The Role of Team and Social Identity in Parasocial Relationships and Parasocial Breakups: Lionel Messi's Departure From FC Barcelona

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Communication scholars have demonstrated great interest in exploring the manifestation of parasocial relationships (PSR) with media persona. Despite such elaborate investigations, the mechanisms underlying PSR and parasocial breakup (PSB) are relatively unexplored in nonfictional circumstances. This study examines the often-overlooked effect of multiple identities (i.e., social and team identity) on expressions of PSR and PSB. Using the 2021 exit of soccer superstar Lionel Messi from FC Barcelona, this study incorporates data from 293 Spaniards to assess a structural equation model, finding that social and team identities were positively related to PSR, although both identities revealed distinct influences. Similarly, social and team identities intensified PSB. Finally, our results also indicate that PSR is positively related to PSB. This study advances current theoretical understandings of PSR and PSB, particularly within a non-American media context.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, parasocial breakup, social identity, team identity

Twenty-one years—with a contract signed on a paper napkin, the association between the Argentinian footballer Lionel Messi and the Spanish football club FC Barcelona was forged in 2000 (Lowe, 2014). However, on August 5, 2021, the club announced that the 34-year-old Messi would be moving on, a victim of the club's poor economic and structural management (Borg, 2021). The relational breakup became even more official when Messi found his new suitor, signing with Paris Saint-Germain five days later. What followed was a truly global demonstration of shock and disbelief, something that is expected from the relationships that fans often develop with a beloved media persona.

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Coined as parasocial relationships (PSR), affective and cognitive attachments with media characters have been at the forefront of communication research for several decades (Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). These relationships function with similar mechanisms as a real-life association. For instance, audience members interact and communicate with media persona as they would with "flesh-and-blood" friends (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 60). Naturally, these relationships are prone to adverse circumstances because of the (fictional) death or removal of a media character. Parasocial breakup (PSB), as Cohen (2003) argues, is a negative emotional response following a media character's dissolution. As observed with fan reactions to Messi's exit, this relational dissolution can be mentally challenging, such as being apologetic and publicly demonstrating emotions such as anger, disbelief, and sorrow (Joseph, 2021).

Lionel Messi inarguably was central to the success of FC Barcelona. If the team's motto is "Més que un club" [More than a club], Messi was undoubtedly more than a player to the organization. On the field, he achieved a total of 48 club and league records while becoming the player with the highest number of appearances (778) while playing for FC Barcelona, *Barça*'s all-time top scorer (672 goals), and the player who has won the most titles for the club (35), including four Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League tournaments and 10 La Liga championships (Lozano, 2021). In his 17 years playing for FC Barcelona, Messi helped the club to achieve unparalleled exposure both at home and globally. Smith (2020) notes, "As Messi developed first into the best player of his generation and then, possibly, into the best in history, so Barcelona was transformed into arguably the most popular sports team in the world" (para. 11).

Due to its dire finances, FC Barcelona was "unable to give Messi a new contract, even on greatly reduced terms" (*The Athletic*, 2021, para. 17). In the aftermath of his exit, FC Barcelona's brand value plummeted by more than 130 million euros while Camp Nou saw a notable decline in attendance (Smith, 2021). Unsurprisingly, Barcelona's tumultuous subsequent season finished with no titles at both domestic or international levels. Given Messi's important contributions to FC Barcelona, his exit provides an opportunity to examine how Barcelona supporters' PSR and PSB with him have functioned.

PSR in sports are core elements of followership for many fans (Sanderson, 2008) as people follow athletes they have never met with avidity and fervor, which they commonly ascribe to close family and friends. However, limitations persist in understanding such manifestations of parasocial constructs, specifically in sports and generally within the discipline of communication. First, there is a greater need to incorporate the interplay of multiple identities within sports media consumption. For instance, fans are not just attached to individual athletes but also to teams and fan groups (i.e., team and social identification; Funk & James, 2001; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Similarly, a common notion is that only individual-level characteristics (e.g., character identification) are related to the parasocial constructs (e.g., Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2001; Tukachinsky, Walter, & Saucier, 2020). Considering the centrality of a team's performance to one's social and team identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), PSR and PSB appear to be associated with individual athletes as a function of their contributions to their team's success. Second, the relationship between PSR and PSB is still unclear. While some scholars found evidence for a positive relationship between the two (e.g., Hu, 2016; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), others did not (e.g., Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017). Third, the operation of PSB within the sports realm is

