REFLECTIONS OF RESIDENTS IN A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY ON THE IMPACTS OF A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL PROGRAM, THEIR TENDENCY TO BASK IN REFLECTED GLORY, AND THEIR SOCIAL IDENTITY

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

REFLECTIONS OF RESIDENTS IN A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY

ON THE IMPACTS OF A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL PROGRAM,

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AND THEIR SOCIAL IDENTITY

presented by Mark D. Hornickel,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

and herby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of their acceptance.

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DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad, Kati, Phoebe, and Faye, thank you for loving me unconditionally, for your unending support, and for the sacrifices you have made to help me achieve this goal. I love you, you inspire me every day, and I am so proud to be your son, your husband, and your dad.

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Growing up, I wanted to write about sports for a living. Even as my career goals changed and evolved, I never thought I would write about sports for a doctoral dissertation.

As I reflect on the culmination of this three-year journey, I can't help but first think of all the teachers and mentors from preschool to the present day—I remember them all and could fill this page with their names—who instilled in me values of critical thinking, work ethic, practice, persistence, and perseverance to achieve the goals I set for myself. Educators throughout my life—not just classroom teachers but scout leaders, church leaders, coaches, and editors, too—have instilled a confidence in me and modeled leadership traits in varying ways that continue to leave an impact on me and mold me in profound ways.

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As I complete this chapter of my life's journey, I am looking forward to what lies ahead with my newfound knowledge. I also am looking forward to a lot more time with Kati and more backyard games with Phoebe and Faye.

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ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate athletics are embedded in the fabric of American culture and provide a source of unity and pride for the students, universities, and communities they represent (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013). This qualitative study sought to understand, within the conceptual framework of basking in reflected glory (BIRG) established by Cialdini et al. (1976) and social identity theory (SIT) established by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the perceptions and lived experiences of residents in a rural Midwestern community and the impacts of a successful university football program that inhabits their community. While the study sought to contribute to the existing literature connected to BIRG and SIT, it also fills a gap in the scholarly research where qualitative methods studying an NCAA Division II environment is scarce. Supported by the previously published literature, themes emerged that showed residents' BIRG tendencies as well as evidence of team identification and social anchors among the residents who associate with the football program. Recommendations for practitioners and scholars include using the findings to better understand the value of intercollegiate athletics in enhancing the identities of broader campus communities and studying an urban setting where a successful NCAA Division II athletics program exists.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION-IN-PRACTICE

Background

Intercollegiate athletics are embedded in the fabric of American culture and provide a source of unity and pride for the students, universities, and communities they represent (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013). When they are successful, athletics programs are a powerful tool that institutions and communities can leverage to attract the attention of students, alumni, and fans while enhancing their reputations (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Miller, 2003; Pope & Pope, 2009). As such, scholars, historians, and journalists alike have conducted vast research and reporting about a variety of threads related to intercollegiate athletics success (Bass et al., 2015; Coakley, 2008; Heere & James, 2007a).

Yet, a review of scholarly research related to intercollegiate athletics reveals that researchers studying athletics success largely have focused on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I programs and the so-called big-time college sports (Coakley, 2008; Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Martin, 2013), particularly football (Snyder & Waterstone, 2015). Although research related to impacts of successful NCAA Division II athletic programs is limited (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Coakley, 2008; Davis et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2015), some notable research exists, including studies authored by Jensen and DeSchriver (2002) and Wells et al. (2000), who found success positively related to game attendance at Division II institutions. Additionally, Castle and Kostelnik (2011) determined athletics success had a significant positive effect on student applications and improving the quality of students who enroll as first-time freshmen at Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference institutions.

Further, researchers studying intercollegiate athletics, including all of the studies of Division II athletics mentioned in the preceding paragraph, have relied on quantitative methods to examine varied aspects of success, therefore publishing findings gathered from surveys or publicly available data sets (Coakley, 2008). Researchers subsequently have suggested that future studies deploy qualitative methods (Dohrn et al., 2015; Lewinter et al., 2013; Scott, 1999).

A thrust of the researcher's interest in studying impacts of athletics success in a community setting begins with a series of studies authored by Cialdini et al. (1976) that coined the concept of fans' tendency to bask in reflected glory (BIRG). Cialdini et al. (1976) defines BIRG as a person or group of people who share in the glory of another person's or group's success even though they were not directly involved with generating the success but are somehow associated. The participants in the original study were students attending Division I institutions with successful athletic teams, based on win-loss records, and the researchers found students closely affiliated themselves with their respective institution's teams even though the students were not directly involved with the cause of a team's success. The seminal research showed a significant tendency of students to wear apparel representing their schools after a victory and a higher likelihood to use the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success. The researchers further posited their studies "suggest a way to understand how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 374). In other words, fans of successful sports teams show their appreciation and pride for the teams with which they affiliate by wearing team apparel, flying team flags outside

their homes and businesses, putting bumper stickers on their vehicles, and attending parades in their honor.

The research of BIRG has since been replicated multiple times (Jensen et al., 2016; Kimble & Cooper, 1992; Mahony et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 1986; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) and applied to professional sports (Spinda, 2011) as well as topics other than athletics, including Sigelman's (1986) analysis of yard sign displays for winning and losing candidates seeking public office. Jensen et al. (2016) most closely replicated the original research, by using more
modern methods, and found participants were more than twice as likely to wear school-affiliated apparel after victories.

Further research of BIRG tendencies in the athletics arena draws on the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979), who defined social identity theory (SIT) as an explanation for individuals striving to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to teams that contribute to the individual's social identity. Similar to the concept of BIRG, Ashforth and Mael (1989) posited an individual can identify with a group by merely perceiving themselves as "psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group" (p. 21) without having to commit any effort to the group's goals or ever interacting with other individuals who associate with the group. Scholarly research of SIT also has produced new dimensions of study that advance understanding of the impacts of athletic success on groups, including the concepts of team identification and social anchor theory. While team identification "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116), the social anchor theory proposed by Clopton and Finch (2011) "posits that community (in its myriad

forms) is built of social networks that are 'anchored' to the community" (Katz & Clopton, 2014, p. 289) and generates social capital and collective identity among like-minded community members, who foster "an element of 'thick trust'" (Katz & Clopton, 2014, p. 290).

In sum, while intercollegiate athletics attract a high level of attention from scholars and sports fans alike (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013), and research of BIRG and SIT establishes a foundation for additional research, existing gaps drove the researcher's interest in a study that used qualitative methods and centered on the effects of a successful NCAA Division II athletic program on residents of the city it inhabits.

Statement of the Problem

The review of literature revealed a gap in qualitative research addressing impacts of a successful NCAA Division II football program at a small, rural public university in the Midwest region of the United States (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Coakley, 2008). While evidence of BIRG and SIT is established in scholarly research of athletics success, research exploring the relationships of related groups beyond students and alumni (e.g., residents of a community) or individuals who have no formal connection with the university being studied, as Jensen et al. (2016) suggested, is limited. Further, no such research evaluates concepts of BIRG at the Division II level, and Davis et al. (2020), in a study involving undergraduate students at a mid-sized Division II university in the Northeast, provided the only existing research of SIT at the Division II level.

Researchers studying impacts of intercollegiate athletics success have largely relied on quantitative methods, formulating their results from data collected through

surveys or publicly available data sets (Coakley, 2008). The results of such studies also are mixed, as evidenced by the research of Katz and Heere (2016), who found identification with a football team at a large southwestern university increased involvement with the institution. Also Castle and Kostelnik (2011) determined athletics success had a significant positive effect on student applications, thus improving the quality of students who enroll as first-time freshmen at Division II institutions in the Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference. In contrast, Clopton and Finch (2012) found no connection between the success of high-profile NCAA athletics and perceptions of external academic prestige at a Division I institution, but the researchers found mixed evidence suggesting college students believe athletics success affects outsiders' opinions of their universities, further concluding that expectations and perceptions of a program vary by stakeholder group.

Unlike research founded on quantitative methods, qualitative research relies on the collection of open-ended data through interviews and surveys to document, interpret, and study participants' conscious, lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Further demonstrating the lack of scholarly research related to impacts of intercollegiate athletics success and using qualitative methods, only seven studies, among dozens reviewed, were constructed solely through qualitative methods. Benford (2007) and Lawrence (2009) addressed faculty perceptions and attitudes toward intercollegiate athletics; Rudd and Mondello (2006) and Snyder and Waterstone (2015) studied coaches and institutional leaders; Warner and Dixon (2013) and Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) studied student engagement; and Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) studied the organizational culture of an athletic department. Only the research of Snyder and

Waterstone (2015) involved participants representing a Division III institution, and participants in the study authored by Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) were members of competitive intercollegiate sports clubs, not NCAA varsity programs. The other five qualitative articles cited above involved participants' experiences with NCAA Division I athletic programs.

Notable research involving NCAA Division II athletics exists, including studies by Baucom and Lantz (2001) and Feezell (2013) regarding faculty attitudes toward Division II student-athletes, studies by Jensen and DeSchriver (2002) and Wells et al. (2000) regarding game attendance, and the research of Davis et al. (2020) on team identification in relation to students' adjustment to college life, but scholarly research involving member institutions representing the NCAA's "middle child" (Moltz, 2009) remains limited.

As such, little is known about how individuals belonging to groups with an external connection to a university, particularly at the NCAA Division II level, identify with an institution. An exploration of residents living in a rural community in the Midwest and their levels of attachment to a football team at a small, public NCAA Division II institution offered potential to contribute to existing literature regarding BIRG and SIT.

Purpose of the Study

Mindful of gaps in research related to impacts of success in intercollegiate athletics and the paucity of studies involving groups that are external to the campus setting, the purpose of the current study was to analyze a successful NCAA Division II football program's impacts on the rural, Midwestern community it represents and the

ways that residents identify with the team. Using qualitative methods, the case study involved conducting interviews and focus groups to collect narratives of residents' lived experiences during and after a decade when the college football program went from perennial losing seasons to consecutive winning seasons that included multiple national championships. By interviewing residents about their contrasting perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to the football program during the time period, the study sought to contribute experiences of a small college environment to existing literature of BIRG and SIT that, as described previously, is largely limited to research of NCAA Division I institutions.

Research Question

This qualitative study sought to understand the effects of a university football program's success on a rural community and its residents. Thus, the overarching research question guiding the current study was: "What is the impact of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents?"

Theoretical Framework

The key concepts, definitions, and theories driving this study were derived from the tendencies described previously of individuals and connected groups to more closely associate themselves with the sports teams they follow when those teams are successful. Cialdini et al. (1976) identified the tendency of supporters of athletic teams to bask in reflected glory (BIRG), and Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed social identity theory (SIT), which describes an individual's tendency to strive to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to certain teams that contribute to their social identity, thus providing two theories through which the proposed study was conducted. The

differences among the divisions of NCAA intercollegiate athletic levels, which foster varied competition, environments, and interest (Robinson et al., 2005), provided a third lens.

Bask in Reflected Glory

The original BIRG research affirmed its authors' hypotheses through three field studies that involved students at Division I institutions (Cialdini et al., 1976). Results demonstrated students' affiliations with successful athletic teams, specifically by wearing team apparel after a victory and using the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success, even though they were not directly involved with the causes of it (Cialdini et al., 1976). The researchers noted the outcomes "suggest a way to understand how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 374).

Social Identity Theory

SIT is based on an assumption that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by establishing an emotional attachment with groups that contribute to the individual's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, SIT posits that people are motivated to emphasize and secure the ways in which their group is positively distinct from other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Two secondary concepts rooted in SIT are team identification, which "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116), and social anchor theory, which "posits that community (in its myriad forms) is built of social networks that are 'anchored' to the community" (Katz & Clopton, 2014, p. 289).

NCAA Division I, Division II, and Division III

A decades-long dissatisfaction with the lack of championship opportunities and a widening gap between small and large institutions motivated the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to restructure itself in 1973 and establish three divisions for athletics competition (Katz & Clopton, 2014; Katz & Seifried, 2014; NCAA, 2022a). Restructures of Division I football since the 1970s have evolved into the present-day structure consisting of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), which competes in bowl games and the College Football Playoff, and the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) (NCAA, 2022b).

Division I, which is considered the highest level of competition, draws high attendance and aspires for national prominence while offering the most scholarships of any classification (Robinson et al., 2005). Division II programs offer partial scholarships that still recognize a student's athletic skills but align with its "Life in the Balance" mantra to inspire both athletic and academic excellence (NCAA, 2022c, para 5). At the Division II level, operating budgets are significantly less than Division I, and athletic departments rely on institutional support and student fees rather than ticket revenue as their primary funding sources (Orszag & Orszag, 2005; Robinson et al., 2005).

Division III programs, which are viewed as the lowest level of NCAA competition and draw low attendance, award no athletics-based financial assistance while placing priority on the educational experience and meeting the needs of internal constituencies that include students and alumni, not the general public (Katz et al., 2015; Katz & Clopton, 2014; Robinson et al., 2005).

By virtue of their scholarship levels, a larger school in a higher division generally translates to more media exposure and support from fans and donors (Katz & Clopton, 2014).

Design of the Study

The current study was a case study through which the conscious, lived experiences of residents in a rural Midwestern community were analyzed, using qualitative methods outlined by Creswell (2013), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Mertens (2020). Working from Mertens' (2020) premise that case studies involve in-depth description and analysis of a contemporary phenomenon in a bounded context, the research methods sought an "individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience and calls upon the researcher to suspend theories, explanations, hypotheses, and conceptualizations to be able to understand the phenomenon" (p. 255).

With that practical knowledge, the current study involved conducting interviews and focus groups with residents of a rural Midwestern community that supports a small, regional public university and its NCAA Division II athletics programs. The interviews and focus groups attempted to capture the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences that resulted from a phenomenon occurring in the community when the university's football program went from mediocrity to claiming multiple national championships in the span of a decade.

Setting

The setting for the study was a rural Midwestern community with a small, regional public university that competes athletically within the structure of NCAA Division II.

Midwest Town

Midwest Town was the home of indigenous residents representing the Iowa, Sauk, Fox, and Potawatomi tribes, before Central European settlers established the town in 1845 (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022a). Since then, Midwest Town has grown to a population of nearly 11,000 residents with a median household income of about $34,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). It is governed by a five-person city council whom residents elect to three-year terms (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022b), and the city boasts a strong economic climate fueled by robust manufacturing, health care, agriculture, and education services. Recreation also factors heavily into Midwest Town's composition, which includes a 3,000-acre recreation park that features a 1,000-acre fish-stocked lake and an 18-hole championship golf course (Midwest Town, 2022c). According to its mission and vision statements, Midwest Town prides itself as "a dynamic community" that enhances the quality of life for its residents through public services, safe neighborhoods, and a vibrant economy (Midwest Town, 2022d, vision statement).

