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Pathways to Prejudice and Outgroup hostility: Group alignment and intergroup conflict among football fans

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Abstract

How do different forms of group alignment influence our attitudes towards outgroups?

To answer this, the current fieldwork study explored how identification and identity fusion differentially impact outgroup anxiety, prejudice and hostility towards rival football fan supporter groups in Australia. The community participants ($N = 100$) were members of two active fan groups who had experienced a history of intergroup tensions. The findings from the full path model confirmed that the predictor group alignment variables of identification and fusion were correlated, and the two outcome variables of outgroup prejudice and hostility were correlated, as predicted. The findings also revealed that fusion with one's club predicted outgroup hostility, but not prejudice, whereas identification with one's club predicted outgroup prejudice, but not hostility. Additionally, outgroup anxiety was found to significantly mediate the relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup prejudice, whereas a similar relationship was not found for fusion. These findings highlight the differential impact of group alignment (i.e., identification and identity fusion) on social constructs of outgroup anxiety, prejudice and hostility. Empirically, this is the first study to demonstrate the workings of these distinct group alignment pathways in an applied setting involving hardcore football fans. We discuss the broader implications of these findings for a fuller understanding of the drivers of intergroup tensions and conflict.

Keywords: identification, identity fusion, identity, intergroup relations, prejudice, hostility, football

Pathways to Prejudice and **Outgroup hostility:**

Group alignment and intergroup conflict among football fans

Much recent research suggests that identity fusion – a visceral feeling of oneness with the group – is distinct from group identification in a number of ways (Swann et al., 2012). First, identification concerns categorical ties to the group, in the form of feelings of *allegiance* to the collectivity whereas identity fusion concerns relational ties that bind together networks of distinct individuals (Swann et al., 2009), although extended fusion with categorical groups has also been extensively studied (Swann et al., 2012). **Second, fusion entails a synergistic relationship between personal and group identities, such that making the one salient also activates the latter and, consequently, any attack on the group is taken personally (Swann et al., 2010a; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015); identification, by contrast, entails a hydraulic relationship between personal and group identities, such that making the one salient makes the other less accessible and thus identification is depersonalizing (Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994). Third, whereas fusion results from the sharing of personally transformative experiences that are simultaneously self- and group-defining, rooted in episodic memories for unique events and their consequences; identification, by contrast, is based on the sharing of group traits, such as beliefs, practices, that are learned from others and remembered in the form of semantic scripts and schemas, disconnected from the moments and contexts in which they were originally acquired (Jong et al., 2015; Whitehouse, 2018). Fourth, since features that define the group are also personally defining for highly fused individuals, priming personal agency increases feelings of fusion (Swann et al., 2010b). As a consequence of the above differences in pathways to group alignment, fusion motivates more extreme forms of pro-group action and self-sacrifice than identification (Swann et al., 2012; Whitehouse, 2018).**

Although the research cited above reports scores of studies detailing *intragroup* differences between fusion and identification, relatively little research has examined the differential impact of these group alignment constructs on *intergroup* relations. The current study will be the first time to address this empirical gap in the literature.

Differential Group Alignment Factors and Intergroup Relations

Considering ingroup identification reflects the extent to which one’s ingroup membership is incorporated into one’s self-concept (Noel et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals who identify strongly with their ingroup are more likely to be affected by outgroup anxiety and threats directed toward their ingroup (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), and respond with prejudice to threatening outgroups, who may make them anxious (Bizman & Yinon, 2001). In support, White and her colleagues have shown that Muslims reported a pattern of high ingroup identification, high outgroup anxiety and high outgroup prejudice, compared to the pattern reported by their Catholic counterparts (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012; White et al., 2014). Relatedly, research indicates that following a threat to their ingroup identity, high identifiers react more negatively and/or derogate the outgroup more than low identifiers (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). The more important the ingroup is to an individual’s sense of collective identity, the more anxious, wary or suspicious they are of outgroups who could potentially harm their ingroup (Riek et al., 2006). In other words, anxiety mediates the ingroup identification-outgroup prejudice relationship. Highly identified individuals are not indiscriminately hostile to outgroups, but instead react if there is perceived or real intergroup threats (Veenstra & Haslam, 2000).