largely unknown. PSB is germane to the world of sports as athletes retire, transfer, or attain injuries several times during their careers. While only one study examined it in the context of sports (cf. Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017), it is necessary to continue the conversation to that end. Finally, and most importantly, studies examining the functioning of parasocial constructs in non-American media environments are warranted. For instance, a recent meta-analysis from Tukachinsky and colleagues (2020) reviewed 120 studies from four decades of PSR research—of which only 20 (17%) originated outside the United States. This reveals how Americanized PSR scholarship is, warranting investigation of its principles outside the United States as these parasocial constructs may manifest differently in non-American contexts (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). Such parasocial constructs affect real-world behaviors, including those related to health (e.g., Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003), consumer behavior (e.g., Dix, Phau, & Pougnet, 2010), and politics (e.g., Cohen & Holbert, 2021). As such, understanding these propositions can ultimately predict media-enabled relationship effects. To address this need, responses from 293 Spanish participants have been used to evaluate the unique state of Messi's exit and advance theoretical understandings of the parasocial constructs.

Overview of the Parasocial Constructs

Contemporary mass media afford unique forms of social interaction(s). Established through a routine and persistent form of media consumption, such interactions manifest as PSR, embodying a face-to-face interaction with a media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In contrast to interpersonal relationships, PSR are one-sided and imaginary as the media persona is unaware of any *interaction* with an audience member (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), yet is cultivating an environment for these interactions to unfold. These relationships do not form via a single exposure but through a multitude of such, by which the viewer enhances their understanding, emotional proximity, and appreciation of the media character (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). A sense of identification, homophily, and social attraction is developed within the process, fostering PSR (Eyal & Rubin, 2003) via consistent media use (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of studies adopting the parasocial construct reveals moderate to strong correlations between PSR intensity on attitudes, behavioral intention, and behavior (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Thus, although PSR are an imaginary phenomenon, they have real-life consequences well beyond the virtual world.

Traditionally, PSR and parasocial interaction (PSI) were used interchangeably to study media character involvement. However, recently, scholars have begun to conceptually distinguish PSR from PSI. While PSI involves an interaction with a media character that is limited to a single viewing episode (e.g., a viewer yelling at Messi to pass the ball while watching a televised game), PSR are constituted via long-standing relationships built on multiple media exposures (e.g., a fan wanting to meet Messi, liking Messi; Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). In sum, PSI functions as an antecedent to PSR.

Because PSR are pseudo-interpersonal relationships that audiences develop with a media persona, they share several relational characteristics, one of which leads to emotional distress through immutable events (e.g., death). PSR with media characters also involve such responses—the phenomenon of PSB, defined as a negative emotional reaction (e.g., sadness, depression) following a media character's dissolution (Cohen, 2003). As opposed to grave events in real life, PSB mostly

functions because of artistic determinations (e.g., the death of a character or the termination of a television program). While seemingly trivial, PSB functions similarly to face-to-face relationships (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). For instance, Kretz (2020) examined public discourse in response to Dr. Derek Shepherd's death in the fictional TV series *Grey's Anatomy* (Gordon et al., 2005–present). The author found that fans projected several emotions ranging from heartbreak to sadness to shock, mirroring social, real-life relationships. This demonstrates how fans establish positive and negative dispositions to foster involvement and equate media characters to real-life personas. PSB can even affect individuals' behaviors, such as those of women choosing to socialize and engage in non-media activities as a way of dealing with the loss of a media character (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Together, PSB and PSR are intangible concepts yet are inextricably linked to a wide range of behavioral and psychological consequences.

The proliferation of new media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) has facilitated an increase in sports media consumption, leading to a fresh investigation of the role of PSR and PSB with sports persona. Innovations in media technologies now offer multiple platforms that cultivate PSR with athletes. Indeed, most PSR research within sports focuses on audience interactions on the Internet, which assume myriad shapes and forms of PSR with sports celebrities. For instance, Sanderson and Emmons (2014) studied how parasocial phenomena led social media users to exonerate and show compassion for professional baseball player Josh Hamilton's alcohol relapse. Similarly, Sanderson (2008) analyzed how social media users responded to Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling's blog as a result of PSR with him. Demonstrating the unique nature of the Internet, which has changed the way PSR function, Kassing and Sanderson (2009) examined the ways in which these relationships operate two-way communication channels (i.e., athletes can directly communicate with their fans and vice versa). With athletes amplified social media presence; fans are afforded additional means through which they can interact with them (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Such interactions can further PSR as fans actively engage in athlete-led narratives (Sanderson & Emmons, 2014), perhaps transforming fundamental understandings of PSR as they are no longer parasocial but "semi-parasocial" (Giles, 2002, p. 295). Yet, most sports content is still consumed through conventional media (McCaskill, 2019). Thus, PSR are generated via extended exposure to sports through television (Basil, 1996), and social media can only complement the relationships formed through such means (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009).