Midwest University

Midwest University opened in 1905 after a decades-long struggle and efforts by civic leaders, among others, to locate a college in the community yielded a state bill that created a teacher training school (Brandon-Falcone, 2005; Dykes, 1956). Today, Midwest University is a comprehensive, moderately selective public institution that boasts an enrollment of about 8,000 students and represents a source for regional development in partnership with other agencies and institutions (Midwest University, 2021a). As the

institution has evolved and changed, so has its relationship with the community through triumphs, tragedies, and dissent (Brandon-Falcone, 2005).

Midwest University Football

Although Midwest University's first football practice occurred in 1906 (Brandon-Falcone, 2005; Dykes, 1956), it was not until the 1920s that the football team began drawing local interest (Dykes, 1956). The school enjoyed some success during the first half of the 20th century, reaching a peak with consecutive undefeated seasons and conference championships during the late 1930s (Dykes, 1956; Midwest University, 2019). But the team's records were more often unimpressive during the century's second half, which included just 14 winning seasons in a 45-year span (Midwest University, 2019).

During a time period when the university was addressing declining enrollment, a lack of distinctiveness, and a threat of closure (Brandon-Falcone, 2005), the university athletics department and football program also experienced leadership changes. Those changes to the athletic director role, the coaching staff, facilities, budgeting, and the logo with which the program identified resulted in an organizational culture shift that spurred significant improvement in the football program (Merrill, 2017). In the nearly three decades since that turnaround, the football program has recorded no losing seasons (Midwest University, 2019) and won multiple NCAA Division II national championships (Cavadi, 2019).

Participants

Research participants consisted of residents of the community being studied. Participants were selected for interviews and focus groups through a combination of

purposeful sampling methods, including convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Through convenience sampling, study participants are selected based on time, location, and availability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020). Through the use of snowball sampling, the researcher identifies individuals who are knowledgeable about the setting and seeks recommendations for other potential participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020; Seidman, 2019).

More specifically, participants for this study were initially identified through a review of church directories that demonstrated potential participants' longevity as residents of Midwest Town. Additional participants were identified when the researcher made contact with people identified during the initial review of directories as well as through newspaper accounts of the setting and timeframe being studied, university yearbooks and catalogs, and state manuals providing information about the university. According to Mertens (2020), purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative studies to help researchers gather rich information and delve more deeply into a subject.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also note that purposeful sampling may involve criterion-based selection, through which the researcher selects the attributes of study participants to reflect the study's purpose and guide identification of rich information. Therefore, more specific criteria for an individual's participation in the study beyond residing in the rural community that served as the research setting included the participant's role as a witness to any identity shift that occurred within the community as a result of the university football program's success. Thus, as shown in Table 1, study participants must have lived in the community since before 1993, which is the year before changes at the university helped jumpstart the football program's success.

Table 1

Study participant criteria

Characteristics	Criteria for selection		Criteria for exclusion
	Interview participants	Focus group participants	
Residency	A potential participant may be selected for the study if they have resided in Midwest Town since 1993 or before.		A potential participant will be excluded from the study if they did not reside in Midwest Town prior to 1993.
Affiliation and involvement level with Midwest Town	A potential participant may be selected for an interview if they served on the city council, owned a business, or are perceived to have a high level of involvement in the community.	A potential participant may be selected for a focus group based on assumptions that they are not highly involved in the community.	A potential particpant's affiliation or involvement level with Midwest Town will not be a consideration for exclusion from the study.
Affiliation with Midwest University	A potential participant may be selected for an interview if they were employed by the university.	A potential participant may be selected for a focus group if they graduated from the university.	A potential participant will be excluded from the study if they were a student-athlete, coach, or staff member with the university's athletics department.

Study participants may have been employees and alumni of the university but had no direct involvement with the athletic department or football program to align with assumptions established by the foundational BIRG (Cialdini et al., 1976) and SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) research, which suggest people who are not directly involved

with the cause of a team's success or fate establish attachments to teams after success is achieved.

The researcher contacted participants through a combination of in-person visits, phone calls, and email communication (see Appendix A) to request participation in the study. Such contact visits are an important step to help the researcher begin building a relationship with potential participants in addition to presenting the basis of the study and outlining expectations (Seidman, 2019). Once interviews commenced, the researcher's intent was to achieve saturation, which is defined as a point when interviews begin to produce redundant information and no new insights are being collected (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection occurred through a series of interviews, focus groups, and a review of historical documents and artifacts relevant to the phenomenon being studied to achieve triangulation. By doing so, researchers crystalize their work, thus presenting multidimensional research that increases the credibility and quality of their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews (see Appendix B) and focus groups (see Appendix C) served as the basic mode of inquiry to help the researcher recount narratives and help willing participants make sense of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). The researcher deployed a phenomenological approach to interviewing that asked participants to reconstruct their thoughts, emotions, actions, and perceptions as the researcher sought to gather thick, rich description of the setting being studied (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020; Seidman, 2019).

Although scholars recommend a focus group should be composed of five to 10 people who possess certain and similar characteristics and respond to questions during a focused discussion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), Krueger and Casey (2015) stipulated any focus group should comprise a small group of people who possess similarities, provide qualitative data in a focused discussion, and help the researcher understand the topic being discussed. For the current study, multiple focus groups involving at least two and up to three people were conducted.

Using the described criteria and through the contact process, the researcher selected participants who were assumed to have extensive knowledge of the setting and involvement in the community prior to the start of the football program's success. The interviews and focus on groups were conducted in person, by phone, or via the Zoom virtual meeting platform, dependent on the participant's location, availability, and preference. In all, 27 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups, but the responses of two individuals were eliminated because they did not meet the participant criteria, thus providing a sample size of 25 people.

During interviews and focus groups, the researcher used a semi-structured interview style (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019) with willing participants to explore their perceptions of the setting being studied and clarify circumstances that led them to their level of attachment with the football program. The semi-structured interviews ensured specific data, including demographic data (see Appendix D) was collected from participants while allowing for flexibility and open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Open-ended questions are useful in asking participants to reconstruct experiences associated with the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 2019).

The interviews and focus groups, which lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour, were recorded, transcribed, and coded for the purposes of data analysis, which is described later in this section.

To enhance the credibility of the research, the researcher also gathered field notes and other data from historical documents and artifacts, such as newspaper articles, news releases, photographs, game programs, university yearbooks, and broadcast recordings, to achieve triangulation.

While ethical and equitable methods were followed throughout the study, informed consent (see Appendix E) was used to help participants understand the potential risks of being interviewed and make clear that they were volunteers in the research process (Seidman, 2019). Member checks, a qualitative research strategy that involves seeking feedback from study participants regarding the preliminary findings, also was deployed. Member checking is an important component of data collection, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Mertens (2020), because it helps participants better represent their experiences, reduces the risk of a researcher misinterpreting information, and it helps identify biases. Further, pseudonyms were assigned to the names of study participants and components of the setting to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis phase, transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were reviewed, and noteworthy passages were labeled during coding, a process of identifying themes and patterns in the descriptive accounts provided by the willing participants (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). By allowing themes and patterns to rise from passages, the coded accounts could then be connected to

scholarly literature (Seidman, 2019) related to the theoretical framework using BIRG and SIT tendencies as well as differences in NCAA competition levels.

Through the coding process, the researcher could begin to answer the research question. As such, the researcher looked for patterns that, for example, showed the study participants' tendency to BIRG through accounts of purchasing apparel to show support for the university football team, by repeatedly using the pronoun *we* when they reflected on memorable games, or their contributions to "lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 374). Likewise, support of SIT was examined in threads describing participants' social attachments to the football team and the sense of belonging they felt when gathering with others to cheer on the team.

Following the guidelines of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the data analysis brought together all of the information gathered during the data collection process, including interview and focus group transcripts, documents, and artifacts, to build descriptions of the phenomenon being studied and generate a determination of how it came to be.

Efforts to Support the Quality of the Research

While Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posit that the credibility of a qualitative study starts with the training, experience, and intellectual rigor of the researcher, Seidman (2019) notes qualitative researchers must inform their actions with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmibility. In the context of the proposed study, the researcher is a trained journalist skilled in interviewing, research, and reporting through more than 20 years of professional experience. Ethical considerations occurred before and throughout the study.

The researcher remained keenly aware that relational ethic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) existed within the study, based on personal connections to the setting and potential participants. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Seidman (2019) warn of the pitfalls of convenience sampling because it involves seeking participants who are known and readily available to the researcher, which may expose research bias. Such risks were lessened through snowball sampling.

To protect participants from harm and to further maintain trustworthiness and validity, the researcher used the process of informed consent to gain participants' permission to collect data, member checking to review preliminary findings with participants and confirm the accuracy of information provided (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens 2020), and maintained an audit trail detailing methods, procedures, and decision points throughout the course of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019).

In sum, the researcher's professional experience, prior knowledge, and objective values were an asset to ensuring the trustworthy and ethical completion of the study.

Definitions of Key Terms

Bask in reflected glory: A person or group of people who share in the glory of another person's or group's success even though they were not directly involved with generating the success but are somehow associated (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Intercollegiate athletics: Sporting activities that are organized and operated within the parameters of a national association and played by college-level students who meet the association's eligibility requirements.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): An organization of 500,000 college athletes representing about 1,100 member schools in all 50 states, the District of

Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Canada, that oversees championships, manages programs benefitting student-athletes, and supports member committees that make rules and policies for college sports (NCAA, 2022d).

Resident: A person who inhabits a city on a long-term basis.

Social anchor theory: An idea positing that communities are built of social networks connected to anchors, such as schools, sports, or corporations, that are affixed to the community and provide personal identification for members (Clopton & Finch, 2011).

Social identity theory: A concept to describe an individual's tendency to strive to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to certain groups that contribute to their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Team identification: A psychological attachment that fosters a sense of belonging within a larger social structure (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Significance of the Study

Scholarly Significance

The current study contributes to existing research of BIRG tendencies (Cialdini et al., 1976; Jensen et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Sigelman, 1986; Snyder et al., 1986; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) through its use of qualitative research methods to study people who affiliate with an NCAA Division II athletics environment, which are characteristics not studied in previous BIRG research. Simply, the study participants' narratives of their lived experiences related to the success of a Division II football team within a small, rural Midwest community add a new dimension to the scholarly context.

Similarly, the study contributes to the seminal research of SIT authored by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and, more specifically, the concepts of team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Davis et al., 2020; Fink et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Heere & James, 2007a, 2007b; Katz & Heere, 2016; Stinson & Howard, 2007; Wear et al., 2016) and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011; Katz & Clopton, 2014). While previous studies of team identification involved professional and NCAA Division I teams, results of this study extend that research by providing insights into a phenomenon occurring in a rural Midwestern community where an NCAA Division II program resides. Additionally, the study follows recommendations to examine, through qualitative research, how intercollege athletics enhance communities and team identification (Bass et al., 2012; Clopton, 2008; Davis et al., 2020).

Practical Significance

The study contributes to the practice of educational leaders through its exploration of a phenomenon related to the success of a NCAA Division II athletics program and residents' narratives of their lived experiences related to their attachment with the university and its football team. Previous research indicates that team identification has a positive effect on consumer behavior (Heere & James, 2007b), and the current study provides insight that may motivate university leaders to consider the success of their athletics teams and ways they may leverage success to build "town and gown" relations (Katz & Clopton, 2014).

Summary

Intercollegiate athletics is embedded in the fabric of American culture (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013), and scholars, historians, and journalists alike

have conducted a vast amount of research and reporting on a variety of threads related to the topic (Bass et al., 2015; Coakley, 2008; Heere & James, 2007a). However, a review of literature about intercollegiate athletics reveals that a majority of researchers studying athletics success have focused on NCAA Division I athletic programs, and a gap exists related to qualitative research of Division II institutions (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Coakley, 2008). Further, the foundational research of Cialdini et al. (1976) on the tendency to bask in reflected glory (BIRG) and of Tajfel and Turner (1979) related to social identity theory (SIT) provided a basis to study the impacts on a rural Midwestern community when the NCAA Division II football program at its small, regional public university achieved success.

As a qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019), the current research involved the collection of willing participants' narratives of lived experiences related to their levels of attachment to the football team. The analysis drew conclusions that contribute to existing literature related to the impacts of a successful intercollegiate athletic team and a community's BIRG and SIT tendencies.

SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

The setting for this case study is a rural Midwest community, Midwest Town, in the 1990s where a small, regional public university, Midwest University, competes athletically within the structure of NCAA Division II.

This section provides background of the setting being studied, including its history as well as analysis of the community's organization and leadership, and implications for research of the setting.

Background of the Context

History of Midwest Town

Midwest Town had been the home of indigenous residents representing the Iowa, Sauk, Fox, and Potawatomi tribes, before it was established as a county seat in 1845 and incorporated in 1856 (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022a).. As Central Europeans, mostly of German and Irish descent, settled among the region's rolling hills, the town retained a rural, hard-working tradition, evidenced by low unemployment rates (CommunityLink, 2002).

Its population had grown to about 10,700 by 1990 and was 10,600 in 2000. According to the most recent census data, 89 percent of Midwest Town's population is White, 3 percent is Asian, and 2 percent is Black (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The population's median household income is about $34,300 (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

Midwest Town is governed by a five-person city council whom residents elect to three-year terms (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022b). The city council

selects one of its members to serve as mayor for one year, and a city manager hired by the city council is responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations, the administration of city departments, and bringing recommendations to the city council (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022b).

Midwest Town boasts a strong economic climate fueled by robust manufacturing, health care, agriculture, and education services. During the 1990s, a battery manufacturer and an engine manufacturer were two of the city's largest employers (CommunityLink, 2002). Helping enhance its economy, a two-lane highway was reconstructed and expanded to four lanes, better linking the city to major interstates that connect to three metropolitan areas (CommunityLink, 2002). The city's Main Street retail corridor also featured a variety of dining, department stores, grocers, banks, auto service stations, and lodging (CommunityLink, 2002). Further, recreation factors heavily into Midwest Town's composition with the completion of a 3,000-acre recreation park that features a 1,000-acre fish-stocked lake and an 18-hole championship golf course (Midwest Town, 2022c) to go with the town's 10 smaller neighborhood parks that allow for youth sports, swimming, and other family activities (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town Parks & Recreation, 2021).

According to its mission and vision statements, Midwest Town prides itself as "a dynamic community" that enhances the quality of life for its residents through public services, safe neighborhoods, and a vibrant economy (Midwest Town, 2022d, vision statement).

History of Midwest University

Since as early as the 1870s, Midwest Town had worked through its state

legislature to establish a college that could serve its region and supply schools with teachers (Brandon-Falcone, 2005; Dykes, 1956). In 1905, Midwest Town, in competition with four other nearby communities, earned the praise of a governor-appointed commission and was selected as the location for a state normal school to provide teachers for schools within a 19-county region (Brandon-Falcone, 2005; Dykes, 1956).

