiple Foci of Identification: AO Local Identity Providing Emotional Support for the USMNT, Soccer Fan, and AO National Identity

A group with which one identifies may serve as a supportive, reaffirming network when facing a threat (Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke, 2006; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). When the group or focal object (e.g., sport team or brand) is disparaged by those in the outgroup, ingroup members may experience dissonance between their positive self-concept of being part of the group and the negative view of the group by others. By reaffirming the positive qualities of the ingroup with group members, that dissonance can be reduced (Cooper et al., 2003). For example, members of the HUMMER brand community share experiences of negative attention in the form of rude drivers and negative media portrayal; by ignoring, rationalizing, or recontextualizing these negative stimuli, community members are able to maintain their positive self-concept (Luedicke, 2006). Moreover, the stigmatization by the outgroup may help fortify the ingroup as members coalesce around each other, and some groups have used their marginalization as a point of pride in shaping their identity (Kozinets, 2001). Muñiz and Schau (2005) likened the stigmatization faced by members of some brand communities to what is endured by members of marginalized religions, suggesting that some of the strongest brand communities are those that have been marginalized.

Informants in the current study experience internal dissonance as their identities are dismissed, ignored, and/or isolated within day-to-day life. Specifically, informants noted how outsiders mocked their fanship of the USMNT, their interest in soccer, and their membership in a national supporters group. However, these threatened identities are reinforced through the social interactions with likeminded others in the local chapters. The social spaces created by AO Local events give members places in which to parade and celebrate their identities, opportunities that are more frequent due to the AO's subgroup structure. Through seeking asylum among each other, those in the subgroup are able to reinforce their identification with the group, and the internalization of the group identity, in turn, may enhance members' self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In addition to the personal benefits enjoyed by individuals from heightened group and subgroup identification, the sport property itself is also likely to prosper.

Prolonged Identity Salience and the Effects on Consumption

Sport organizations and scholars expend tremendous effort examining what organizations can do to positively affect consumer experience and engagement. Yet, much of USMNT consumption for AO members is shaped not by the US Soccer Federation, but by the AO supporter group. AO enhances members' perceived enjoyment of watching USMNT games, and AO activities extend the amount of time during which members are engaged in activities related to sport, team, and/or supporter group. The supporter group social events offer benefits for members' identities, as detailed earlier in this chapter, but they also are beneficial for the focal sport organization.

AO members report greater consumption of the USMNT because of AO.

Members perceive the social events during and surrounding games as enhancements to the USMNT consumption experience and are thus more interested in dedicating money and time to these events. The findings of the current study are consistent with research pointing to group affiliation as motivating sport consumption (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Kahle, Kambara, & Rose, 1996; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995). What the current study reveals is the way in which the AO-facilitated social atmosphere (e.g., around live games and gamewatches) encourages members to increase their consumption. Sport organizations seek to increase the frequency with which consumers interact with their brand (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007), and as shown here, this goal can be helped by the actions of the team supporter group. This study shows evidence of increased frequency of consumption due to AO, but also sees AO members increase the duration of their consumption as well.

AO supporter group events before and after live games increases the time during which members can parade and celebrate their shared social identities. As time with similarly identified others can strengthen one's identification with that group (Postmes & Spears, 1998), it follows that the more time the USMNT supporter identity is salient, the more one will identify with the team. Brands enjoy benefits from more highly identified individuals such as increased consumption (Pease & Zhang, 1996), greater brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999), and reduced sensitivity to price changes (Sutton et al., 1997). Thus, the US Soccer Federation appears to be an indirect beneficiary from AO members' periods of prolonged identity salience. It is therefore likely that if sport organizations help facilitate

within-group interaction among their supporter group members, the sport organizations themselves can reap the reward.