Team and Social Identification

Sports consumers often reserve their identity to a single team, manifesting a sense of belonging to the team and its players, a phenomenon referred to as team identity (Funk & James, 2001). In other words, team identity is defined as a self-concept resulting from a psychological attachment or loyalty to a sports team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). By agency of this relationship, fans inherit a perception of "oneness" and attempt to define themselves in relation to the team (Gundlach, Zivnuska, & Stoner, 2006, p. 1607). Thus, they expand their identity beyond their personal characteristics (e.g., ethnic identity) toward a larger organization that potentially enhances their self-esteem and self-worth. Although distinct, the framework of team identity was built on the theoretical concepts of social identity theory (SIT; Wann, 2006). Social identity is conceptualized as a sense of belonging resulting from membership in a social group that shares a common identity. Ideally, individuals attempt to assign themselves to groups with a greater

communal reputation (Tajfel, 1972). SIT outlines the mechanisms through which group members elevate the status of their own group (i.e., in-group) in relation to other external groups (i.e., out-group) to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, germane to sports, fans often delegate and self-categorize themselves into particular social camps, which permits them to maintain incongruence with the fan groups of other teams, developing a unique sense of identity. By means of showing favoritism toward the in-group and derogating the status of the out-group, a positive self-image is maintained (Wann & Grieve, 2005). Subsequently, social identity involves both the positioning of oneself with the team and a parallel association with other members of the same group. As such, social identity functions as a more globally operationalized kinship (Wann et al., 2001).

The position of team identification within the framework of SIT is rather contested. While most scholars use these concepts interchangeably, they are, nevertheless, distinct phenomena. The confusion primarily results from its evolution, which was heavily influenced by SIT's propositions (Wann, 2006). For instance, the central tenets of SIT (i.e., individuals forge a psychological connection with a social group, establish boundaries between their group and other related groups, and evaluate their social status) were used to develop the concept of team identification (Wann, 2006). However, Gundlach and colleagues (2006) claim that team identification is the extent to which an individual only identifies with a team, independent of its social juxtaposition (i.e., comparison with an out-group). This distinction can be made transparent through the analogies "consumer with team" (i.e., team identity) and "consumer with group" (i.e., social identity; Lock & Heere, 2017, p. 415). In other words, while team identity refers to an association of an individual with a team, social identity—from the perspective of sports—refers to an association of an individual with the team *plus* the fan group of that team. Furthermore, social identity also involves the processes of both in-group and out-group evaluations (Karasawa, 1991), which team identity does not account for. Therefore, the terms social and team identity cannot be used interchangeably because self-concept is formed through distinct means. For instance, when team identity becomes salient for a fan, the success of his/her team is of consequence, independent of its communal reputation. However, when social identity becomes salient, the success of his/her fan group—in relation to other groups—becomes critical in determining their identity (Wann, 2006), as that success is the basis for communal reputation. Thus, within the realm of sports fan behavior, team identification and social identification do not function interchangeably (Wann et al., 2001).

As previously established, the degree and intensity of media consumption to which individuals expose themselves are related to various personality and sociological variables. Of interest to this study is how media exposure is related to the development of both social and team identification. Both forms of identification are essential components of an individual's expression of fandom (Brown, Billings, Devlin, & Brown-Devlin, 2020). Many underlying motivations could explain why one follows a sports team, yet media exposure often becomes core to sports fanship formation and allegiance. However, media exposure was not used as the core metric for two reasons. First, Messi has been a significant part of FC Barcelona for more than two decades; asking participants to specifically recall media use over such a prolonged period leads to incorrect and recall biases (Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016). Second, and relatedly, media affordances have changed exponentially over this period; asking the participants to list—or respond to—all modes of media consumption would be both byzantine and challenging.

Consequently, a broader media use item is adopted, focusing on the age of the participant, as it parallels elements of long-lasting media exposure while simultaneously measuring potential age demographic differences in the life span of a sports fan (contrasting formative fan years to later years; see Gantz & Lewis, 2021). Thus, age becomes the most apt surrogate for longevity and becomes the foundation for two initial hypotheses relating to social and team identities:

H1:   The age of the fan is positively related to social identity.

H2:   The age of the fan is positively related to team identity.