Throughout its history, the university has overcome its share of struggles, which included a fire that nearly destroyed the campus's historic administration building and threats to close the university in the 1980s due to declining enrollment and a lack of distinctiveness, among other reasons (Brandon-Falcone, 2005). By the 1990s, Midwest University had evolved from its beginning as a small teacher's college to a coeducational, primarily residential, regional university offering a broad range of undergraduate and selected graduate programs that attracted the majority of its students from a four-state area (Midwest University, 1992). The university also had become a source for regional development in partnership with other agencies and institutions (Midwest University, 1992). Midwest University's mission statement of the time stated, in part, that the institution "strives to provide a quality living-learning environment which will equip the individual for responsible participation in a rapidly changing society" (Midwest University, 1992; Midwest University, 1993).

Midwest University also had embarked on a comprehensive strategic plan to strengthen all aspects of its undergraduate education (Midwest University, 1992; Midwest University, 1993) and strive for continuous improvement (Midwest University, 1994). For its efforts, the university was later honored on consecutive occasions with the state's Quality Award for Education (Midwest University, 2021b).

Simultaneously, changes affecting the organizational culture within Midwest University's athletics department and football program, including changes to leadership and staff, facilities, budgeting, and the logo with which the program identified, led to significant improvement in the team's record and image (Merrill, 2017). Since that time, the football program has recorded no losing seasons (Midwest University, 2019) and won multiple NCAA Division II national championships (Cavadi, 2019).

Today, Midwest University is a comprehensive, moderately selective public institution that receives approximately 30 percent of its funding through state appropriations and has an enrollment of about 8,000 students. It has been fully accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools since 1921 (Higher Learning Commission, 2021), and it implemented state standards for moderately selective institutions in fall 1996 (Midwest University, 1996).

Organizational Analysis

Organizations are complex and often encumbered with ambiguity but can be simplified through the development of systems to better collect and process information (Bolman & Deal, 2017). By analyzing an organizational setting through multiple perspectives, we can make sense of the way in which the setting operates (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Bolman and Deal (2017) provide four frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—through which organizations may be viewed. Each of these frames afford individuals an ability to think about situations from multiple angles, identify problems, and develop strategies to solve issues (Bolman & Deal, 2017). As

described by Bolman and Deal (2017), the structural frame focuses on an organization's design, roles, rules, and goals. The human resource frame places emphasis on understanding people's strengths and shortcomings as well as their emotions, wishes, and concerns. The political frame views organizations as competitive environments where individuals battle for resources and power. The symbolic frame focuses on meaning, placing rituals, celebrations, stories, and culture at the center of organizations. In an organizational analysis of Midwest Town, viewing the city through the structural frame and the symbolic frame helps develop a better understanding of its culture and the basis on which decisions are made as well as context for the current study.

Structural Frame

The structural frame is the adopted organizational frame of most city governments (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021) and provides an architecture for organizations and their leaders to place team members in specialized roles that foster alignment with strategy, goals, and policies (Bolman & Deal, 2017). It provides a lens through which to view the exchanges that occur among the organization's leaders, employees, and external constituencies, who include residents, businesses, and partners (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The structural frame also can play a role in enhancing morale and enabling productivity so long as managers don't use their roles to wield so much control that it negates productivity (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Midwest Town is governed by a five-person city council whom residents elect to three-year terms, and the city council selects one of its members to serve as mayor for a one-year term (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022b). The city council also is charged with hiring and oversight of a city manager, who is responsible for overseeing

the city's day-to-day operations, the administration of city departments, and bringing recommendations to the city council (CommunityLink, 2002; Midwest Town, 2022b). The city manager is the formal authority within Midwest Town's organizational structure, which operates as a vertical coordination system through which leaders align actions with strategy, make decisions, solve problems, and evaluate performance (Bolman & Deal, 2017; G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021). The city manager reports to the city council and supervises a nine-member team of leaders within a simple hierarchy. Figure 1 shows a map of the city's organizational structure of paid full-time staff.

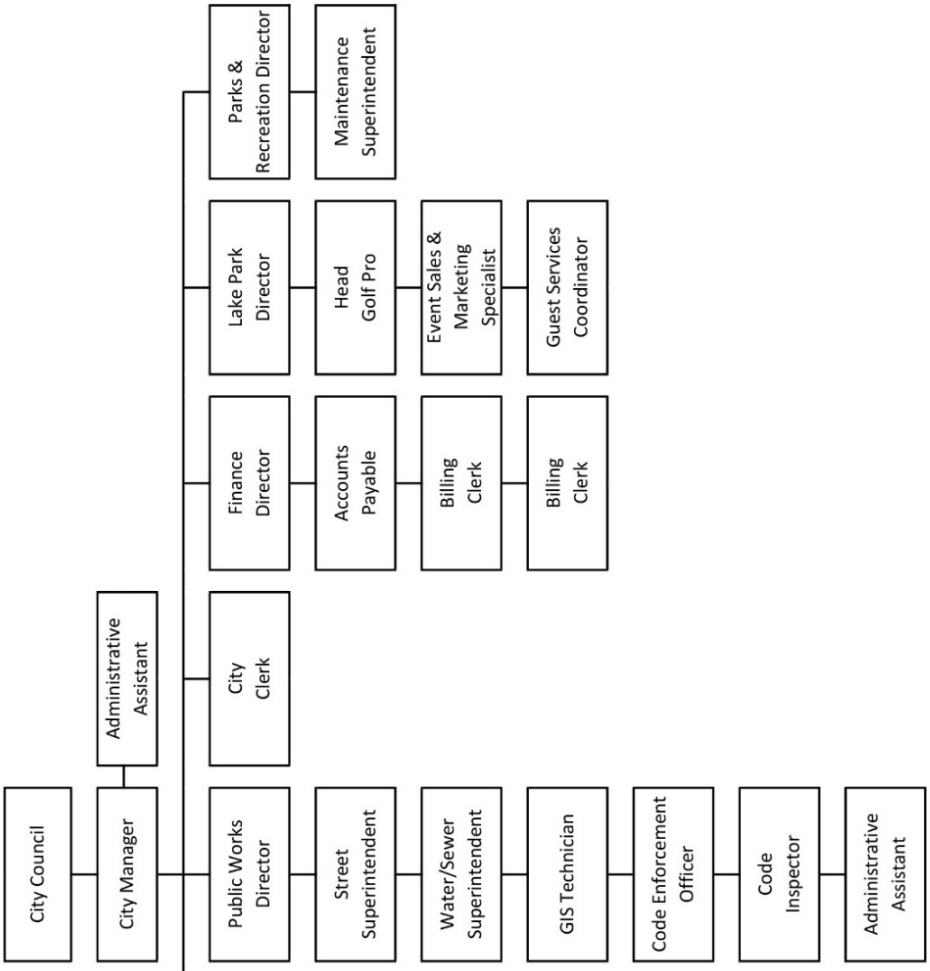
As an extension of the city's organizational structure, Midwest Town's governance includes 11 boards or commissions that have varied levels of authority and are comprised of five to nine residents in volunteer capacities. Some of the city boards are designated to simply provide recommendations to the city council, and some have broader authority that includes the power to adopt regulations and manage expenditures. Table 2 shows the boards and commissions operating within Midwest Town, their memberships, and their levels of authority within the city's organizational structure.

In alignment with the structural frame described by Bolman and Deal (2017), department leaders are charged with the operation of their units and the management of staff whose tasks are well understood. The city manager meets biweekly with the leadership team in a formal environment, although informal exchanges occur daily (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021).

Further, laws and policies guide the city manager and city staff in their operation of Midwest Town. Action planning, in collaboration with the city council, dictates

Figure 1

Midwest Town Organizational Chart



Note . Adapted from *Staff* by Midwest Town, 2021.

Table 2

Midwest Town Boards and Commissions

	Number of members	Authority
Airport Board	7 members	Advisory board to city council; adopts rules of procedure and bylaws, subject to council approval, to administer operation and maintenance of regional airport
Board of Code Appeals	5 members, 2 alternate members	Advisory board to city council on issues pertaining to the application and enforcement of city codes; makes rulings, findings and determinations to hear and decide appeals regarding alleged error(s) by city employees in application or enforcement
Board of Zoning Adjustment	7 members	Hears appeals regarding alleged error(s) by a city administrator in enforcement of municipal code
City Tree Board	5 members, 1 alternate member	Advisory board to city council and staff regarding forestry matters
Housing Advisory Board	5 members	Administers and manages housing rehabilitation grant and loan programs
Public Art Committee	7 members	Directs the inclusion of artwork in public spaces
Lake Park Advisory Board	9 members	Advisory board to city council; adopts rules of procedure and bylaws, subject to council approval, to administer marketing and promotion of Lake Park; oversees implementation of strategic plans for development and maintenance of Lake Park and Golf Course

	Number of members	Authority
County Extension Board	1 member	Represents city in work with extension specialists to provide county educational programs and assist in managing finances for local extension operations
Parks and Recreation Board	9 members	Manages expenditures, supervision, improvements, care, and custody of the city's parks and recreation facilities; appoints director and assistants to care for parks
Planning & Zoning Commission	8 members	Advisory board to city council on rezoning requests, approval of preliminary and final plats of subdivision development, zoning issues, and permits

Note . Adapted from *Boards and Commissions* by Midwest Town, 2021.

the projects and programs Midwest Town administers and the timeframes for the completion of such projects (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021). For example, in 2012, after extensive study and gathering public input, Midwest Town adopted a comprehensive plan that identified opportunities for growth and revitalization projects (Midwest Town, 2022e). Among those projects, a public safety facility was completed, and improvements to the Main Street corridor running through the city's central retail district were underway at the time of this study (Midwest Town, 2022f; Heiland, 2019). Said the city manager, "In the next couple of years, this community will need to go through another comprehensive planning process, due to the success of knocking a lot of those items off the last list, but really engaging in 'Is it still the vision

for the community?' 'Does the community want to go in a different direction?'" (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021).

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame focuses on the ways symbols and stories help individuals make sense of the environments or cultures in which they live (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Its tenets can be found in a community's rituals, displays, and stories, all of which enhance culture, pride, and hope (Bolman & Deal, 2017). "Symbols carry powerful intellectual and emotional messages; they speak to the heart and the soul" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 236).

In Midwest Town, symbols linking the city with Midwest University are prominent. They include an arch, adorned with the city and university logos, over a College Avenue corridor that leads to the university campus and symbolizes a gateway connecting the city's downtown with the neighborhood surrounding the campus, known as Campus Town. Flags, banners, and posters that promote Midwest University's athletic teams are regularly displayed in business windows, while memorabilia and photos from championship games occupy spaces in restaurants and bars, further symbolizing the strong ties and pride Midwest Town shares with Midwest University. Some businesses, such as a lumber store and a bowling alley, include the university's mascot in their formal names, and the names of a bar and an auto dealership make associations with Midwest University's recent championships. Multiple parades throughout the year, from a celebration of the university's homecoming to holiday parades, feature businesses and city organizations mingled with groups representing the university as throngs of people,

many of whom wear jackets and hats that demonstrate their support of the university, line the streets.

Stories of Midwest Town's successes have helped spark action as partnerships increasingly have generated growth and development, enhancing the sustained success of both the city and Midwest University to an almost mystical level. As an example, on the heels of the College Avenue corridor's completion, the residents of Midwest Town voted to pass a transient guest tax that fueled the completion of a 137,250 square-foot multipurpose facility on the Midwest University campus (Midwest Town, 2022d, 2022e). As a result of the funding support from private donors and public entities, including Midwest Town, the $21 million facility was billed as the largest public-private partnership ever in the region (Midwest University, 2021c).

Successful partnerships, like Midwest Town's cooperation with Midwest University, inspire residents to invest more deeply in the community and unite to make decisions that accomplish goals and enable future success (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Further, the city manager of Midwest Town notes the symbolism of that success instills pride in residents and a sense of excitement in the community. He said, "Things we're able to do, things with our partners, like [the multipurpose facility] or College Avenue, or even just uplift the conversation in a positive manner together, when there's good things happening at [Midwest University], there's great, good things happening with the city" (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021).

Leadership Analysis

Based on decades of researching leadership and its varied dimensions, Northouse (2019) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a

group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 5). The author delineates various types of leadership defined through decades of research and posits that an individual's ability to lead does not develop from a trait or characteristic but rather from interactions between leaders and followers.

Servant Leadership

According to Northouse (2019), servant leaders are attentive to the concerns of their followers; they empathize with them, behave in a way that is ethical, and lead in ways that support follower development and the greater good of the community. Researchers have identified 10 characteristics of servant leaders that consist of listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Northouse, 2019).

The city manager of Midwest Town describes himself as a servant leader and supports that belief in the characteristics he exhibits in leading city staff and building consensus within the community. He maintains and encourages an open door policy with city staff as well as community members that invites listening and open communication (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021). With an awareness that he knows a little about many topics but does not consider himself an expert on any of them, he empowers department managers to develop creative solutions (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021). When solving a problem, he listens to all voices and tries to assess it from all sides (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021). Further, his work with the city council to recommend and execute projects that foster Midwest Town's growth and development,

such as street improvements and the multipurpose facility, provide evidence of his ability to persuade, conceptualize, use foresight, and build community.

In alignment with characteristics outlined by Northouse (2019), the city manager is a visionary whose ideas for Midwest Town's future, including his desire to further develop linkages with Midwest University and gain support for a more modern entry sign that welcomes people to the city, go beyond day-to-day operations and spearhead a direction for the city (G. McDanel, personal communication, November 3, 2021).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

The current study contributes to existing research and adds a new dimension to the scholarly context of BIRG tendencies (Cialdini et al., 1976; Jensen et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Sigelman, 1986; C. R. Snyder et al., 1986; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) through its use of qualitative research methods to study residents of a rural Midwestern community who affiliate with an NCAA Division II athletics environment. Additionally, the research has implications on the practitioner setting in the ways residents of the community attach themselves to a successful college sports team in their city and realize a sense of belonginess.

While stable leadership and symbols are believed to play a role in the growth and development of Midwest Town, scholarly research has shown that successful athletics programs can be a powerful tool for institutions and communities to leverage in their efforts to attract the attention of students, alumni, and fans while enhancing their reputations (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Miller, 2003; Pope & Pope, 2009). Additionally, the seminal research of Cialdini et al. (1976) and subsequent research

related to fans' tendency to bask in the reflected glory of successful athletic programs lays a path to further understand "how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (p. 374).

Further, scholarly research of social identity theory (SIT) has shown that team identification "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116) and that such ties foster "an element of 'thick trust'" (Katz and Clopton, 2014, p. 290) among community members. Tajfel and Turner (1979) defined SIT as an explanation for individuals striving to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to teams that contribute to their social identity.

Combined, existing research has repeatedly shown that successful athletic programs positively influence team identification and social identity, but the majority of researchers have relied on quantitative methods to achieve their results. Thus, the current research in the practitioner setting sought to investigate a successful NCAA Division II football program's impacts on Midwest Town and the ways, through a case study, that residents identify with the team. The study has implications for individual identity as well as the community's identity in that the stories of Midwest Town residents yielded qualitative data that supports previous research.