Practical Implications

There are several areas of this study that may be instructive for practitioners, particularly with respect to sport organizations' relationships with team supporter groups. As highlighted above, individuals' identification and engagement with a supporter group appear to offer benefits to the sport organization itself. Supporters reported an increased frequency of game consumption specifically because of being in the supporter group. This yields a direct, bottom-line benefit to the sport property through increased ticket revenue. Indirectly, the supporter group activities increase the duration during which members' team-related social identities are salient. They turn a two-hour game into a multi-day event. This is a longer, but still intense, time of consumers being exposed to and interacting with the brand. Similar events have been observed for other brands, such as Jeep's Brandfest (McAlexander et al., 2002), and help to deepen consumers' identification. Highly identified fans are more likely to spend money related to the team (Madrigal, 2000; Pease & Zhang, 1996), and thus sport organizations would be wise to cultivate supporters' identification among themselves. Members' multiple foci of identification were found to reinforce each other, and thus a team's efforts to strengthen members' identification with their supporter group (or other related identities) is likely to also strengthen identification with the team.

For brand communities, this study reveals the importance of multiple levels of group with which members can identify. Current industry trends show brands scrambling to create and/or foster "communities" through Likes on their Facebook pages, followers on Twitter, and hashtag-driven conversations among consumers (Slutsky, 2010). This approach is focused on establishing a large, singular brand community. Yet, the current

study demonstrates that identification and engagement with *subgroups* is a vital part of being in AO. The social interaction and sense of community made possible through AO subgroups deepens members' identification with the subgroup, and with the larger AO National group. With this in mind, brands seeking to nurture brand communities should encourage the formation of smaller subgroups instead of focusing exclusively on building the largest possible collective of fans. That said, brands should consider the role of the parent organization in managing its fans, particularly in the case of sport supporter groups.

Finally, some American sport organizations have started their own supporter groups under the control of the sport property. While these are different from supporter groups as seen in the current study, there is the potential for them to grow into more involved organizations. A question that remains, however, is whether or not the sport team should maintain control over these groups. Given the importance of autonomy as found in the current study, it may be wiser for organizations to encourage supporter groups where possible, but allow the groups to develop organically. AO members point to the group's fan-lead status as a necessary trait for seeing the group as an extension of themselves. Sport organizations should facilitate supporter groups' activities where possible while maintaining dialogue with groups in order to meet their consumption preferences. Through helping to foster within-group social interaction while encouraging saliency of team-related identities, the sport organization stands to benefit through the mechanisms addressed above.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on a very specific population and context of consumption. Such focus was necessary to achieve depth of knowledge within the scope of this research, but doing so limited the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other consumers. The intent is for this research to fit into the larger bodies of work on identity construction, brand communities, and sport fans, and for future scholarship to continue to build on these results. Future research can stem from the findings of the current study in many ways. This section highlights some of those possible opportunities, including inquiry into subgroups within brand communities, varying salience of multiple foci of identification, American supporter groups, and reducing antagonism among sport consumers.

This study expands on the relatively unexplored area of subgroups within brand communities. It shows the considerable influence of the subgroup on members' identification and interaction with the overall brand community and the focal brand itself. Further, it found a symbiotic relationship between the AO superordinate group and its subgroups wherein identification with one level of group reinforced identification with the other. While these findings are insightful, they are neither exhaustive or overly generalizable. Brand communities exist across numerous forms of consumption. Future scholarly inquiry could expand on this work by examining subgroups in different contexts – in retail, with branded goods or services; in sport, but not in a defined supporter group; or with personalities, like celebrities or musical artists. It is unclear how the experiential, ephemeral, and intangible nature of spectator sport consumption affects the brand community formation and interaction. It is possible that a sport-related community may more closely resemble a community formed around a television program

such as Star Trek (cf. Kozinets, 2001) than one formed around a durable good, such as a car. In further understanding possible distinctions among brand community types, researchers may also understand the potential varying roles of subgroups therein. In addition, the use of quantitative measures of identification would be useful in providing more accurate levels of saliency across different contexts, especially in terms of differentiating the saliency of the subgroup identity from that of the overall brand community. As scholars further their understanding of identification and brand communities, it appears that subgroups should be an important component of their inquiry. Even through continued study of the AO supporter group, one may gain insight into salience among multiple social identities.