Traditionally, the parasocial constructs have been associated with character identification (referred to as identification hereafter), with Cohen (2001) defining identification as media involvement that enables the audience to develop an affective state of "feeling with the character" (p. 251). That is, the range of emotions that a fictional or nonfictional media persona faces is equally experienced by the audience. However, this conceptualization—and most of the literature examining this phenomenon—hints toward the fact that identification is reserved only *with the character*. Advancing those understandings, this study argues that the mechanisms associated with identification transcend media persona, toward social groups and teams, for two reasons. First, as Cohen (2001) notes, "Identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other" (p. 247). Social and team identifications involve similar means, where one assumes the identity of the group or team. For instance, addressing teams and fan groups as "we" and "us" means conceptions of self-identity are suspended, at least temporarily (Cialdini et al., 1976). Second, identification requires that a person adopts the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior of a team or a fan group (Kelman, 1961). Social and team identifications in sporting contexts commonly result in shared culture via team anthems/songs, memorabilia, rituals, and other routine practices unique to each team. In conclusion, social or team identification closely resembles that of character identification, with similar underlying mechanisms and, perhaps, resulting in similar outcomes.

As noted earlier, scholars demonstrate a positive relationship between identification and parasocial constructs. With the parallels drawn, it is plausible to predict that social and team identifications are associated with PSR and PSB. Pertaining to the unique role of Messi, one must explore what level and form of identification with FC Barcelona will lead to either of these parasocial construct(s) with him. Following a call to analyze the effect of team identity on PSR and PSB (Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017)—and to explore the role of social identity in this process—two additional hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Social identity is positively related to (a) PSR and (b) PSB.

H4: Team identity is positively related to (a) PSR and (b) PSB.

While the relationship between PSR and PSB appears to be intuitive, research has demonstrated mixed evidence. Eyal and Cohen (2006) were one of the earliest scholars to have explored the association between PSR and PSB, finding that the audiences' PSR with their favorite *Friends* sitcom character was positively related to PSB when the show concluded (Bright et al., 1994–2004). These audiences subsequently demonstrated grief and loss, mirroring the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Similar

effects have been found in studies examining distinct contexts. Even when the absence of favorite characters is temporary, or when a popular media persona is caught in a scandal, a positive relationship between PSR and PSB is noticed (Hu, 2016; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). While these studies analyzed this in a fictitious media environment, Bostwick and Lookadoo (2017) examined its role in the real world. Contrary to expectations, they did not find any relationship between PSR with LeBron James and PSB when he left the Cleveland Cavaliers for the first time in 2010. While it is possible to assume that PSB does not get triggered in a sports context—as fans can simply follow Messi in his new team—such conclusions are premature. Although he is moving to a new team where soccer fans can still watch him play, the association between FC Barcelona fans and Messi was inextricably severed; in simple terms, a breakup emerged. While Messi did not retire or die, his exit represented a grief-stricken event for most FC Barcelona fans. To reiterate, we predicted earlier that one's social and team identities with regard to FC Barcelona are associated with PSR and PSB with Messi. As such, a fan who is psychologically invested in FC Barcelona learns of Messi's exit, they will have their PSR relate to PSB. Therefore, a final hypothesis is advanced:

H5: PSR toward Messi significantly increases feelings of PSB after his departure.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

Before the collection of data, ethics approval was secured. Subsequently, a member of the research team based in Barcelona shared a recruitment e-mail containing a link to the survey, hosted on Qualtrics, with their contacts. Recipients of the recruitment e-mail were FC Barcelona fans, who were asked to answer the questionnaire and encouraged to distribute the survey to their associates and acquaintances via e-mail or social media. Data collection took place between September 20, 2021, and October 4, 2021, using snowball sampling (Bhutta, 2012). This chain-referral technique enabled targeting a specific group in a timely and cost-effective way. Snowball sampling was the only recruitment strategy possible, given the lack of a public directory or census of the target group/population of interest (i.e., FC Barcelona fans). All measures were first developed in English while a member of the research team—proficient in English and Catalan—translated the survey and distributed it to the participants. Participants proceeded to the survey only if they were at least 18 years of age.

Next, a set of filter questions were posted— "I'm a fan of FC Barcelona" and "I'm a fan of Lionel Messi." Participants who answered three or lesser on a 7-point Likert-type scale (i.e., *strongly disagree–strongly agree*) on both measures were dropped from the analysis since it indicated the absence of involvement with Messi *and* the team. The remaining participants then proceeded to the main survey assessing parasocial constructs and other variables central to this study. After the completion of their survey, participants were thanked for their time and effort.