Secondarily, the current study has implications for college administrators, specifically at NCAA Division II institutions, regarding the value of intercollegiate athletics in enhancing the identity of their broader campus communities. Previously, the majority of researchers studying successful college athletic programs and their impacts have focused on NCAA Division I programs (Coakley, 2008; Duderstadt, 2003;

Gumprecht, 2003; Martin, 2013). Using quantitative methods, Clopton and Finch (2012) found no connection between the success of high-profile NCAA athletics and perceptions of external academic prestige while finding mixed results suggesting college students believe athletics success affects outsiders' opinions of their university. Yet, Katz and Heere (2016) found identification with a football team at a large southwestern university increased involvement with the institution. As such, the current study was designed to collect qualitative data that supported or contradicted the previous research.

Summary

Midwest Town is a rural community with a rich history that boasts a strong economy fueled by robust manufacturing, health care, agriculture, and education services. Factoring prominently in the community is Midwest University, which began as a small teacher's college and has evolved into a coeducational, primarily residential, regional university that offers a broad range of programs. Both Midwest Town and Midwest University strive for quality in the services and experiences they provide, and the university's championship-winning football program exemplifies that goal.

In alignment with Bolman and Deal's (2017) research of organizational frames, Midwest Town's leadership architecture is better understood by viewing it through a structural frame that places staff in specialized roles to foster alignment with strategy, goals, and policies. Additionally, a view of Midwest Town through the symbolic frame allows a better understanding of the culture, stories, and symbols that have helped spark action and partnerships to generate and sustain success both in the city and at Midwest University. At the same time, the city manager of Midwest Town exhibits the

characteristics of a servant leader in the way he leads city staff and builds consensus within the community.

This understanding of the setting's history, structure, and leadership, as well as the implications for research, provide context and guidance for the proposed study.

SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

College towns are distinctive communities where, on any given Saturday in the fall, legions of fans, clad in school colors and professing their allegiance to the local university, descend on football stadiums for competition with a regional rival (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Heere & James, 2007a; Martin, 2013; Quintanar et al., 2015; Weight et al., 2019). Through that competition, intercollegiate athletics inspire a high level of excitement, pride, and involvement for communities while unifying their diverse fan groups who form emotional bonds as they follow the teams (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003). As a result, intercollegiate athletics programs play an important role in garnering attention for the universities that sponsor them as well as the communities where they reside, particularly when teams are successful (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003).

Scholarly research shows a successful intercollegiate athletics program, particularly football, generally leads to positive media exposure for the university, donations from alumni and other supporters, and economic advantages (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Miller, 2003), leading Gumprecht (2003), in his study investigating the ways a successful NCAA Division I college football program helped shape its community, to observe that “football permeates all aspect of life” (p. 48). While successful college sports teams attract students to their universities and serve as a unifying force for student bodies and alumni, they have a similar impact on surrounding communities (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003). Athletics are

a vital part of collegiate life and a powerful tool that institutions have to directly affect their reputations (Duderstadt, 2003; Pope & Pope, 2009).

Not surprisingly, an immense amount of scholarly research exists related to intercollegiate athletics, its role, and its varied impacts on higher education institutions as well as the communities they serve (Bass et al., 2015; Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Chu, 1982; Coakley, 2008; Feezell, 2015; Goff, 2000; Heere & James, 2007a; Miller, 2003; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013). However, the research, as this review will show, lacks qualitative studies exploring the impacts on communities where successful athletics programs exist, specifically at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level.

This introduction to the scholarly context related to intercollegiate athletics and its impacts will provide an overview of relevant literature, outline key theories identified in the context, and lay a foundation for the current study.

Overview of Relevant Literature

During a review of scholarly literature specific to the impacts of athletics success at the intercollegiate level, several common research topics emerged. Researchers have studied the relationships of athletics success to game attendance (Jensen & DeSchriver, 2002; Robinson, et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2000), branding (Carlson et al., 2008; Heere et al., 2011; Wear et al., 2016), coaching and leadership (Adler et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2007; Dohrn et al., 2015; Gilbert et al., 2006; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Rudd & Mondello, 2006; Scott, 1999; Snyder & Waterstone, 2015), faculty attitudes and perceptions (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Cockley & Roswal, 1994; Feezell, 2013; Lawrence, 2009; Lewinter et al., 2013), fundraising and donor giving (Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Frank, 2004; Mahony et al., 2003; Stinson & Howard, 2007), media exposure (Bremmer

& Kesselring, 1993; Martin, 2009), student engagement (Warner et al., 2011), student recruitment and enrollment (Castle & Kostelnik, 2011; Chressanthis & Grimes, 1993; Pope & Pope, 2009), and athletics program reform (Benford, 2007).

In an empirical review of research related to intercollegiate athletics, Goff (2000) summarized studies focused on financial impacts, media exposure, donor giving, and student enrollment. Intercollegiate athletics' position as the so-called front porch, or "the most visible room in the house" (Katz et al, 2017, p. 105), and its relationship to other facets of higher education also has been studied extensively (Bass et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2017).

Yet, a majority of researchers studying impacts of intercollegiate athletics success have focused on NCAA Division I programs (Coakley, 2008), particularly football (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Snyder & Waterstone, 2015), leaving a low percentage of scholarly research addressing the NCAA's lower divisions. Baucom and Lantz (2001), who studied faculty attitudes toward male student-athletes at a Division II school, posited the reasons for the dearth of research involving smaller, lower division schools may be that athletes are more representative of those institutions' student bodies and academic missions. More recently, Davis et al. (2020), who used quantitative methods to study how team identification helped students adjust to college life at a mid-sized, public Division II institution in the northeastern region of the United States, contended the reason for the lack of research related to small division athletics programs is that they lack the influence and power that larger Division I universities possess.

Among scholars who have studied intercollegiate athletics success at the Division II level are Jensen and DeSchriver (2002) and Wells et al. (2000), both of whom found

that success positively related to game attendance at Division II institutions. Also, Castle and Kostelnik (2011) determined athletics success had a significant positive effect on student applications and improving the quality of students that enroll as first-time freshmen at Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference institutions, and Feezell (2013) determined NCAA divisional status, among other demographic characteristics, influenced the attitudes of faculty members at Division II institutions in the South.

While the differences of the NCAA's divisional structure are explained in more detail later in this review of the scholarly context, it also is noteworthy that researchers interested in studying smaller colleges seem to overlook Division II institutions and instead focus on sample groups representing Division III institutions, as done by Katz et al. (2015) for a study of success factors in Division III athletics and Snyder and Waterstone (2015), who studied the athletic philosophies of Division III college presidents and athletic conference commissioners. The lure to study Division III athletics and its impacts may be attributed to the fact that Division III institutions emphasize interconnections of education with athletics and outnumber each of the membership totals for Division I and Division II (Katz et al., 2015).

Further, researchers studying impacts of intercollegiate athletics overwhelmingly have relied on quantitative methods to examine levels of success, formulating their results from data collected through surveys or publicly available data sets (Coakley, 2008). Examples include Feezell (2013) distributing a 40-question survey to faculty to gather data regarding their opinions of intercollegiate athletics and Dohrn et al. (2015) and Katz et al. (2015) using the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act database. These researchers' findings regarding the impacts of athletics also are mixed, with some finding

positive impacts and others finding no significance. Katz and Heere (2016), for example, found a new college football team could have a significant social impact on the university. In contrast with the research of Castle and Kostelnik (2011) described earlier, Clopton and Finch (2012) found no connection between the success of high-profile NCAA athletics and perceptions of external academic prestige but found mixed evidence suggesting college students believe athletics success affects outsiders' opinions of their universities, further concluding that expectations and perceptions of a program vary by stakeholder group.

In fact, of the dozens of scholarly research articles reviewed that relate to intercollegiate athletics, only seven were found to be constructed solely through qualitative methods. Qualitative research relies on open-ended data gathering, such as interviews and surveys, to document, interpret, and study participants' conscious, lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Among the qualitative studies reviewed, Benford (2007) and Lawrence (2009) addressed faculty perceptions and attitudes toward intercollegiate athletics; Rudd and Mondello (2006) and Snyder and Waterstone (2015) studied coaches and institutional leaders; Warner and Dixon (2013) and Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) studied student engagement; and Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) studied the organizational culture of an athletics department. Only the research of Snyder and Waterstone (2015) involved participants representing a Division III institution, and the participants in Jayakumar and Comeaux's (2016) study were members of competitive intercollegiate sports clubs, not NCAA varsity programs. The other five qualitative articles cited above involved participants' experiences with NCAA Division I athletics programs.

Thus, the review of scholarly research revealed a gap in qualitative studies addressing the impacts of a successful NCAA Division II football program sponsored by a small, rural, public university in the Midwest region of the United States. With that research gap in mind, the review of research also highlighted conceptual and theoretical themes connected to the impacts of athletics success on groups, which are explored in more detail within the following sub-topics.

Differences of NCAA Division I, Division II, and Division III

An understanding of the differences among levels of intercollegiate athletics is helpful before further exploring scholarly research of athletic success. Within the vast literature regarding intercollegiate athletics lies some valuable reviews of the NCAA's history and evolution as an organization since its founding in 1906 (Katz & Seifried, 2014). Fueled by a decades-long dissatisfaction with a lack of championship opportunities and a widening gap between small and large institutions, the NCAA restructured itself in 1973, establishing three divisions for athletic competition (Katz & Clopton, 2014; Katz & Seifried, 2014; NCAA, 2022a). In 1978, Division I divided itself, separating football programs into classifications of I-A and I-AA (Katz & Seifried, 2014; NCAA, 2022a). Additional restructures of Division I football since the late 1990s evolved into the present-day structure consisting of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), which competes in bowl games and the College Football Playoff, and the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) (NCAA, 2022b).

While more than 1,000 institutions compete in intercollegiate athletics as members of the NCAA, each of the three divisions represent varied philosophies, environments, and levels of competition (Robinson et al., 2005). Division I, which is

considered the highest level of competition, draws higher attendance and aspires for national prominence while offering the most scholarships of any classification (Robinson et al., 2005), as shown in Table 3.

Comparatively, NCAA Division II programs offer partial scholarships that still recognize a student's athletic skills but align with its "Life in the Balance" mantra to inspire excellence athletically as well as academically (NCAA, 2022c, para 5). At the Division II level, operating budgets are significantly less than Division I, and athletic departments rely on institutional support and student fees rather than ticket revenue as their primary funding sources (Robinson et al., 2005).

Division III programs, which are viewed as the lowest level of NCAA competition, award no athletics-based financial assistance while placing priority on the educational experience and meeting the needs of internal constituencies that include students and alumni, not the general public (Katz et al., 2015; Katz & Clopton, 2014; Robinson et al., 2005). As such, attendance at Division III athletics games is minimal, and ticket revenue is not a significant source of funding for those athletics departments (Robinson et al., 2005).

Robinson et al. (2005) further contended that philosophies, budgets, and the offering of scholarships lead to not only differences in competitive quality among the classifications of NCAA college football but also a difference in the type of person who attends the games offered within each classification. By virtue of their scholarship levels, higher enrollments, and large alumni groups, a school in an upper division translates to more media exposure and support from fans and donors (Duderstadt, 2003; Katz & Clopton, 2014). Consequently, the extremes of Division I, often referred to as big-time

Table 3

Differences of NCAA's Three Divisions

Characteristics	NCAA Divisions		
	Division I[a]	Division II	Division III
Number of schools	350	310	438
Median undergraduate enrollment	8,960	2,428	1,740
Average football game attendance[b]	26,377	3,073	1,762
Ratio of students who are athletes	1 in 23	1 in 10	1 in 6
Scholarship availability	Multiyear, full scholarships available (57 percent of athletes receive athletics aid)	Partial athletics scholarship (60 percent of athletes receive athletics aid)	No athletics scholarships (80 percent of athletes receive non-athletics aid)
Eligibility requirements	Students must meet standards set by NCAA membership.		Athletes must meet admissions standards set by school.
Governance	Groups of presidents and chancellors lead each division within committees and regular meetings.		

Note . Adapted from *Our Three Divisions* by NCAA, 2022e, NCAA.org (https://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/our-three-divisions). Copyright 2022 by NCAA.

[a] Schools with football programs that participate in bowl games belong to the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), while schools with football programs that participate in the NCAA-run football championship belong to the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). Schools that do not sponsor football but compete in other sports are considered simply Division I. From *Our Division I Story* by NCAA, 2022b, NCAA.org (https://www.ncaa.org/our-division-i-story). In the public domain.

[b] Average football game attendance is 41,477 for FBS schools and 7,830 for FCS schools. From *NCAA Football Attendance* by NCAA, 2019, NCAA.org (http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/stats/football_records/Attendance/2019.pdf). In the public domain.

college sports (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Martin, 2013), and Division III have, at times, left Division II feeling like a "middle child" trying to figure out where it belongs (Moltz, 2009, subheading).

Basking in Reflected Glory

Numerous studies related to intercollegiate athletics have noted the tendency of individuals and connected groups to associate themselves with teams, which may unveil emotional, psychological, and social benefits when the teams they follow are successful (Heere & James, 2007; Wann & Robinson III, 2002; Wann et al., 2011; Weight et al., 2019). In their foundational research, Cialdini et al. (1976) labeled that tendency to bask in reflected glory (BIRG) after conducting a series of field studies that illustrated students' affiliations with successful athletic teams even though they were not directly involved with the causes of success. The research showed a significant tendency of students to wear apparel representing their schools after a victory and a higher likelihood to use the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success. The researchers further posited their studies "suggest a way to understand how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 374).

> Fans of championship teams gloat over their team's accomplishments and proclaim their affiliation with buttons on their clothes, bumper stickers on their cars, and banners on their public buildings. Despite the fact that they have never caught a ball or thrown a block in support of their team's success, the tendency of such fans is to claim themselves part of the team's glory (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 367).

The research of BIRG has since been replicated multiple times and applied to professional sports (Kimble & Cooper, 1992; Spinda, 2011) as well as topics other than athletics, including Sigelman's (1986) analysis of yard sign displays for winning and losing candidates for public office. Jensen et al. (2016) most closely replicated the original research study, using more modern methods, and found participants were more than twice as likely to wear school-affiliated apparel after victories. Additionally, the initial BIRG research spawned subsequent studies of the opposite effect, called "cutting off reflected failure," or CORF (Snyder et al., 1986). Wann and Branscombe (1990) asserted the results of such studies help define the more commonly known terms "die-hard fans" and "fair-weather fans," defining the latter as people who "take advantage of the association and bask in its successful glow" (p. 111).