Conversely, fusion has been linked to more extreme pro-group actions, both positive and negative. For example, fused people are more likely to give blood after a terrorist attack (Buhrmester et al., 2015), donate time and money after a natural disaster (Segal et al., 2018), and pursue the most successful strategies for mitigating conflict when fused to a romantic

partner (Walsh & Neff, 2018). The darker side of fusion has also been well-reported, with hostile or violent outcomes occurring when a fused individual perceives such actions to be beneficial to the group (Whitehouse, 2018a; Paredes et al., 2018). For instance, this includes out-group hostility at a cost to self in economic games (Buhrmester et al., 2018), self-sacrifice on the battle field (Whitehouse et al., 2014; Whitehouse, 2018), and the desire for retaliation after an in-group threat (Fredman et al., 2017). Whereas fusion is often rooted in experiences that are both autobiographical as well as group-defining, identification stems from the sharing of socially transmitted identity markers stored in semantic rather than episodic memory (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014). Such identity markers may include negative stereotypes toward outgroups and closely linked to prejudice but, once again, not to self-shaping episodes. This may help to explain not only why prejudice is linked more to identification than fusion, but also why prejudice does not play an important role in the process through which fusion can lead to **outgroup hostility**. Admittedly, however, further empirical examination is required to understand how fusion may interact with less extreme attitudinal outgroup variables, like outgroup anxiety and outgroup prejudice, which have not been measured in relation to fusion.

An Applied Intergroup Context: Hardcore Football Fans

Studying these patterns of group alignment and their consequences among military or terrorist groups engaged in extreme self-sacrifice and lethal intergroup violence presents obvious challenges, both practical and ethical. By contrast, football fan supporter groups offer a relatively safe and accessible population within which to examine the potential intergroup differences between these group alignment constructs (Newson, 2017). **The ESIM (Elaborated Social Identity Model) has already posed substantial contributions to understanding fan behaviours as part of crowd and group psychology (Stott et al., 2001). Here we extend this work to analyse individual differences as part of the fusion model.**

Fused fans report high levels of lifelong loyalty to their club (Newson et al., 2016), higher levels of intergroup violence (Newson et al., 2018), and even report willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice to save their fellow fans (Whitehouse et al., 2017), compared to less fused fans. In Australia, there has been a history of intergroup tension between two active football fan supporter groups, commonly known as Ultras: the Red and Black Bloc (RBB) and The Cove. The RBB is the fan group for the Western Sydney Wanderers team, which largely represents the western suburbs of Sydney, known for its working-class and immigrant roots (Gow, 2005), whereas The Cove is Sydney FC’s active supporter group, primarily representing the middle/upper class eastern suburbs of Sydney. The RBB fan group is culturally diverse, overwhelmingly male, and hold grievances against authority and economic privilege, presumably amplifying the rivalry that tends to exist between dedicated fan groups (Knijnik, 2018; Knijnik & Newson, 2020).

Since 2012, there has been a history intergroup tensions between the two fan groups, though not reaching the levels of violence more common in Europe and Latin America. For example, in 2013, 100 RBB fans were hostile toward Sydney FC families before an A-League derby; in 2015, four Sydney FC fans were attacked by 25 RBB fans; in 2017, 14 members of the RBB were banned for displaying a lewd banner attacking Sydney FC’s coach and, in response, Cove members damaged seats and threw water bottles on the field during this match.

The Current Study and Hypotheses

The present field study is the first of its kind to explore the differential role of two group alignment factors – identification and identity fusion - to help elucidate the nature of intergroup tensions between these ‘hardcore’ football fan groups. Fan groups are heterogenous, as are the fans within them. For example, some fan groups focus more on extreme fandom (e.g., aggressive chanting or even fighting) and it is membership to these

more extreme groups, or ‘hardcore’ football fans, that are of particular relevance to the present study. An *intergroup* perspective, where both fan groups are assessed, is also imperative (White et al., 2015). It is also an ideal context to contrast two ends of the spectrum of intergroup conflict, from mild (prejudice) to extreme (hostile behaviours), currently lacking from the fusion literature.