As part of data cleaning, a portion of the responses was discarded. Participants who did not satisfy the inclusion criteria (i.e., respond to at least four on either of the filter questions; $n = 13$) or were not at least 18 years of age ($n = 5$) were culled from the analysis. Finally, one additional response was deleted due to invalid age. In total, data from 293 individuals were analyzed.

All 293 participants resided in Spain, including men ($n = 233$, 79.5%), women ($n = 57$, 19.5%), and others ($n = 3$, 1.0%). Ages ranged from 18 to 71 years ($M = 33.64$, $SD = 13.26$). One-third identified as students ($n = 98$, 33.4%), while the rest were full-time working professionals ($n = 195$, 66.6%). Nearly all were Spanish citizens ($n = 240$, 81.9%), and many resided in Barcelona ($n = 127$, 43.3%).

Measures

The survey contained measures that captured the participants' social and team identification with FC Barcelona, parasocial constructs associated with Messi, and demographics. Otherwise stated, all measures used a 7-point Likert-type scale of *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The full list of measurement items (English and Catalan) can be found on our OSF page.[1]

Parasocial breakup was operationalized using a revised version of Eyal and Cohen's (2006) 13-item PSB scale, which identifies the affective or behavioral responses to Messi's exit. This measure followed the stem, "Now that Messi has left FC Barcelona," and indicated respondent agreement with each item listed (e.g., "I feel more lonely").

Parasocial relationship with Messi was operationalized using a revised version of Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) seven-item PSI scale.[2] Additionally, one item from Pan and Zeng's (2017) scale was integrated into the measure, making it an eight-item scale, which identified the perceived closeness with Messi. This measure followed the stem "Before Messi's exit from FC Barcelona" and indicated respondent agreement with each item listed (e.g., "I see Messi as a natural, down-to-earth person").

Team identification with FC Barcelona was operationalized using a revised version of Wann and Branscombe's (1993) five-item Sport Spectator Identification Scale, which captures the significance of FC Barcelona to one's identity (e.g., "How important to YOU was it that FC Barcelona won?"). Response format differed across each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (e.g., *Not important–Very important; Never–Always*).

Social identification with FC Barcelona was operationalized using a revised version of Mael and Tetrick's (1992) seven-item Psychological Group Scale, which identifies loyalty and attachment to FC Barcelona (e.g., "I was very interested in what other people thought about FC Barcelona").

Data Analysis

To answer the hypotheses, IBM SPSS AMOS was used to perform structural equation modeling. The model was analyzed in three phases, similar to Wang and Lewis' (2021) approach. First, an overall chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted to determine global fit. A nonsignificant chi-square value indicates that the model fit is adequate for the data (Bollen, 1989). Second, model fit is further calculated using fit indices that are not sensitive to sample size: Relative chi-square goodness-of-fit to degrees of

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[1] https://osf.io/tvbgn/
[2] Although we used the PSI scale, these items are observed to be a valid measure of PSR (see Dibble et al., 2016).

freedom (χ^2/df; ratio of 5 or less to be considered a good fit; Marsh & Hocevar, 1985), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; less than 0.06 to be considered a good fit; Ki & Hon, 2007), as well as the Bentler-Bonett normed fit index (NFI), the Tucker-Lewis coefficient (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI; all values between 0 and 1, values greater than 0.9 are considered a good fit; Bentler, 1990). Finally, the significance of each hypothesis was determined by examining the regression weights, and the proposed theoretical model (see Figure 1) was revised based on those weights and the modification indices.
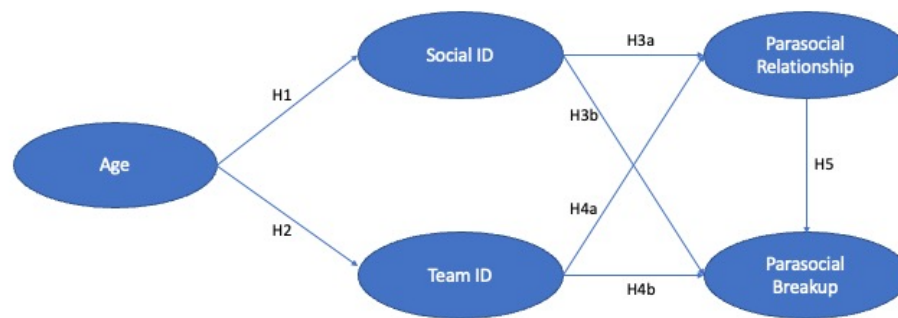

Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Results

Because of the potential multicollinearity issues that could result from the similarities in measuring both social identification and team identification, several tests were conducted to ensure that the model should treat these as two separate variables. First, a principal component factor analysis was conducted using a Promax rotation, which is typically used for scale construction and validation (Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003). The factor analysis revealed two distinct variables: Four items were extracted for team identification, and five items were extracted for social identification. All items with low factor loadings and loaded under both factors were excluded from the analysis (please refer to our OSF page for the discarded items: https://osf.io/tvbgn/).