Recognizing that sports teams are symbolic representations of the communities that support them and acknowledging the significance of BIRG, Anderson and Stone (1981) skillfully argued that teams become important extensions of residents' identities. Notably, the researchers posited that sports teams foster sentiments of identification that become collective representations of loyalty, pride, and unity, and games provide an opportunity for community members to express their identification publicly. Anderson and Stone (1981) explained their idea of these "quasi-intimate relationships" (p. 169) further:

> Sport stadiums, arenas, and even parking lots frequently become meeting places for social interactions which provide involvement in a community event and inject a personal quality into the situation. The explicit role of the event is

> recreational but social interaction takes place which may generate enthusiasm for and identification with the community. (p. 169)

Scholarly research has continuously cited intercollegiate athletics for the intangible benefits they lend to their communities (Davis et al., 2020) and the high degree to which people identify with the teams they support, particularly when those teams are successful (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

Social Identity Theory

In their research of BIRG tendencies in athletics, Wann and Branscombe (1990) and Jensen et al. (2016) among others, cited the seminal work of Tajfel and Turner (1979), who defined social identity theory (SIT) based on assumptions that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by establishing an emotional attachment with groups that contribute to the individual's social identity. Another assumption of SIT is that positive comparisons between the in-group and out-group could provide high prestige while negative comparisons between groups may lead to low prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Tajfel formulated the foundational theory during the early 1970s out of his interest in understanding people living together as neighbors, colleagues, and friends (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). SIT is based on the premise that people sometimes behave differently as members of a group than as individuals, or as Ellemers and Haslam (2012) posed, "When do people think of themselves in terms of 'we' instead of 'I'?" (p. 381). Further linking a concept of BIRG with SIT, incidentally, Tajfel and Turner (1979) provided this example:

> After realistic competition, the losing groups should be hostile to the out-group victors, both because they have been deprived of a reward and because their interaction has been exclusively conflictual. However, when winning and losing establish shared group evaluations concerning comparative superiority and inferiority, then, so long as the terms of the competition are perceived as legitimate and the competition itself as fair according to these legitimate terms, the losing group *may* acquiesce in the superiority of the winning out-group. (p. 41)

As such, social identity theory posits that people are motivated to emphasize and secure the ways in which their group is positively distinct from other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggested an individual can identify with a group by merely perceiving themselves as "psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group" (p. 21) without having to commit any effort to the group's goals. Through social identification, an individual draws satisfaction and displeasure by experiencing a team's successes and failures. Likewise, an individual does not need to interact with or even like other individuals who associate with the group, but the person's perception of being loyal to the team serves as a basis for their social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). "It is this search for a distinctive identity that induces organizations to focus so intensely on advertising, names and logos, jargon, leaders and mascots, and so forth" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 28).

Ellemers and Haslam (2012) point to SIT's core premise as the notion that people in social situations think of themselves and others as group members, not as unique individuals, stating, "The theory argues that social identity underpins intergroup behavior

and sees this as qualitatively distinct from interpersonal behavior" (p. 379). Furthermore, Ellemers and Haslam (2012) posit that "SIT opens up the possibility of considering whether a group-level approach can help understand a particular phenomenon, and, if this is the case, provides conceptual tools that can usefully inform and structure this type of analysis" (p. 391).

In other research related to SIT, scholars have attempted to advance understanding of tensions between ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups as well as study and predict responses to migration and changing labor relations (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Trepte (2006) used SIT as a basis for a study of media and entertainment, and van Lange (2013) noted the theory has fostered understanding of associations and loyalty to not only football teams but political parties.

The research of Tajfel and Turner (1979) and SIT's effects on varied groups of people has inspired numerous studies related to intercollegiate athletics, among other subjects, in addition to spawning ideas of team identification and social anchor theory. In combination with the concepts of BIRG, SIT lends itself well to studies focused on impacts of successful athletic teams.

Team identification

A dimension that is common in scholarly research involving SIT and intercollegiate athletics is team identification, which "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116). Among the first to study factors influencing identification with a sports team, Wann et al. (1996) found team success, geography, players, and group affiliations as the most important reasons. In subsequent research related to team identification, Clopton and

Finch (2012), in a study involving undergraduate students at 27 NCAA Division I institutions, found that athletics success significantly contributed to perceptions of external prestige. Wear et al. (2016), in a study involving students at a Division I university in the Midwest, found high levels of team and university identification did not impact the perceived value of a sponsor. Yet, Davis et al. (2020), in a study involving undergraduate students at a mid-sized Division II university in the Northeast, found that team identification did not affect students' personal self-esteem, social adjustment, or emotional adjustment to college life.

Social Anchor Theory

Clopton and Finch (2011) added another dimension to SIT by proposing social anchor theory, which posits that communities are built of social networks connected to anchors, such as schools, sports, or corporations, that are affixed to the community and provide personal identification for members. Social anchors strengthen bonds between similar-minded individuals and help to extend networks (Clopton & Finch, 2011). They become integrated within the social context of communities, generating social capital and collective identity among members while fostering "an element of 'thick trust'" (Katz & Clopton, 2014, p. 290).

Summary

Over time, university administrators have realized a winning team can be an effective source of advertising for their institution that not only draws attention to the school but helps boost enrollment, increase school spirit, and enhance alumni and community support (Duderstadt, 2003; Miller, 2003). Martin (2013) observed a winning

football team leads to national attention, improved facilities, the ability to recruit top coaches and staff, academic support, and campus excitement, among other things:

> If used appropriately, this exposure enhances student recruiting and attracts donors. It brings tens of thousands of persons to campus on a Saturday and provides special opportunities to highlight academic programs and the campus atmosphere to potential students, boosters, and donors. (pp. 52-53)

This review of the scholarly context related to intercollegiate athletics, impacts of its success, and related theories is relevant because it provided an overview of the vast research completed and the gaps that remain. The scholarly research is limited, however, in that the majority of studies conducted focus on athletics at NCAA Division I institutions and use quantitative research methods. Thus, the current study using qualitative methods to explore the extent to which a successful Division II football program at a small, regional public university in a rural Midwestern setting impacts its community that helps advance the scholarly context related to intercollegiate athletics.

SECTION FOUR: CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution to Follow Defense

The researcher plans to disseminate the findings of the study at the International Town and Gown Association (ITGA) Conference in spring 2023. ITGA is an association for professionals working in municipal and higher education settings that identifies itself as "the premier resource for addressing challenges, emerging issues and opportunities between and amongst institutions of higher education and the communities in which they reside" (International Town & Gown Association, 2021). The annual conference provides an opportunity for attendees to share information, network, and build partnerships to improve town-gown relations. Applications to present are submitted to ITGA during the spring prior to the conference.

Type of Document

The study findings will be presented orally with PowerPoint slides during the ITGA Conference. Presentations are limited to 40 minutes with 10 minutes for questions and answers at the conclusion of the presentation. PowerPoint presentations are shared with attendees and uploaded to the ITGA website after the conference.

Rationale for this Contribution Type

The rationale for this contribution is to share findings of a case study analyzing a successful NCAA Division II football program's impacts on the rural, Midwestern community it represents and the ways that residents identify with the team. Potential implications of the study will help municipal leaders as well as college administrators better understand their community's identity as it relates to an athletics team and the support the team receives from residents.

Outline of Proposed Contents

The basic elements of the presentation will include a background of the setting that was studied, an overview of previous research and relevant literature, the theoretical framework for the study, the design of the study, the findings, and discussion.

Practitioner Document

REFLECTIONS OF RESIDENTS IN A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY ON THE IMPACTS OF A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL PROGRAM, THEIR TENDENCY TO BASK IN REFLECTED GLORY, AND THEIR SOCIAL IDENTITY

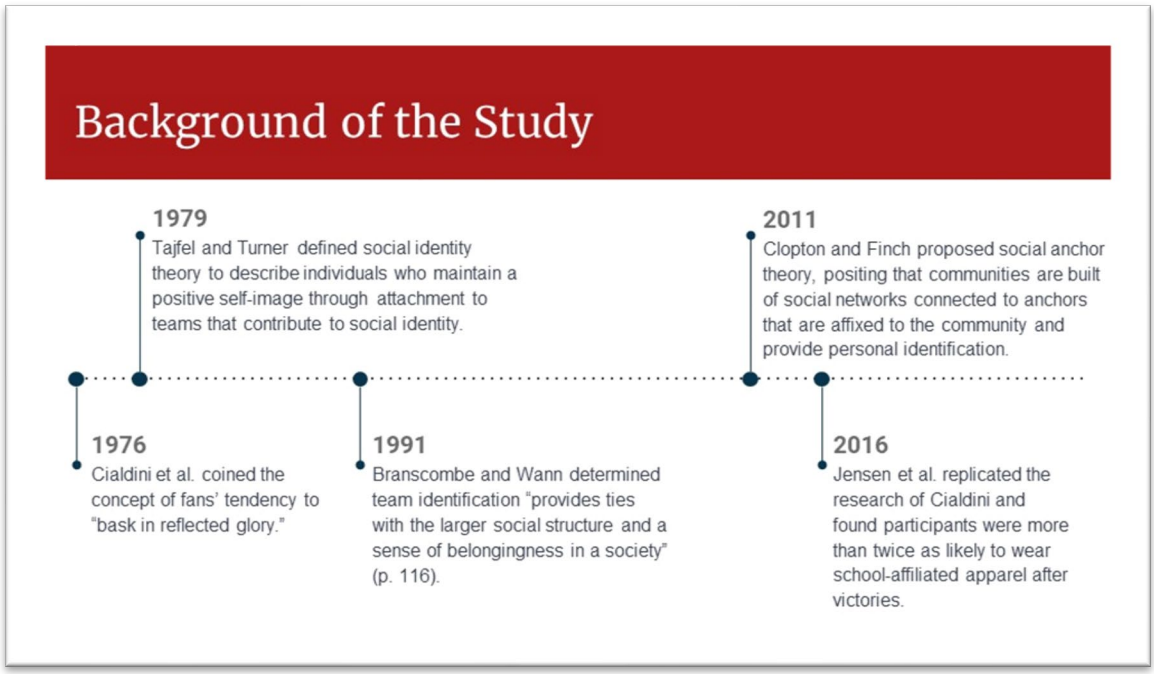
Executive Summary for Conference Presentation

International Town and Gown Association (ITGA) Conference

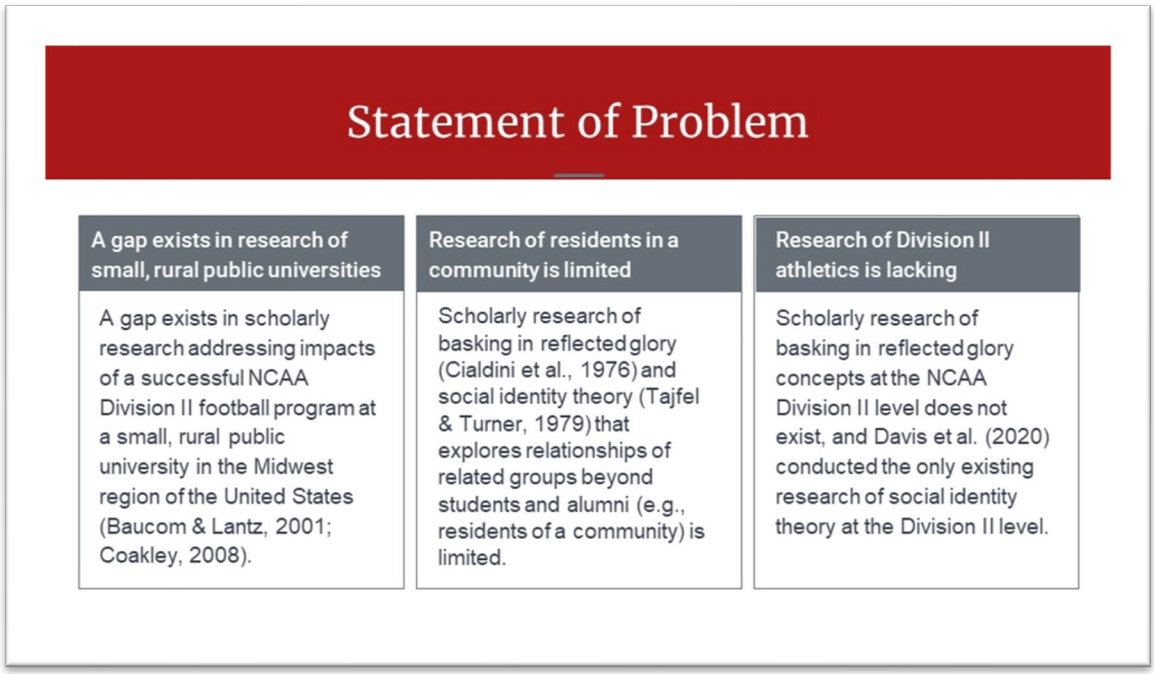
Spring 2023

By Mark D. Hornickel

- Welcome and introduction
- Discuss research interest stemming from personal observations related to how various communities seem to rally around their athletics teams, particularly when those teams are successful.

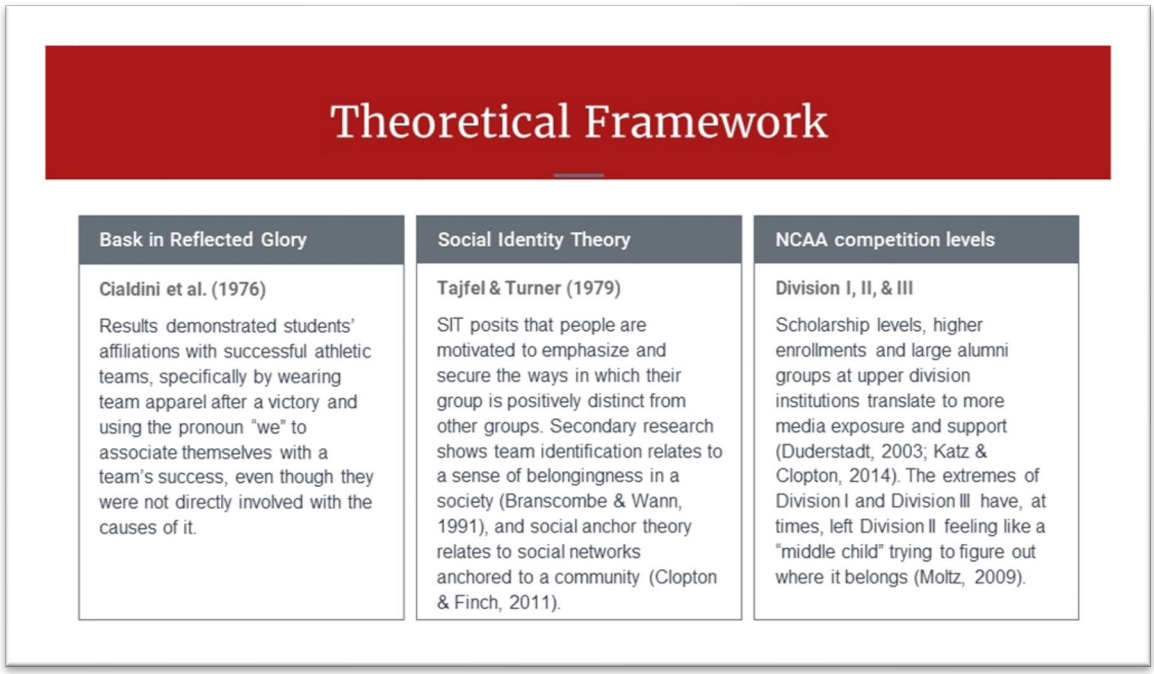


- A review of scholarly research related to intercollegiate athletics revealed that researchers studying athletic success largely have focused on NCAA Division I programs and the so-called "big-time college sports," particularly football.
- Researchers have relied heavily on quantitative methods to examine varied aspects of athletics-related success.
- In 1976, Cialdini et al. coined the concept of fans' tendency to bask in reflected glory, or BIRG. Their research found that students attending NCAA Division I institutions with successful athletic teams closely affiliated with their respective institution's teams even though the students were not directly involved with the cause of a team's success.
    - In a series of three field studies, they found the students were more likely to wear apparel supporting their team after a victory, used the pronoun *we* to associate themselves more with a positive source, and used the pronoun *we* nearly twice as often to describe a victory.
- Tajfel and Turner, in 1979, defined social identity theory as an explanation for individuals striving to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to teams that contribute to the individual's social identity.
- Branscombe and Wann, in 1991, determined team identification "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society."
- Further, social anchor theory, as proposed by Clopton and Finch, in 2011, posits that communities are built of social networks connected to anchors—such as schools, sports, or corporations—that are affixed to the community and provide personal identification for members.
- Jensen et al., in 2016, most closely replicated the original BIRG research by using more modern methods and found participants were more than twice as likely to wear school-affiliated apparel after victories.