First, in support of previous literature, we test the hypothesis that ingroup identification and outgroup anxiety are significant predictors of prejudice (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012), and that outgroup anxiety will mediate the relationship between identification and outgroup prejudice (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Riek et al., 2006; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). Here, outgroup anxiety is defined here as a negative affective response experienced when anticipating future, or expecting actual, contact with an outgroup member (Stephen & Stephan, 1985). Second, we test for the first time whether identity fusion is a stronger predictor of outgroup hostility than identification (see Swann et al., 2009; Newson et al., 2018), or prejudice. We also test whether outgroup anxiety mediates this identity fusion-outgroup hostility relationship. Finally, we develop a path model to test the relationship between identity fusion, ingroup identification, outgroup anxiety, prejudice, and outgroup hostility.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the current study ($n = 100$) included members of two active football fan groups associated with two major Australian A-League football clubs, Sydney FC’s *The Cove* and Western Sydney Wanderers’ *Red & Black Bloc*. A power analysis determined that at least 99 participants were required to detect a medium effect size (Cohens $f^2 = .15$) in a multiple regression with three predictors using an $\alpha = .05$ and power $(1 - \beta) = .90$. Participants were drawn from a larger online survey ($N = 202$) of football fandom in Australia and were

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recruited online via targeted advertisements posted on social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) and emailed a link to the online questionnaire. In addition to the present study's target measures of identity fusion, ingroup identification, outgroup anxiety, prejudice, and outgroup hostility, the larger survey included measures on threat perception, shared dysphoria, and social dominance orientation (Newson et al., in prep.). Our community participants were members of active fan groups and ranged in age from 18 to 60 years ($M = 26.66$, $SD = 8.19$) and were predominantly men (82.0%). Most participants reported an Anglo-Celtic cultural background (54%), followed by European (18%), Middle Eastern (6%), Indigenous Australian (4%), Asian (4%), and Hispanic (4%).

Materials

Identity fusion. An adapted version of Gómez et al.'s (2011) seven-item identity fusion scale assessed participants' feelings of connectedness and reciprocal strength with their football team. These items included: "The [Sydney FC/Western Sydney Wanderers] is/are me" and "I am one with [Sydney FC/Western Sydney Wanderers]". Scale items were averaged to create an index of identity fusion ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), where higher scores indicated greater mean identity fusion (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). All items can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

Ingroup identification. An adapted version of the four-item centrality subscale of Cameron's (2004) social identification scale assessed the cognitive accessibility of participants' football team identity (e.g., "I often think about the fact that I am member of [Sydney FC/Western Sydney Wanderers]"). Scale items were averaged to create an index of ingroup identification ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), where higher scores indicated greater identification (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$).

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Outgroup anxiety. A shortened version of Stephan and Stephan's (1985) intergroup anxiety scale required participants to rate how *happy*, *awkward*, and *self-conscious* they would feel if they were in a group made up entirely of rival fan group members¹. Scale items were averaged to create an index of outgroup anxiety ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Extremely*), where higher scores indicated outgroup anxiety (Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$).

Prejudice. Prejudice towards the rival fan group was measured along a single feeling thermometer anchored at 0 (*Very cold*) and 100 (*Very warm*; reverse scored).

Outgroup hostility. Outgroup hostility towards the rival fan group was measured using two ends of the fan hostility spectrum with two, yes-no items that asked participants if they had ever 'verbally attacked or insulted' or 'physically attacked or injured' someone for being a fan of the opposition. Both items were included because they were equally relevant, whilst also acknowledging that verbal attacks tend to precede, but do not always lead to, physical attacks. Scale items were moderately and positively correlated ($r = .26, p = .008$), and were summed to create an index of **outgroup hostility** that ranged from 0 to 2.

Results

Prior to testing the research hypotheses, we computed descriptive statistics for, and correlations between, the study measures (Table 1). Identity fusion and ingroup identification were strongly positively correlated with each other. Identity fusion was weakly-to-moderately positively correlated with outgroup anxiety, and moderately-to-strongly positively correlated with prejudice and outgroup hostility. Ingroup identification was moderately-to-strongly positively

¹ Being mindful of volunteers' time-constraints to complete all of the study's measures, a 3-item version of Stephan and Stephan's (1985) intergroup anxiety scale was deemed most viable, and showed acceptable reliability, a decision similar to previous research that also effectively adopted a 3-item version (see Greenland & Brown, 1999). The three items chosen here overlap considerably with the other scale items of 'confident, relaxed and defensive'. To avoid duplication, happy, awkward, and self-conscious were chosen.