Once those factors were finalized, separate regression analyses were conducted to check for multicollinearity between the two variables: One that predicted PSR and one that predicted PSB, using both team identification and social identification as predictor variables. Field (2009) suggests that a variance inflation factor (VIF) higher than 10 and tolerance values below 0.1 are causes for concern with multicollinearity. Neither team identification (VIF = 1.68; tolerance = 0.59) nor social identification (VIF =

1.68; tolerance = 0.59) posed issues of multicollinearity; therefore, they were treated as separate variables for the analysis.

Correlation analysis revealed a significant, inverse relationship between age and both PSR ($r(293)$ = −.33, $p < .01$) and PSB ($r(293) = −.27$, $p < .01$). There also was a significant, inverse relationship between age and respondent social identification with FC Barcelona ($r(293) = −.21$, $p < .01$) and team identification with FC Barcelona ($r(293) = −.18$, $p < .01$). For social identification with FC Barcelona, there were significant, direct relationships with both PSR ($r(293) = .56$, $p < .01$) and PSB ($r(293) = .54$, $p < .01$). There were also significant, direct relationships between team identification with FC Barcelona and both PSR ($r(293) = .49$, $p < .01$) and PSB ($r(293) = .52$, $p < .01$). Finally, there were significant, direct relationships between social identification and team identification ($r(293) = .76$, $p < .01$) and between PSR and PSB ($r(293) = .77$, $p < .01$). Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix for all variables used in the model.

For global fit, the chi-square analysis was not significant (χ^2 (1, 291) = 0.13, $p = .72$), indicating that the model was a good fit for the data. In addition, the other fit indices also indicated that the model was a good fit (χ^2/df = 0.04, RMSEA < 0.01, NFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99). Also, the modification indices did not suggest any new paths to be added to the model to improve overall fit. Figure 2 provides the revised model, excluding paths that were not significant.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.

	M (SD)	α	Social ID	Team ID	PSR	PSB
Age	33.64 (13.26)		−0.21**	−0.18**	−0.33**	−0.27**
Social ID	4.07 (1.68)	.90		0.76**	0.56**	0.54**
Team ID	5.93 (1.14)	.89			0.49**	0.52**
PSR	4.07 (1.40)	.84				0.77**
PSB	3.45 (1.21)	.79				

*** indicates p < .01*

Hypothesis 1 suggested that the fan's age would directly relate to their social identification with FC Barcelona. The model indicated a significant, inverse relationship between the variables ($\beta = −0.21$, *SE* = 0.01, $p < .01$); therefore, H1 was not supported. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the fan's age would directly relate to their team identification with FC Barcelona. The model did not reveal a significant relationship between the two variables; therefore, H2 was not supported.

The two-pronged H3 suggested that social identification would directly relate to (a) a fan's PSR with Messi, and (b) a fan's PSB with Messi after his departure from the team. For the relationship between social identification and PSR, the model indicated a significant, direct relationship between the variables (β = 0.41, *SE* = 0.06, $p < .01$); therefore, H3a was supported. For the relationship between social identification and PSB, the model revealed a significant, direct relationship between the two variables (β = 0.17, *SE* = 0.07, $p < .01$); therefore, H3b was supported.

Similarly, the two-pronged H4 suggested that team identification would directly relate to (a) PSR and (b) PSB. For the relationship between team identification and PSR, the model indicated a significant, direct relationship between the variables (β = 0.17, *SE* = 0.07, *p* < .01); therefore, H4a was supported. For the relationship between team identification and PSB, the model also indicated a significant, direct relationship between the variables (β = 0.11, *SE* = 0.05, *p* = .02); therefore, H4b was supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposed that a fan's PSR with Messi would significantly increase feelings of PSB with the footballer after his departure from FC Barcelona. The model indicated a significant direct relationship (β = 0.66, *SE* = 0.04, *p* < .01). Hypothesis 5 was supported.