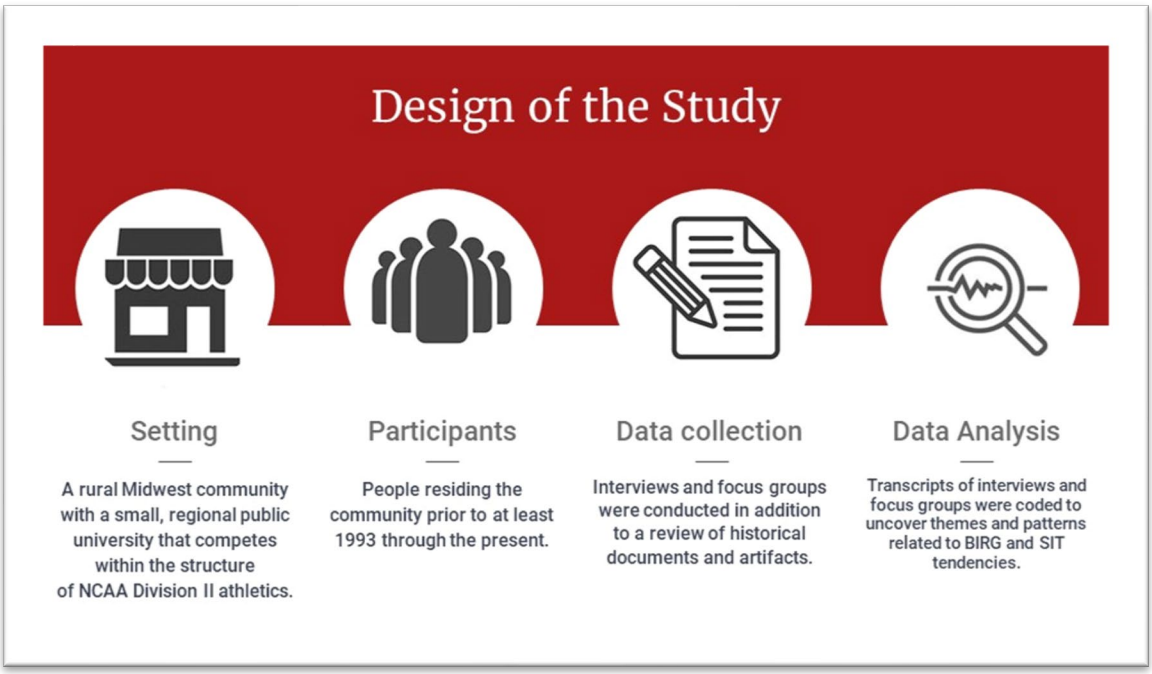


- The review of literature revealed a gap in qualitative research addressing impacts of a successful NCAA Division II football program at a small, rural public university in the Midwest region of the United States.
- While evidence of BIRG and SIT has been established in scholarly research of athletics success, research exploring the relationships of related groups beyond students and alumni, such as residents of a community, is limited.
- Further, research evaluating concepts of BIRG at the Division II level does not exist, and Davis et al., in a study published in 2020 involving undergraduate students at a mid-sized Division II university in the Northeast, provided the only research of social identity theory at the Division II level.

- Mindful of the gap in research related to impacts of success in intercollegiate athletics and the paucity of studies involving groups that are external to the campus setting, the purpose of the proposed study was to analyze a successful NCAA Division II football program's impacts on the rural, Midwestern community it represents and the ways that residents identify with the team.
- Using qualitative methods, the study involved conducting interviews to collect narratives of residents' lived experiences surrounding a decade when the college football program went from consecutive losing seasons to winning multiple national championships.
- By interviewing residents about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to the football program during the time period, the study sought to contribute experiences of a small college environment to existing literature of basking in reflected glory and social identity theory that is largely limited to research of NCAA Division I institutions.
- The overarching research question guiding the study is: "What is the impact of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents?"

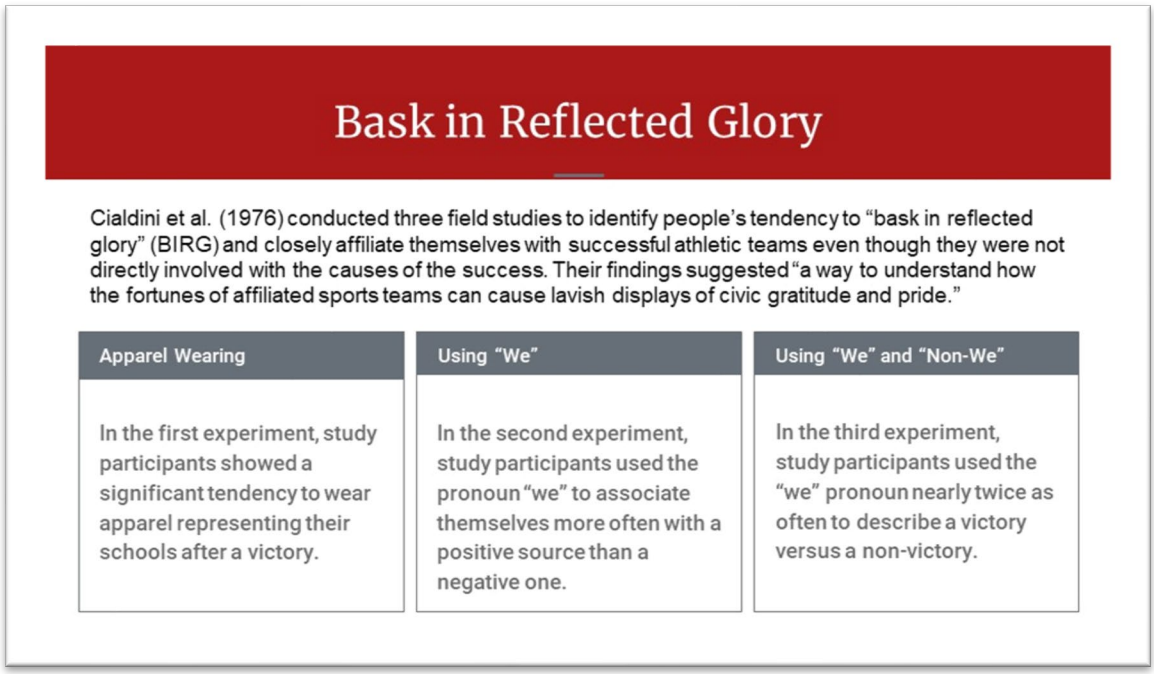


- The key concepts, definitions, and theories driving this study are derived from the tendencies of individuals and connected groups to more closely associate themselves with the sports teams they follow when those teams are successful.
- As discussed in the background, the key concepts are bask in reflected glory, social identity theory, and its secondary concepts of team identification and social anchor theory.
- The differences among the divisions of NCAA intercollegiate athletic levels, which foster varied competition, environments, and interest, provide a third lens.
    - Restructures of Division I football since the 1970s have evolved into the present-day structure consisting of the Football Bowl Subdivision, which competes in bowl games and the College Football Playoff, and the Football Championship Subdivision.
    - Division I, which is considered the highest level of competition, attracts national attention while offering the most scholarships of any classification.
    - Division II programs offer partial scholarships that recognize a student's athletic skills but align with its "Life in the Balance" (NCAA, 2022c, para 5) mantra to inspire both athletic and academic excellence. At the Division II level, operating budgets are significantly less than Division I, and athletic departments rely on institutional support and student fees rather than ticket revenue as their primary funding sources.
    - Division III programs draw the lowest attendance and award no athletics-based financial assistance while placing priority on the educational experience and meeting the needs of internal constituencies, not the general public.



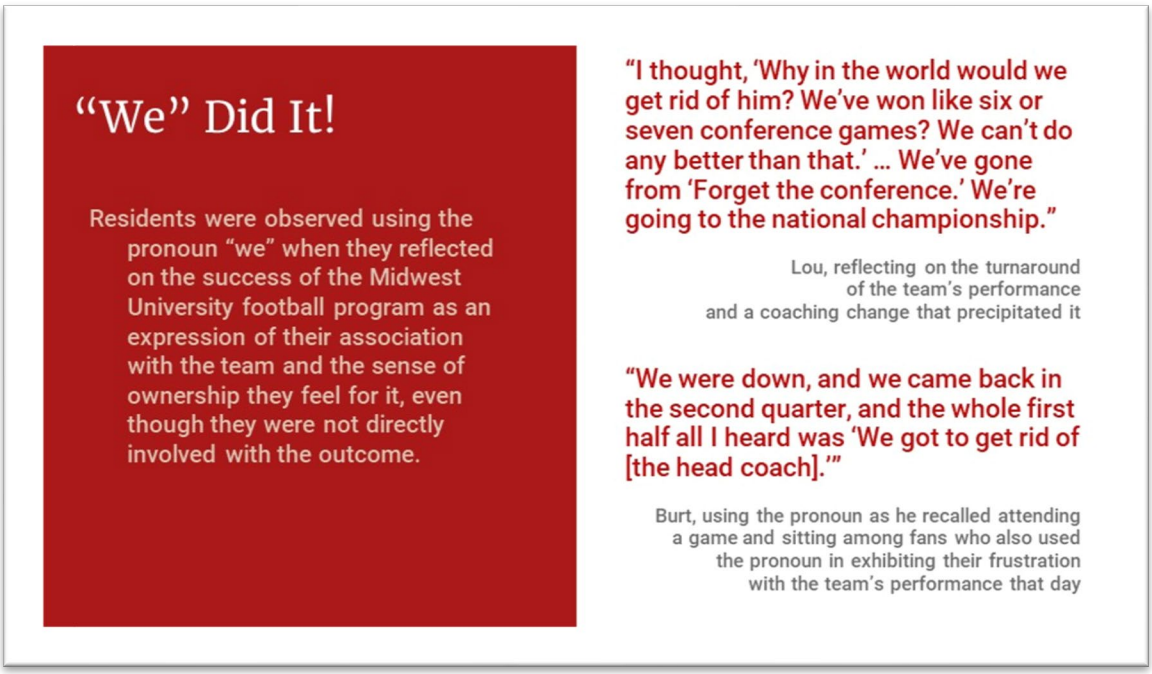
- The research was founded as a qualitative case study through which participants' conscious, lived experiences were collected and analyzed.
- The setting was a Midwestern rural community that supports a small, regional public university and its NCAA Division II athletics programs.
- Participants consisted of residents of the community who were selected for interviews and focus groups through a combination of purposeful sampling methods, including convenience sampling and snowball sampling, as well as through a review of historical documents, such as newspaper articles, yearbooks, catalogs, and directories.
- Participant criteria included having residence in the community since at least 1993, which marks a year of change within the university athletics program preceding the football program's success. Participants also had no direct involvement with the athletic department or football program to align with assumptions established by the BIRG and social identity theory research, which suggest people who are not directly involved with the cause of a team's success or fate establish attachments to teams after success is achieved.
- Data collection occurred through a series of interviews, focus groups, and the review of historical documents and artifacts relevant to the study to achieve triangulation. Pseudonyms were assigned to the names of study participants and to components of the setting to protect their privacy and confidentiality.
- During the data analysis phase, transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were reviewed, and themes and patterns were identified that related to the theoretical framework and participants' BIRG and SIT tendencies.

- The interviews attempted to capture the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences that resulted from a phenomenon that occurred in the community when the university's football program went from mediocrity to claiming multiple national championships.
- I'll introduce the findings with an observation from Mike, a longtime resident of the setting for this study, who provided a metaphor for the way residents feel when the university football team that inhabits the town is successful. He said, "It's kind of like when the sun shines."
- Mike's reflection helps set the stage for the findings of the study, the results of which contribute to scholarly literature related to intercollegiate athletics success while using existing BIRG and SIT research as a lens to compare the findings.
- Notably, saturation was achieved quickly during the process of interviewing study participants and conducting focus groups, which signals how deeply embedded residents' social identity and pride for the football program is in the community.
- Study participants also had difficulty providing examples when asked if they had observed negative impacts on the community as a result of the football program's success.
- The findings provide qualitative insights that further demonstrate people's tendencies to more closely associate with an athletic team when it is successful.