This study detailed members' varying degrees of identity salience depending on the context. Within the supporter section at live games, the USMNT supporter identity appeared most salient. Yet within the section were members of multiple groups, including AO and SA. The presence of an outgroup can increase the saliency of one's ingroup identity (Festinger, 1954), thus it is somewhat surprising that the inclusion of SA appears to result in little or no increased saliency of the AO identity. The presence of a superordinate goal (i.e., supporting the USMNT) is part of the explanation, but perhaps AO's dominant standing within the USMNT supporter group population plays a factor as well. If SA or some other group were better represented, potentially increasing the threat to the AO identity, would the AO identity be more salient? In a related issue, one can explore the conditions that may give rise to the saliency of the AO Local identity at games. For example, the supporter group banners hung at a June 2012 USMNT game included those for AO Huntsville and AO South Florida. Though anecdotal, this

situation suggests that the subgroup identity is growing in prominence. Thus, further research is needed to more completely understand subgroup saliency within the context of a brand community. More immediately, a logical next step is to expand beyond USMNT supporter groups and look at supporter groups for Major League Soccer (MLS) clubs.

For several MLS teams there is more than one supporters group. For example, the Chicago Fire have at least ten supporters groups (Chicago Fire, n.d.), including the *Blitzer Mob* supporter group. An umbrella association, named *Section 8*, coordinates actions with the independent groups of Chicago Fire fans. As a separate entity, rather than a superordinate one, Section 8 offers an organizational dynamic that differs from the subgroup structure present in AO. Members of AO Local chapters expressed considerable identification with the superordinate AO National group, but it is unknown whether the same multi-level identification would be found among collaborative affiliates (e.g., Section 8 and Blitzer Mob) rather than semi-autonomous subordinates (AO National and AO Local). Investigation in this area may be prescriptive for nascent supporter groups or sport organizations active in coordinating supporter group activities.

Finally, the findings of this study may have implications in the risk management area. Some data suggest that the superordinate goals shared by most AO members may reduce animosity among otherwise rival fan groups. In Castro-Ramos (2008), the author writes about the relationships of Spanish soccer fans with their local club teams and their national team. He suggests that fans who root for different club teams may unite in their support of the national team, but he does not interview fans directly. The current study found that fans of rival MLS clubs came together in their support of the national team,

providing data to support works like Castro-Ramos (2008). When considering “all soccer fans in the US” as a community of interest, supporter groups for MLS teams and supporter groups for the USMNT are groups subsumed within that larger community. There may be overlapping membership between MLS club and national team supporter groups yet exclusive membership among the MLS club groups. The commonly shared identification with the national team may help reduce derogation between MLS club supporter group members, as suggested by existing research on the contact hypothesis within intergroup relations (Allport, 1954). This line of research could have an impact for league managers, event planners, and stadium personnel.

In conclusion, the findings from the current study contribute to the existing body of knowledge in three main areas. First, this study expands work on multiple foci of identification. While scholars and practitioners recognize fans’ varying points of identification, the conventional emphasis remains heavily on identification with the brand (or team) itself. The current study demonstrates that, even among highly identified consumers, there are overlapping foci of identification other than the team. These multiple foci of identification are found to reinforce each other in shaping members’ interactions with the team, the supporter group, and social groups therein. A second finding notes the symbiotic relationship between multiple levels within the supporter group. Existing brand community literature tends to focus on the community as a single entity with which members identify, but the current study illuminates the subgroup level as being significant. The social interaction and homogeneity offered through subgroups further members’ sense of community and identification with the superordinate group, and this superordinate-subgroup structure appears to be conducive for overall group

cohesion and longevity. Finally, the study illustrates the considerable influence that identification with a supporter group has on members' consumption behaviors related to the team itself. AO events extend the consumption period surrounding live games and prolong the saliency of USMNT-related identities. In turn, this has the potential to offer significant benefit to the sport property itself.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

American Outlaws – One of the primary national supporter groups for the US Men’s national soccer team.