NOTE: All paths are statistically significant (p < 0.05).
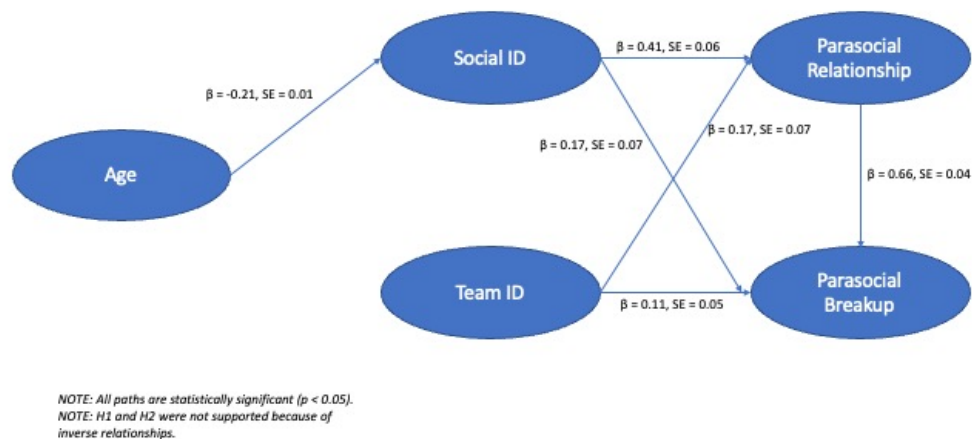NOTE: H1 and H2 were not supported because of inverse relationships.

Figure 2. Revised theoretical model.

Discussion

This study explored the unique state of audience involvement processes with a media persona through independent manifestations of social and team identification, an underexplored and warranted investigation (Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The results unearth some unique findings, including three primary insights: (a) the significant inverse effect of age on social identification, (b) the distinct influence of social and team identification on PSR and PSB, and (c) the relationship between PSR and PSB.

First, the negative effect of age on social identification (and the absence of an association between age and team identification) is noteworthy. As fans aged, their emotional ties to their fan communities grew weaker, and social identification became less important to their self-concept. This finding echoes recent evidence demonstrating that younger adults' self-concept is largely driven by social identification, while it is

less important for older adults (Barker, 2012). As Gantz and Lewis (2021) argue, sports fandom does not manifest equally across a life span. As one gets older, family and work obligations take precedence over recreational pursuits (e.g., sports). Considering our sample respondents' age (*M* = 33.64), who have been following FC Barcelona for several decades, it is evident that one becomes less inclined to maintain social affiliation with sports teams (Gantz & Lewis, 2021). These findings underscore one important caveat: In the realm of sports fandom, age is inversely related to fans' involvement processes with fan groups (e.g., spending time with other in-group and out-group fans). With age comes additional responsibilities and altered motivational states; as such, the salience that one places on idolizing a sports team becomes less critical in determining one's self-concept.

Second, the distinct influence of team and social identification on parasocial constructs is insightful. Beginning with PSR, both social and team identification predicted PSR with Messi. It is only obvious that fans demonstrating identification with FC Barcelona would maintain a positive relationship with their athletes (i.e., in-group bias). However, the position of Messi in the world of football is rather unique for his long-standing loyalty to a single team—having been part of FC Barcelona for nearly 21 years—and winning the most Ballon d'Or awards (i.e., an annual award presented to the best football player for the year). As such, it is natural that the team and social identification toward FC Barcelona lends itself to the development of PSR with Messi. This effect is much more pronounced for social identification because fans are proud not only of his contributions to their team's success but also of the fact that he offers considerable social capital for their group (i.e., in-group members strive to be distinct and superior to out-groups). As such, social identification is more strongly related to PSR than team identification is.

The relationship between team and social identification with PSB revealed a similar pattern, with both types of identification leading to exacerbated feelings of PSB. Yet, social identification is more strongly associated with PSB than team identification is. Indeed, when an athlete or a TV character is removed from their traditional role, fans will inevitably display emotional distress (see Kretz, 2020). FC Barcelona fans who strongly identified with the team feared Messi's departure might negatively impact the team's performance. Conversely, those who strongly identified with the social group were worried not only about the team's performance but also that Messi's exit no longer provided the ingroup-outgroup distinction that they, as group members, strove to attain (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within such an equation, FC Barcelona would no longer be an *exceptional* group containing the world's greatest soccer player. Therefore, the loss of social privilege intensified feelings of PSB.