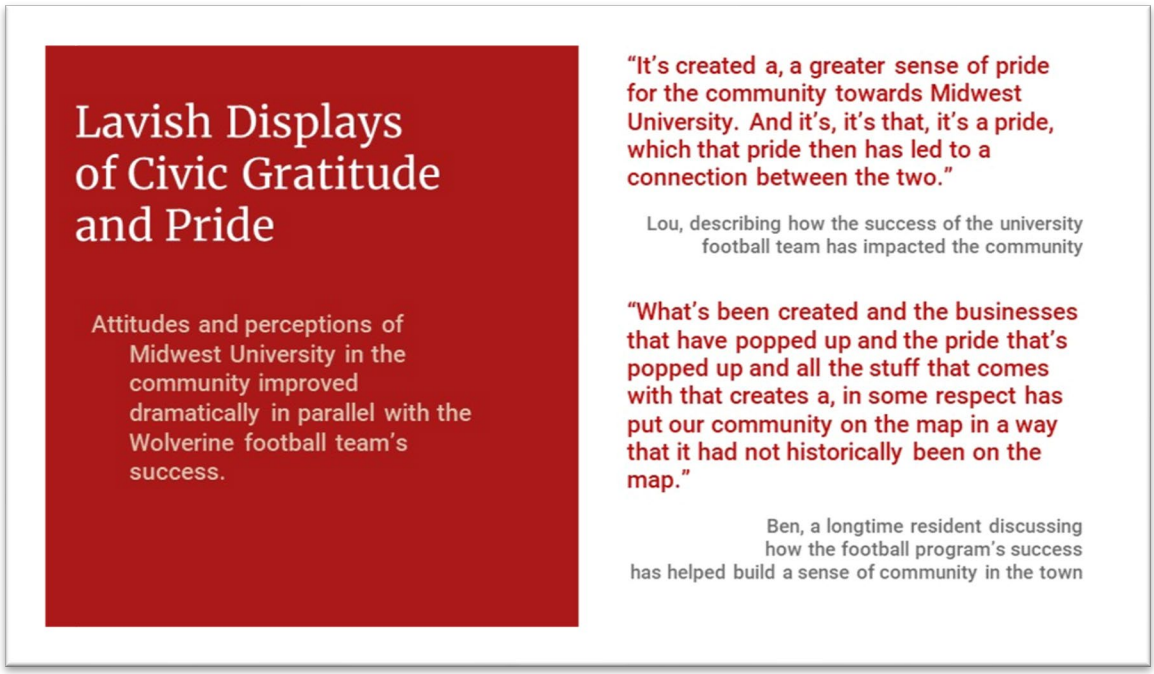


- As described, the tendency of individuals and connected groups to associate themselves with teams was identified through the foundational research of Cialdini et al., who, in 1976, labeled that tendency to bask in reflected glory.
- The research showed a significant tendency of students to wear apparel representing their schools after a victory and a higher likelihood to use the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success.
- The researchers further posited their studies "suggest a way to understand how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride."
- The authors observed that "fans of championship teams gloat over their team's accomplishments and proclaim their affiliation with buttons on their clothes, bumper stickers on their cars, and banners on their public buildings" without doing anything that directly contributed to the team's success.

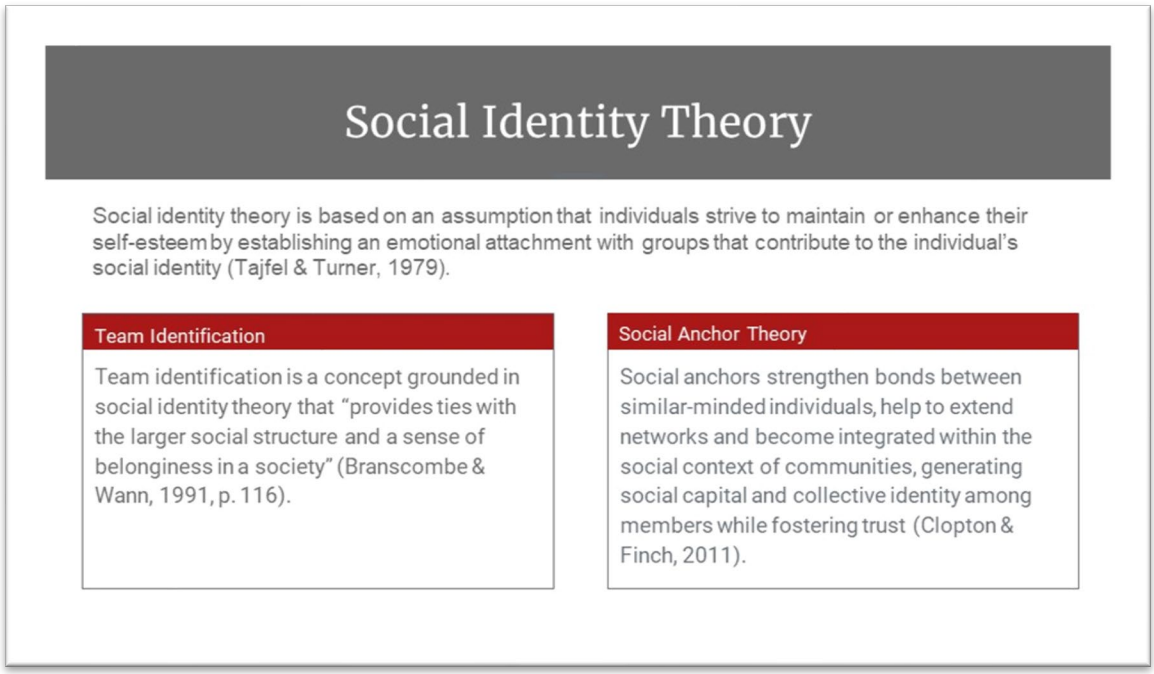
- Prior to the 1990s, according to interviews and historical documents, Wolverine apparel was barely spotted in Midwest Town, nor was it widely available. Beyond the campus bookstore, Midwest University apparel simply was not sold.
- Access to university apparel within Midwest Town has evolved significantly since the Wolverines football program became successful, however. Since opening in the 1990s, a locally owned store that specializes in Midwest University apparel has expanded and become a stable retail anchor in the community. Grocery stores and national retailers operating in Midwest Town now dedicate sections of their stores to Midwest University merchandise that also includes flags, license plates, car decals, and mugs, among other collectibles.
- Residents said they purchase and wear apparel regularly now to show their pride for the team and their association with the university. In some families, Wolverine apparel is all their children know to wear, and even residents who do not regularly attend games wear it. Residents described owning stacks of sweatshirts and T-shirts measuring 1 or 2 feet high. Some said they could wear one Wolverine shirt every day of the week for perhaps close to a month, which sometimes opens those fans to mocking for having wardrobes full of Wolverine clothing.



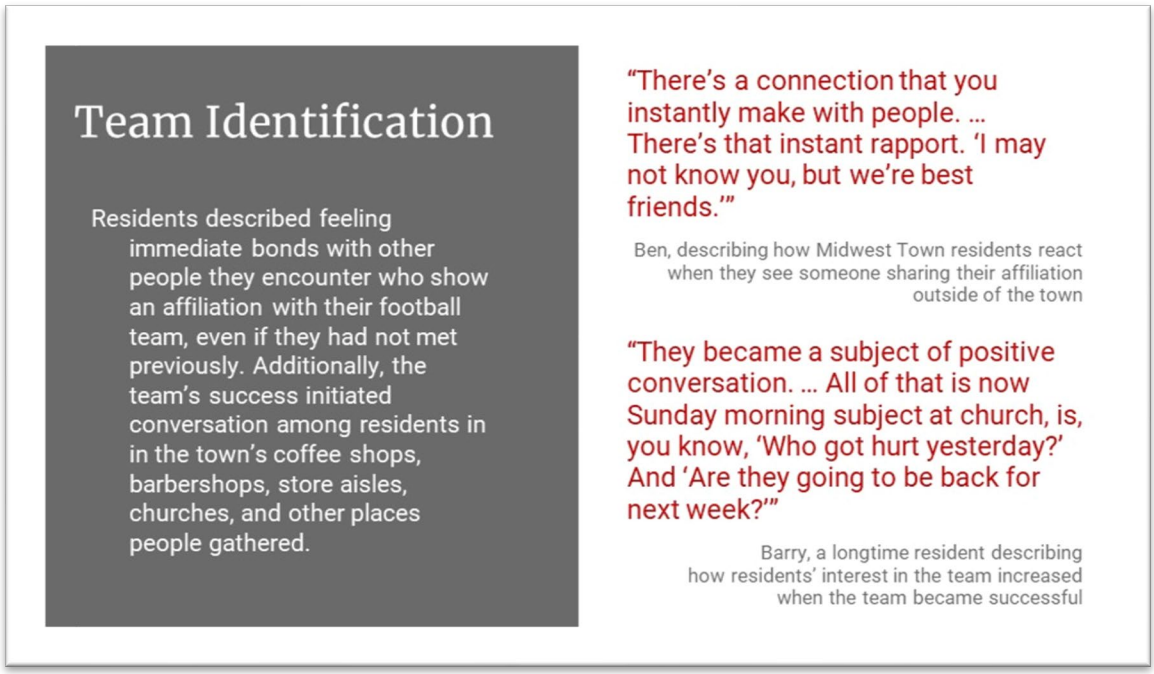
- Similar to the findings of Cialdini et al. (1976), Midwest Town residents were observed using the pronoun *we* when they reflected on the success of the Midwest University football program.
- Lou used the pronoun as he reflected on the turnaround in the Wolverines performance and the head coaching change that precipitated it.
- Likewise, Burt used the pronoun as he recalled attending a Wolverines game during the previous season and sitting among a group of fans, who also reportedly used the pronoun as they exhibited frustration with the team's performance in a game the team eventually won.



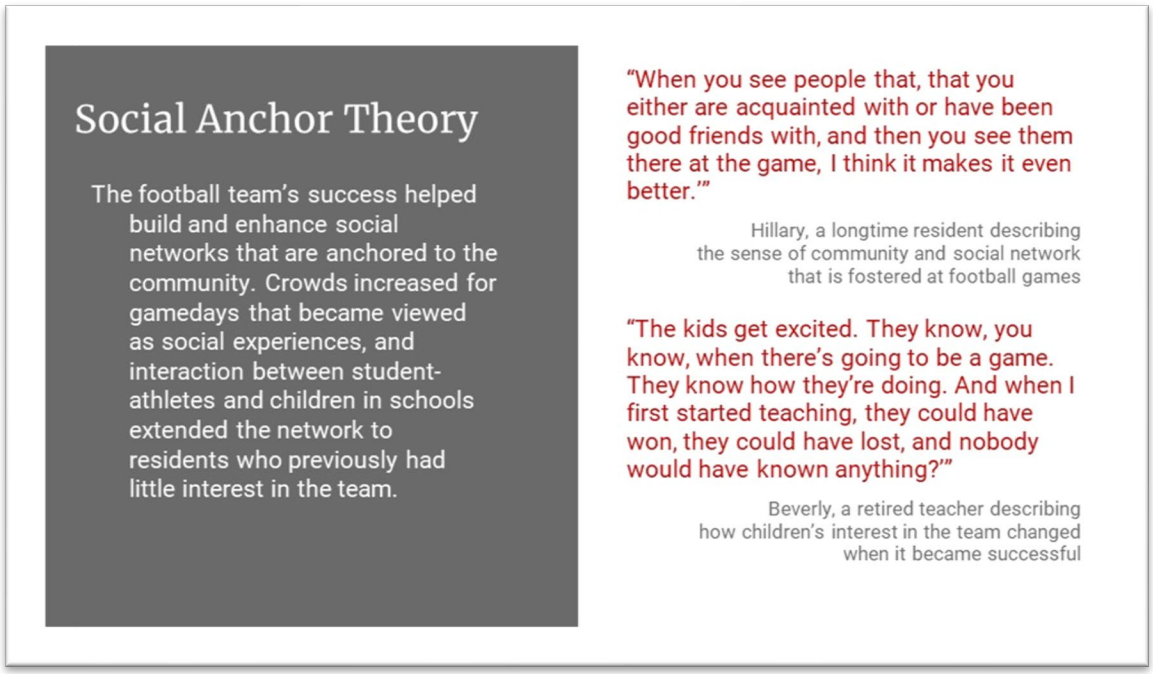
- Although residents expressed a mostly positive perception of Midwest University prior to the 1990s, it was largely viewed merely as an educational institution and a teacher's college. The university and the community were viewed as separate entities.
- Today, however, residents perceive Midwest University as a highly integrated asset within the community, an economic driver, and a quality institution with athletics programs that make the town an attractive place for people and families to live.
- Nearly all of the residents interviewed for the current study unwittingly used the word "pride" when describing their feelings about the success and the strengthened sense of community they perceive as a result of the Wolverines' success.
- Like the proliferation of apparel, displays of pride for the Wolverine football program and Midwest University became more visible in Midwest Town after the team became successful, and those displays figure prominently in the town today as symbols that help residents feel a sense of unity with the university.
- Such displays would not exist without the football team's sustained success, study participants said, and leaders in the community actively look for ways to align their businesses and organizations with Midwest University because of it.



- Social identity theory assumes that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by establishing an emotional attachment with groups that contribute to the individual's social identity. Additionally, it posits that people are motivated to emphasize and secure the ways in which their group is positively distinct from other groups.
- Team identification is a concept grounded in social identity theory that "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society."
- Clopton and Finch (2011) added another dimension to social identity theory by proposing social anchor theory, which posits that communities are built of social networks connected to anchors, such as schools, sports, or corporations, that are affixed to the community and provide personal identification for members. Social anchors strengthen bonds between similar-minded individuals, help to extend networks, and become integrated within the social context of communities, generating social capital and collective identity among members while fostering trust.



- Residents feel immense pride when they wear their Wolverine apparel outside of Midwest Town, and their sense of belonging is further heightened when another person associates them with the athletics success.
- Residents described feeling an immediate bond with the other person even if they had not met previously, and, almost like family members who have not seen each other for a length of time, they are likely to open a conversation about their shared affiliation.
- Residents of Midwest Town generally are eager to show their pride for the Wolverines when they travel and enjoy associating with others because one of them is wearing Wolverine apparel. The recognition gives residents joy in the common identity that exists when they see someone else wearing the apparel.
- They are eager to share the stories of encounters with other Wolverine supporters in locations throughout the world. Residents have grown so accustomed to it, study participants said, that it seems more uncommon not to have that experience when they travel.
- Further, residents of Midwest Town remember a time when the Wolverine football program was irrelevant within the community. Study participants described a feeling of apathy toward the football program, and it seemed few people cared whether the team won or lost on Saturdays.
- When the Wolverine football program began having success, it became a source of conversation in places where residents gathered. They were suddenly enthusiastic about the team.
- When asked about negative impacts of the football team's success on the community, study participants struggled to think of any examples, and those who did only provided annoyances such as increased traffic and crowded bars and restaurants on game days.



- As the Midwest University football team wins consistently, crowds pack Wolverine Stadium to cheer on the team. Residents, students, and visitors alike enjoy being a part of the game day atmosphere that surrounds the competition on the football field, including the socialization that occurs during tailgating activities in the parking lots and open fields near the stadium and at after-parties at Midwest Town bars and restaurants.
- As the team evolved from losing to winning consistently, study participants said, more people began attending games with an interest in seeing the team that was driving conversations in the community.
- The game day activities represent experiences for Midwest Town residents who go to the games that bring people together, and for some those experiences are more important than the games themselves.
- Notably, the idea of game days as social gatherings was found to be particularly meaningful to women. For example, Hillary said she doesn't like football but exhibited enthusiasm as she talked about the enjoyment she gains from following the Midwest University team.
- Another example of the ways Midwest University and Wolverine football has formed social networks anchored to the community is apparent to residents in Midwest Town schools. Study participants offered observations of how children's feelings toward Wolverines football changed when the team became successful.