AO – see *American Outlaws*

AO Rally – a convention of AO members from throughout the country. The inaugural event was held at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, from March 4-6, 2011.

Badge – the logo on the jersey. In the case of the USMNT, it depicts “U S,” a soccer ball, and stars and stripes. Also called the “crest.”

Bigsoccer.com – a popular online message board for soccer fans in America. It is also referred to as “Bigsoccer” or “Big Soccer.”

Brunken, Justin – co-founder of American Outlaws

CONCACAF – the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football. This is the collection of teams with whom the USMNT competes in order to claim regional superiority and advance to larger international competitions, such as the FIFA World Cup. For more, see Appendix B.

Cap – an appearance in an international match for a soccer player. The term has been coopted by fans to refer to the number of USMNT games they have attended.

Capo – a designated individual who leads chants in the stands at soccer matches. The word “capo” is Italian for “leader.”

Crest – see *badge*

Donahoo, Korey – co-founder of American Outlaws

El Tricolor – nickname for the Mexican national soccer team

FA – the Football Association. Founded in 1863, this is the governing body for soccer in England. It is the English equivalent of the USSF.

FBM – see *Free Beer Movement*.

FIFA – Fédération Internationale de Football Association. The international federation for soccer and the sport’s highest governing body.

Free Beer Movement – A grassroots movement to get more Americans interested in soccer. It encourages soccer fans to coax “newbies” to watch a game by promising to buy the newbie a beer (e.g., “If you just give the gamewatch a try, I’ll buy your beer”). The initiative was founded and championed by SGM *Dan Wiersema*. The FBM partners with AO National for some initiatives.

Friendly – an exhibition match. These games are not part of a larger tournament (e.g., Gold Cup, World Cup), but offer practice for the teams and entertainment for spectators.

Kit – the jersey worn by the team.

MLS – Major League Soccer. The top professional soccer league within North America.

NSGM – Non-national supporter group member. Individuals who may be part of other supporter groups, such as online or regional groups, but are not members of the national organizations (AO, SA, USSSC).

Premier League – The top professional soccer league in England, considered by many to be the top professional soccer league in the world.

SA – see *Sam’s Army*

Sam’s Army – One of the primary national supporter groups for the US Men’s national soccer team

SIP – Soccer Industry Professional. Individuals work within the soccer industry as executives or employees, including for the US Soccer Federation; as consultants; as media pundits; or in some other capacity that gives these individuals valuable expertise that aided the research.

SGM – National Supporter Group Member. Individuals who are part of SA, AO, and/or the USSSC.

Spacone, Mark – founder of Sam’s Army

Supporters group – another term for “supporter (singular) group”

USMNT – United States Men’s National Team. The men’s soccer team that represents the United States of America in international competition.

USSF – US Soccer Federation. The governing body of soccer in the United States. They make decisions that control the *USMNT*, such as game schedules and coaching hires.

USSSC – The US Soccer Supporters Club. This is a national supporter group and has been designated as the “official” supporter group by the *USSF*. It was created and is managed by employees of the USSF.

Wiersema, Dan – Founder of the *Free Beer Movement* and chapter head of AO Austin.

APPENDIX B
SOCCER CONTEXT

Soccer's Relevance and Popularity

Soccer is considered by some to be the “world’s most popular team sport” (Dunning, 1999, p. 103; Guttmann, 1993, p. 129). It is played by an estimated 270 million people worldwide (FIFA, n.d., “2006 Big count”), and for many countries, particularly those in Europe and South America, soccer is the sport for which residents are most passionate (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 2001; Mintel, 2009). Further, soccer matches have been observed to hold considerable significance in terms of class struggle (Wagg, 2004), religious affiliation (Giulianotti & Gerrard, 2001), or national pride (Porro & Russo, 2000).