Insert Table 1 here

correlated with outgroup anxiety and **outgroup hostility**, and strongly positively correlated with prejudice. Outgroup anxiety and prejudice were moderately-to-strongly positively correlated with each other. Prejudice and **outgroup hostility** were moderately-to-strongly positively correlated with each other.

To examine the independent effects of identity fusion, ingroup identification, and outgroup anxiety on prejudice and **outgroup hostility**, two regression analyses were conducted. Identity fusion, ingroup identification, and outgroup anxiety were specified as independent variables, and prejudice and **outgroup hostility** were specified as dependent variables in the separate regression models (Table 2). Consistent with our predictions, ingroup identification and outgroup anxiety were significant predictors of prejudice, whereas identity fusion was not. Conversely, identity fusion was a significant predictor of **outgroup hostility**, whereas ingroup identification and outgroup anxiety were not. Follow-up analyses were conducted to examine the interactive effects of identity fusion, ingroup identification, and outgroup anxiety on prejudice and **outgroup hostility** by adding the two- and three-way interactions to the regression models; however, none of these analyses were statistically significant (all $ps > .340$).

Insert Table 2 here

Building on these regression analyses, a path model was developed to test the relationship between identity fusion, ingroup identification, outgroup anxiety, prejudice, and **outgroup hostility**. This theoretical model is diagrammed in Figure 1. Prejudice and **outgroup**

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hostility were specified as separate dependent variables, and identity fusion and ingroup identification as correlated independent variables that were allowed to predict both dependent variables. Residuals for prejudice and **outgroup hostility** were allowed to correlate. Outgroup anxiety was specified as a mediator variable for the relationship between ingroup identification and prejudice. Team membership was included as a covariate, by allowing it to predict the mediator and dependent variables.

Insert Figure 1 here

This model was tested in Mplus 8 using maximum likelihood estimation. The overall model fit was evaluated using the cut-offs recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999)—comparative fit index (CFI) $\geq .95$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) $< .06$, and; standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) $< .08$. Figure 2 shows the standardised path coefficients that were obtained for the tested model. The fit indices indicated excellent overall model fit— $\chi^2 = 4.66$, $df = 4$, $p = .324$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04, 90% CI [.00, .16]; SRMR = .026. Consistent with the hypotheses, identity fusion positively predicted **outgroup hostility** but was unrelated to prejudice, whereas ingroup identification positively predicted prejudice but was unrelated to **outgroup hostility**. Ingroup identification also positively predicted outgroup anxiety, which in turn positively predicted prejudice. Consistent with the mediation hypothesis, the indirect relationship from ingroup identification to prejudice via outgroup anxiety was statistically significant in the predicted direction ($\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.43$, $p = .015$).

Insert Figure 2 here

Discussion

These novel community-based research findings reveal that the intergroup tensions between rival Australian football fan groups are better understood in terms of outgroup anxiety’s mediating effect on identification, than its effect on the fusion-prejudice relationship. Replicating the associations reported in previous literature, fusion and identification were found to be positively correlated (Swann et al., 2009; Swann et al., 2010). Despite this relationship however, fusion but not identification, was associated with violent self-sacrifice for the group (Swann et al., 2010a; Whitehouse, 2018), identification but not fusion, was associated with outgroup prejudice (Bizman & Yinon, 2001; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; White & Abu-Rayya, 2012). Importantly, this is the first empirical study to show that fusion did not predict prejudice. Previous research has found fusion to predict **outgroup hostility** and extreme actions, but has not previously examined outgroup prejudice (Buhrmester, 2018). Perhaps this is because prejudice is more strongly linked to values, norms, and stereotypes that are socially acquired and stored in semantic memory, along with other markers of group identity linked to identification rather than fusion. Thus, not only do these applied fieldwork findings support the identification, anxiety and prejudice literatures (Riek, et al., 2006; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000), they also indirectly support existing fusion literature showing that fusion is linked with more extreme pro-group actions, including self-sacrifice (Whitehouse et al., 2017; Newson et al., 2018; Whitehouse 2018), as opposed to attitudinal values.

Based on fusion’s context-dependent relationship with intense sacrifices for the group, is the Australian hardcore football fan culture sufficient to elicit violent **outgroup hostility**, above and beyond hostility triggered by the identification – anxiety pathway? Future research will need to test these path models involving fusion, in cultural contexts where football fan-based and other forms of **outgroup hostility** (and thus threat) are a more common occurrence.