Finally, the positive relationship between PSR and PSB must be noted. As psychological closeness with Messi increased, so did fans' PSB when he left FC Barcelona, which aligned with research exploring PSR and PSB (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Hu, 2016). In the sporting context, Bostwick and Lookadoo (2017) examined how fans displayed PSB when LeBron James left the Cleveland Cavaliers to play for Miami Heat, detecting only a nonsignificant negative effect. The difference between PSB demonstrations in both these situations could be attributed to the way these athletes departed. James' decision to leave the team was intentional and planned, viewed as a breach of loyalty and trust for his fans (Scott, 2010). On the other hand, Messi had to sever ties with FC Barcelona primarily due to financial mismanagement by the club (Borg, 2021). Even more so, Messi's emotional breakdown during the press conference following the formal announcement bolstered his character, demonstrating his loyalty to the club and its fans. Therefore, Messi's affective

response, combined with the external factors surrounding his exit, stimulated fans' PSB tendencies. This enhances our understanding of the manifestations and underlying mechanisms of PSB.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, evidence for the discussion of several key constructs in communication literature is advanced. First, a clear association between social and team identification with PSR and PSB is revealed. While scholars have increasingly established parallels between identification and both PSR and PSB (e.g., Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2003; Tukachinsky et al., 2020), the position of social and team identification— despite involving similar mechanisms—vis-à-vis parasocial constructs had not yet been established. Following calls to advance the theoretical understandings of the interaction between PSR, PSB, and distinct forms of identification (Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017; Tukachinsky et al., 2020), social and team identification indeed offers a unique perspective into the audience involvement processes enabled by persistent media exposure. A prior convention was that only character identification is related to PSR (see Cohen, 2001), yet these data indicate that other modes of identification—social and team—are also associated with PSR. Therefore, psychological involvement with a group (social identification) or a team (team identification) can lead to PSR with a particular group member(s). This argument should not be taken as a claim that a fan maintains PSR of similar nature and intensity with all group members but as substantiating that *some* form of PSR can exist toward *some* of the group members. As these psychological involvement processes manifest through positive evaluations (i.e., in-group members are evaluated positively; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wann, 2006), PSR—in some shape or form— must exist with a portion of group member(s). However, the underlying mechanisms explaining why such differences in PSR with varied group actors could exist is beyond the scope of the present study, yet this evidence provides ample warrant for such future explorations.

Second, the distinct nature of social and team identification is also exhibited. While earlier scholarship used these theoretical concepts interchangeably, especially within the domain of sports communication, Lock and Heere's (2017) arguments for marked differences between social and team identification are substantiated through their influence on PSR and PSB. For instance, PSR is more strongly associated with social identification ($\beta = 0.41$) than with team identification ($\beta = 0.17$). Likewise, PSB is more strongly associated with social identification ($\beta = 0.17$) than with team identification ($\beta = 0.11$). As such, this study provides some clarification for the conceptual misunderstanding between social and team identification.

Third, while this study is not the first to examine PSB in a sporting context (see Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017), its contributions lie in demonstrating a positive relationship between PSR and PSB. Other scholars identified similar associations although they examined fictional characters (e.g., sitcom actors; Hu, 2016; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Thus, this study advances our understanding in the nonfiction realm, demonstrating a positive relationship between PSR and PSB while doing so within a non-American media environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this article provides some valuable insights into the processes of audience involvement, the results must be taken with caution. First, the characteristics of our sample must be noted. We used snowball

sampling to recruit participants, which could limit our findings' generalizability to all fans of FC Barcelona or Messi. While it is possible that Spanish residents are more invested in their local sports due to communal attachment, FC Barcelona and Messi are unique with respect to their following, which spans the globe. As such, these findings may not represent a hardcore fan who resides in, for example, the United States. Thus, future research must examine the manifestations of PSR and PSB in cross-cultural contexts. Additionally, the intensity of PSR in men and women is distinct (Cohen, 2003; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), yet they do not differ in how they display PSB (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Due to the distribution of our sample, the potential role of gender was not a factor that could be examined. As such, further research is necessary to explore how gender influences the expression of PSR and PSB in a sports context.

Second, PSR with Messi was measured using the present tense within the current design. While the measures followed the stem, "Before Messi left FC Barcelona," the items themselves were worded in the present tense (e.g., "I see Messi as a natural, down-to-earth person"). In hindsight, measuring this concept using past tense phrasing may have been more appropriate for adequate recall regarding this relationship before his exit from FC Barcelona. Future research should endeavor to measure similar relationships using the past tense for phrasing.

Finally, PSR are found to positively relate to PSB. Although past research found no such effect (cf. Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017), it is possible that this effect was found only because Messi represented FC Barcelona for more than two decades. As such, it would be interesting to explore how these variables function in other contexts where prominent athletes routinely, although not immediately, switch teams (e.g., LeBron James, Cristiano Ronaldo). The amount of time a media figure performs in a particular role can potentially be a decisive factor in the emergence of PSR and PSB.

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