In the United States, while soccer is not the dominant sport in terms of national attention, its popularity has been increasing. Major League Soccer (MLS), the top-level professional league in the US, used to pay ESPN to broadcast its games; the network now spends \$8 million per year in MLS broadcasting rights (Mickle, 2009b). MLS has expanded, increasing from the initial 10 teams in 1996 to 18 as of 2011, and expansion fees for new franchises have swelled from \$7.5 million in 2005 to \$40 million in 2010 (Rovell, 2010). American consumers have also demonstrated an increased interest in international competition, particularly the World Cup. Television ratings in the US for the World Cup increased 80 percent between the 2002 and 2006 World Cups (Mickle, 2009a) and an additional 64% for the 2010 World Cup (Rovell, 2010). Further, while US broadcast rights fees for the 2002 World Cup were about \$41 million (Library of

Congress, 2005), the combined fees for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups are \$100 million (Mickle, 2009b).

Background on Soccer

There are two types of teams that play soccer at in the highest spectator level: professional teams and national teams. Professional soccer leagues typically exist within a specific country,¹⁰ though in the global market for talent, players may hail from outside the league's home region. As examples, Kaká and Dani Alves are both Brazilian but play in La Liga, the top professional league in Spain. The majority of a professional team's games are played within the country of that league, but professional teams also play against teams in other professional leagues. For example, the UEFA Champions League is a tournament for the top professional teams in Europe, and the CONCACAF Champions League showcases the top professional teams in North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Though these matches are played internationally, the participants are playing for and representing their professional teams.

A different form of international competition involves countries' national teams, which are teams comprised entirely of players from that country. Tournaments between national teams are not related to the professional leagues, and players who may normally compete for rival professional teams may play on the same national team or vice versa. These tournaments occur during breaks in professional league seasons, or players may take temporary leave from their professional teams in order to compete for their home

¹⁰ Leagues whose teams are limited to one country include La Liga (Spain) and Serie A (Italy). Exceptions exist to this structure, such as in the MLS, which includes teams from the United States and Canada. A country may also have multiple professional leagues, such as the United Kingdom, where separate professional leagues exist in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

nation. The major international tournaments, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Confederations Cup, occur every 2-4 years. There are also regional tournaments, such as the African Cup of Nations, the European Football Championship, and South America's Copa América tournament. All international competitions are sanctioned by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the international federation for soccer and the sport's highest governing body.

FIFA membership is comprised of national soccer associations within individual countries. As a testament to the sport's global popularity, the 208 member associations exceed the 192 members in the United Nations (FIFA, n.d., "Associations"; United Nations, n.d.). These local associations, such as the United States Soccer Federation, are responsible for governing amateur and professional soccer in their specific country or region. Associations belong to FIFA and to one of FIFA's six continental-based confederations (see Figure B.1), and these groups work together to organize the international competitions. With a per-match average worldwide viewership of 259.9 million (2006 data), the international tournament that generates the greatest interest is the FIFA World Cup (FIFA, n.d., "TV data").

The FIFA World Cup is the world's most popular spectator sporting event—its championship match was watched by 715.1 million people, more than twice the population of the United States (FIFA, n.d., "TV data"). The World Cup is played every four years in a country selected by FIFA.¹¹ National teams from each of FIFA's six regional confederations earn the right to compete in the month-long tournament by qualifying in designated matches over the previous three years. In 2010, the World Cup

¹¹ Typically there is a single host country for the World Cup, though the hosting duties for the 2002 World Cup were shared by South Korea and Japan.

was played in South Africa, the first time the tournament has taken place in Africa. Thirty-two teams qualify to compete, and by virtue of finishing first in CONCACAF qualifying, the United States earned a berth in South Africa.



Abbreviation	Confederation Name	Location
AFC	Asian Football Confederation	Asia and Australia
CAF	Confédération Africaine de Football	Africa
CONCACAF	Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football	North America and Central America
CONMEBOL	Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol	South America
OFC	Oceania Football Confederation	Oceania
UEFA	L'Union Européenne de Football Association	Europe

Figure B.1: Map of FIFA Confederations. Each confederation qualifies a certain number of teams to play in the World Cup, as determined by FIFA rules.

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