This study was limited by its correlational nature and, while our mediation analyses may point toward direction, it cannot speak to issues of causality. Future research should thus seek to triangulate the results with experimental laboratory studies and should also tackle variables that influence fusion's impact on **outgroup hostility**, given our finding that outgroup anxiety was not significant. For instance, it may be that fusion's impact on outgroup actions and sentiments only occurs under conditions of threat (Fredman et al., 2017; Whitehouse, 2018).

Summary and Implications

The results discussed here shed new light on the predictors of outgroup prejudice and **outgroup hostility** in highly bonded social groups. It is important to note that even in a sample of hardcore football fans where passions run high and intergroup rivalries are intense, violent outcomes were reported in a very small subset of the population. Our finding that outgroup anxiety mediates the relationship between identification and prejudice, but not fusion and prejudice, has potentially important theoretical implications. While much previous research has focused on the destructive effects of outgroup anxiety on the attitudes of those highly identified with an ingroup, we have considerable evidence that identification is a weaker motivator of extreme pro-group action than fusion. Thus, our finding that outgroup anxiety does not increase prejudice among highly fused hardcore football fans, suggests that concentrating on outgroup anxiety might not be such a relevant motivator of **outgroup hostility** as previously thought. This points to the need to better understand – and work with – highly fused fans. Interestingly, as these violent fans do not report high levels of prejudice, even when faced with outgroup anxiety, it may be that clubs and community organisations are able to engage with fans at risk of violence by tapping into fused fans' desire to protect their group's reputation, rather than to engage in outgroup violence.

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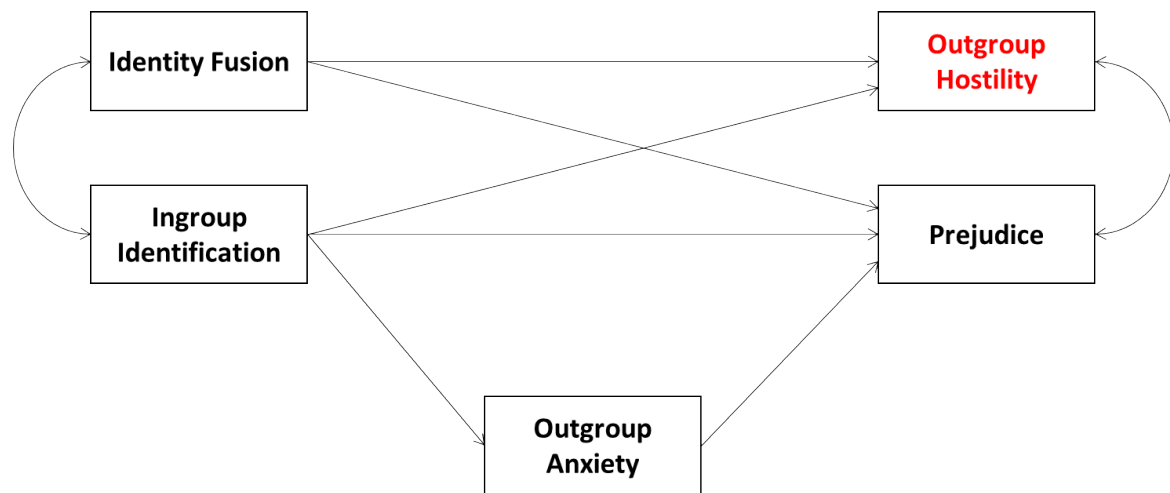


Figure 1. Theoretical model for the relationships between identity fusion, ingroup identification, outgroup anxiety, **outgroup hostility**, and prejudice.

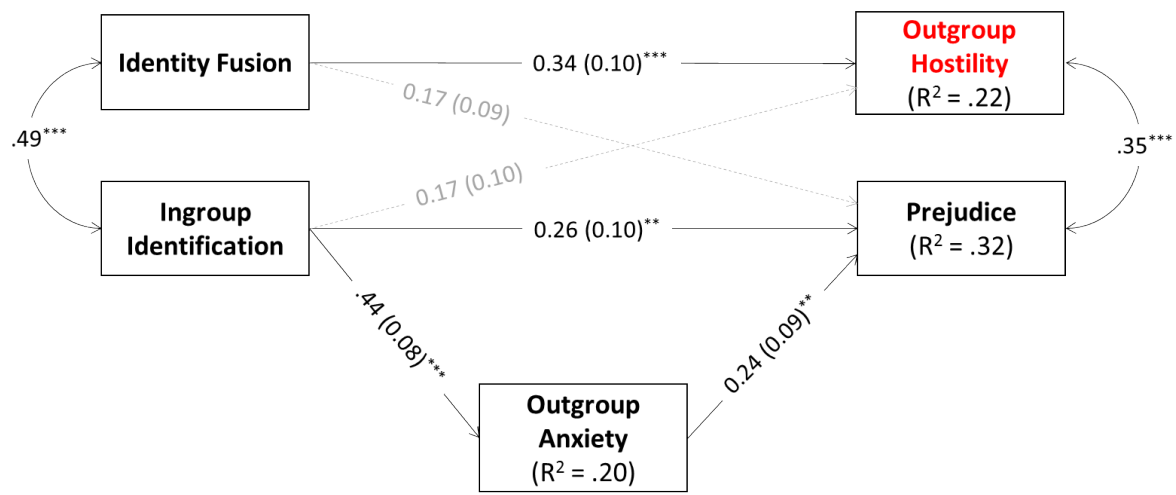


Figure 2. Standardized maximum likelihood coefficients (*SE* in parentheses) for the tested model. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 1

Correlations Between and Descriptive Statistics for Measures (n = 100)

Measure	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Identity Fusion	-				
2. Ingroup Identification	.49***	-			
3. Outgroup Anxiety	.21*	.43***	-		
4. Prejudice	.37***	.49***	.38***	-	
5. Outgroup Hostility	.43***	.33***	.15	.44***	-
<i>M</i>	5.20	5.05	4.75	85.13	0.56
<i>SD</i>	1.03	1.24	1.52	19.31	0.64
<i>Range</i>	2.57-7.00	2.00-7.00	1.33-7.00	19-100	0-2

Note. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

*Standardized Regression Weights (95% Confidence Intervals in Parentheses) for the Independent Effects of Identity Fusion, Ingroup Identification, and Outgroup Anxiety on Prejudice and **Outgroup Hostility***

	Prejudice	<i>Outgroup Hostility</i>
Identity Fusion	0.18 (-0.02, 0.37)	0.36*** (0.15, 0.56)
Ingroup Identification	0.31** (0.10, 0.37)	0.15 (-0.07, 0.38)
Outgroup Anxiety	0.21* (0.02, 0.40)	0.00 (-0.20, 0.20)

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Supplementary File

Identity Fusion

Thinking about the Sydney FC/WSW, please select the answer that best represents you:

1. I am one with Sydney FC/WSW
2. I feel immersed in Sydney FC/WSW
3. I have a deep emotional bond with Sydney FC/WSW
4. The Sydney FC/WSW are me
5. I'd do more for the Sydney FC/WSW than any other fan would
6. I am strong because of the Sydney FC/WSW
7. I make the Sydney FC/WSW strong

Ingroup Identification

Thinking about the Sydney FC, please select the answer that best represents you:

1. I often think about the fact that I am a Sydney FC/WSW fan
2. Overall, being a Sydney FC/WSW fan has very little to do with how I feel about myself
3. In general, being a Sydney FC/WSW fan is an important part of my self-image
4. The fact that I am a Sydney FC/WSW fan rarely enters my mind

Outgroup Anxiety

Imagine you are in a group made up entirely of RBB/Cove fans. Please rate how you would feel in this situation.

1. I would feel HAPPY around the Red and Black Bloc fans
2. I would feel AWKWARD around the Red and Black Bloc fans
3. I would feel SELF-CONSCIOUS around the Red and Black Bloc fans

Prejudice

Please rate how you feel about RBB/Cove on the given scale

Outgroup Hostility

The following questions ask about experiences that could possibly involve participation in criminal activity. Your answers are completely anonymous, and researchers cannot connect your name to your responses. Please indicate whether you have had the following experiences:

1. Have you ever verbally attacked or insulted someone for being a fan of the opposition?
2. Have you ever physically attacked or injured someone for being a fan of the opposition?