- This study has implications for:
    - Community and university leaders interested in leveraging successful intercollegiate athletics programs in their communities to strengthen partnerships and elevate the symbolism with which residents identify;
    - Business owners interested in the ways consumers behave when an intercollegiate athletics program inhabiting their community is successful; and
    - College administrators, specifically at NCAA Division II institutions, who may use the findings to help them better understand the value and impacts of a successful intercollegiate athletics program in enhancing the identity of their broader campus communities.
- This study may be replicated for future research at other college or university settings to help institutions and their communities better understand their environments in relation to their athletics programs.
- Recommendations for future research also include translating this study to an urban setting where a successful NCAA Division II athletics program exists to determine similarities or differences in comparison to the rural setting.
- Research questions used in this study may be translated to a survey for NCAA Division II institutions that could yield data for generalizable research.

Questions?

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SECTION FIVE: CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Target Journal

The researcher projects, after defense of the research, submitting an article describing the results to the Journal of Sport and Social Issues, a peer-reviewed academic journal that launched in 1977 and publishes quarterly. It is the official journal of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society and is published by SAGE Publications.

Rationale for this Target

The journal describes itself as "an indispensable resource" publishing the latest research, discussion, and analysis regarding contemporary sport issues, with emphasis on sport and culture, from international and interdisciplinary perspectives (SAGE Publishing, 2021). More specifically, the journal publishes scholarly research that explores the relationship of sport and society relative to topics such as sociology, history, psychology, and cultural studies.

Each issue of the journal is divided into three sections: focus, trends, and view. The researcher proposes to submit the manuscript, which undergoes a blind review, to the trends section based on the journal's recommendation that such articles are devoted to research on topics impacting the social understanding of sport.

Format of Proposed Article

The journal accepts research founded in diverse theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Basic elements of the submission to meet the journal's guidelines will include the use of style guidelines outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020). The author will be identified only on the title page,

and the manuscript will be prefaced with an abstract of no more than 125 words with references, tables, and figures appearing at the end of the manuscript.

Plan for Submission

After defense of the research, the researcher will set up an online account on the SAGETrack system and submit the manuscript electronically, as required by the journal.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study sought to understand, within the conceptual framework of basking in reflected glory (BIRG) established by Cialdini et al. (1976) and social identity theory (SIT) established by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the perceptions and lived experiences of residents in a rural Midwestern community and the impacts of a successful university football program that inhabits their community. Themes emerged that showed residents' BIRG tendencies as well as evidence of team identification and social anchors among the residents who associate with the football program. Recommendations for practitioners and scholars include using the findings to better understand the value of intercollegiate athletics in enhancing the identities of broader campus communities and studying an urban setting where a successful NCAA Division II athletics program exists.

Keywords: intercollegiate athletics, basking in reflected glory, sport consumer behavior, social identity theory, team identification, social anchor theory

Reflections of Residents in a Rural Midwestern Community on the Impacts of a Successful University Football Program

Introduction

Intercollegiate athletics are embedded in the fabric of American culture and provide a source of unity and pride for the students, universities, and communities they represent (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013). When they are successful, athletic programs are a powerful tool that institutions and communities can leverage to attract the attention of students, alumni, and fans while enhancing their reputations (Duderstadt, 2003; Gumprecht, 2003; Miller, 2003; Pope & Pope, 2009).

As such, intercollegiate athletics attract a high level of attention from scholars and sports fans alike (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013). Within the landscape of scholarly literature related to intercollegiate athletics, the research of basking in reflected glory (BIRG) established by Cialdini et al. (1976) and social identity theory (SIT) established by Tajfel and Turner (1979) laid a foundation for additional research that provides insight into how groups of people affiliate with sports teams and feel a sense of belonging when following them. The intent of the current study is to contribute to the previous research while filling a gap that exists related to qualitative research centered on the effects of a successful NCAA Division II football team on residents of the rural Midwestern community it inhabits.

Literature Review

Several common research topics emerged during a review of scholarly literature specific to the impacts of athletic success at the intercollegiate level, including that a

majority of researchers studying impacts of intercollegiate athletics success have focused on NCAA Division I programs (Coakley, 2008), particularly football (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Snyder & Waterstone, 2015), leaving a low percentage of scholarly research addressing the NCAA's lower divisions. Baucom and Lantz (2001), who studied faculty attitudes toward male student-athletes at a Division II school, posited the reasons for the dearth of research involving smaller, lower division schools may be that athletes are more representative of those institutions' student bodies and academic missions. More recently, Davis et al. (2020), who used quantitative methods to study how team identification helped students adjust to college life at a mid-sized, public Division II institution in the northeastern region of the United States, contended the reason for the dearth of research related to small division athletics programs is that they lack the influence and power that larger Division I universities possess.

Among scholars who have studied athletics success at the Division II level are Jensen and DeSchriver (2002) and Wells et al. (2000), both of whom found that success positively related to game attendance at Division II institutions. Also, Castle and Kostelnik (2011) determined athletics success had a significant positive effect on student applications and improving the quality of students that enroll as first-time freshmen at Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference institutions, and Feezell (2013) determined NCAA divisional status, among other demographic characteristics, influenced the attitudes of faculty members at Division II institutions in the South.

Further, researchers studying impacts of intercollegiate athletics overwhelmingly have relied on quantitative methods to examine levels of success, formulating their results from data collected through surveys or publicly available data sets (Coakley,

2008). Qualitative studies include Benford (2007) and Lawrence (2009) addressing faculty perceptions and attitudes toward intercollegiate athletics, Rudd and Mondello (2006) and Snyder and Waterstone (2015) studying coaches and institutional leaders, Warner and Dixon (2013) and Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) studying student engagement, and Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) studying the organizational culture of an athletics department.

Statement of the Problem

The review of literature revealed a gap in qualitative research addressing impacts of a successful NCAA Division II football program at a small, rural public university in the Midwest region of the United States (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Coakley, 2008). Further, BIRG and SIT research exploring the relationships of connected groups beyond students and alumni (e.g., residents of a community) or individuals who have no formal connection with the university being studied, as Jensen et al. (2016) suggested, is limited. No such research evaluates concepts of BIRG at the Division II level, and Davis et al. (2020), in a study involving undergraduate students at a mid-sized Division II university in the Northeast, conducted the only existing research of SIT at the Division II level.

Purpose of the Study

Mindful of gaps in research related to impacts of success in intercollegiate athletics and the paucity of studies involving groups that are external to the campus setting, the purpose of the study was to analyze a successful NCAA Division II football program's impacts on the rural, Midwest community it represents and the ways that residents identify with the team. Using qualitative methods, the proposed case study involved conducting interviews and focus groups to collect narratives of residents' lived

experiences during and after a decade when the college football program went from perennial losing seasons to consecutive winning seasons that included multiple national championships. By interviewing residents about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to the football program during the allotted time period, the study sought to contribute experiences of a small college environment to existing literature of BIRG and SIT that, as described previously, is largely limited to research of NCAA Division I institutions.

Research Question

This qualitative study sought to understand the effects of a university football program's success on a rural Midwestern community and its residents. Thus, the overarching research question guiding the proposed study was: What is the impact of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents?

Theoretical Framework

The key concepts, definitions, and theories driving the study were derived from the tendencies of individuals and connected groups to more closely associate themselves with the sports teams they follow when those teams are successful. Cialdini et al. (1976) identified the tendency of supporters of athletic teams to BIRG, defined as a person or group of people who share in the glory of another person's or group's success even though they were not directly involved with generating the success but are somehow associated. Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed SIT, which describes an individual's tendency to strive to maintain a positive self-image by attaching themselves to certain groups that contribute to their social identity, thus providing two theories through which the current study was conducted. The differences among the divisions of NCAA

intercollegiate athletic levels, which foster varied competition, environments, and interest (Robinson et al., 2005), provided a third lens.

Bask in Reflected Glory

The original BIRG research consisted of three field studies that involved students at Division I institutions and the ways they support their school teams (Cialdini et al., 1976). Results demonstrated students' affiliations with successful athletic teams, specifically by wearing team apparel after a victory and using the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success, even though they were not directly involved with the causes of it (Cialdini et al., 1976). The researchers noted the outcomes "suggest a way to understand how the fortunes of affiliated sports teams can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 374).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) is based on an assumption that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by establishing an emotional attachment with groups that contribute to the individual's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, SIT posits that people are motivated to emphasize and secure the ways in which their group is positively distinct from other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Two secondary concepts rooted in SIT are team identification, which "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116), and social anchor theory, which "posits that community (in its myriad forms) is built of social networks that are 'anchored' to the community" (Katz & Clopton, 2014, p. 289).

NCAA Division I, Division II, and Division III

A decades-long dissatisfaction with the lack of championship opportunities and a widening gap between small and large institutions motivated the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to restructure itself in 1973 and establish three divisions for athletics competition (Katz & Clopton, 2014; Katz & Seifried, 2014; NCAA, 2022a). Restructures of Division I football since the 1970s have evolved into the present-day structure consisting of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), which competes in bowl games and the College Football Playoff, and the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) (NCAA, 2022b). Today, by virtue of their scholarship levels, a larger school in a higher division generally translates to more media exposure and support from fans and donors (Katz & Clopton, 2014).

Division I, which is considered the highest level of competition, draws high attendance and aspires for national prominence while offering the most scholarships of any classification (Robinson et al., 2005). On the other side of NCAA sports, Division III programs are viewed as the lowest level of competition, draw low attendance and award no athletics-based financial assistance while placing priority on the educational experience and meeting the needs of internal constituencies that include students and alumni, not the general public (Katz & Clopton, 2014; Katz et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2005).

Division II programs occupy the middle, offering partial scholarships that still recognize a student's athletic skills but aligning with its "Life in the Balance" mantra to inspire both athletic and academic excellence (NCAA, 2022c, para 5). At the Division II level, operating budgets are significantly less than Division I, and athletic departments

rely on institutional support and student fees rather than ticket revenue as their primary funding sources (Orszag & Orszag, 2005; Robinson et al., 2005).

Methods

The current research was founded as a case study through which the conscious, lived experiences of residents in Midwestern rural community were analyzed, using qualitative methods outlined by Creswell (2013), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Mertens (2020). Working from Mertens' (2020) premise that case studies involve in-depth description and analysis of a contemporary phenomenon in a bounded context, the study used methods that sought an "individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience and calls upon the researcher to suspend theories, explanations, hypotheses, and conceptualizations to be able to understand the phenomenon" (p. 255).

With that practical knowledge, the study involved conducting interviews and focus groups with residents of a rural Midwestern community that supports a small, regional public university and its NCAA Division II athletics programs. The interviews and focus groups attempted to capture the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences that resulted from a phenomenon occurring in the community when the university's football program went from mediocrity to claiming multiple national championships in the span of a decade.

The Setting

The setting for the study was a rural Midwestern community with a small, regional public university that competes athletically within the structure of NCAA Division II. With a population of nearly 11,000 residents, Midwest Town boasts a strong

economic climate fueled by robust manufacturing, health care, agriculture, and education services. It prides itself as “a dynamic community” that enhances the quality of life for its residents through public services, safe neighborhoods, and a vibrant economy (Midwest Town, 2022d, vision statement).

Midwest Town is home to Midwest University, which opened in 1905 after a decades-long struggle and efforts by civic leaders, among others, to locate a college in the community yielded a state bill that created a teacher training school (Brandon-Falcone, 2005; Dykes, 1956). Today, Midwest University is a comprehensive, moderately selective public institution that boasts an enrollment of about 8,000 students and represents a source for regional development in partnership with other agencies and institutions (Midwest University, 2021a).

Prior to the 1990s, however, Midwest University’s football team, known as the Wolverines, regularly posted unimpressive win-loss records during a time period when the university was addressing declining enrollment, a lack of distinctiveness, and a threat of closure (Brandon-Falcone, 2005). During the subsequent decade, changes to the athletic director role, the coaching staff, facilities, budgeting, and the logo with which the program identified preceded a dramatic turnaround in the football program’s performance that hit a crescendo with multiple national championships (Merrill, 2017; Midwest University, 2019).

Participants

Participants in the current study consisted of residents of the community being studied. They were selected for interviews and focus groups through a combination of purposeful sampling methods, including convenience sampling and snowball sampling.

Through convenience sampling, study participants are selected based on time, location, and availability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020). Through the use of snowball sampling, the researcher identifies individuals who are knowledgeable about the setting and seeks recommendations for other potential participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020; Seidman, 2019).

More specific criteria for an individual's participation in the study beyond residing in the rural community that served as the research setting included the participant's role as a witness to any identity shift that occurred within the community as a result of the university football program's success. Study participants must have lived in the community since before 1993, which is the year that changes at the university helped jumpstart the football program's success. Participants had no direct involvement with the athletic department or football program to align with assumptions established by the foundational BIRG (Cialdini et al., 1976) and SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) research, which suggested people who are not directly involved with the cause of a team's success or fate establish attachments to teams after success is achieved.

As shown in Table 4, the participants comprised 25 individuals who established residency in Midwest Town prior to 1993 and have maintained their residency, thus allowing them to witness changes that have occurred in the community. The participants ranged in age from 46 to 87 and included 16 males and nine females. While their professions and reasons for residing in Midwest Town varied, the study participants have lived an average of 46 years in the community. Pseudonyms were assigned to the names of study participants as well as the components of the setting to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Table 4

Study participants

	Age	Gender identity	Years residing in Midwest Town	Reason for coming to Midwest Town	Professional field
Barry	68	M	42	work	law
Ben[a]	46	M	34	born	health
Beverly	59	F	59	born	education
Brenda	67	F	41	work	law
Burt	46	M	46	born	family services
Edward	64	M	42	college	finance
Frannie	76	F	38	spouse	finance
Fred	77	M	38	work	millitary
Greg	68	M	48	work	business owner
Henry	68	M	29	work	education
Hillary	64	F	32	college	self-employed
Janice	67	F	29	spouse	education
John	68	M	29	work	finance
Lou	71	M	51	work	trade work
Mike	71	M	50	college	education
Nancy	67	F	67	born	finance
Ned	69	M	48	work	trade work
Rene	56	F	43	spouse	finance
Rhonda	84	F	53	spouse	health
Rick	87	M	53	work	education
Robert	70	M	53	college	trade work
Russ	82	M	48	work	trade work
Ruth	67	F	67	born	finance
Tom	67	M	50	college	finance
Wes	68	M	65	family	education

[a] Participant lived in Midwest Town from birth until 2000 and returned in 2012.

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection occurred through a series of interviews, focus groups, and a review of historical documents and artifacts relevant to the phenomenon being studied to achieve triangulation. By doing so, researchers crystalize their work, thus presenting multidimensional research that increases the credibility and quality of their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Using the described criteria and through the contact process, the researcher selected interview participants who were assumed to have extensive knowledge of the setting and involvement in the community prior to the start of the football program's success. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in person, by phone, and via the Zoom virtual meeting platform, dependent on the participant's location, availability, and preference. The researcher used a semi-structured interview style (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019) to explore participants' perceptions of the setting being studied and clarify circumstances that led them to their level of attachment with the football program. The semi-structured interviews ensured specific data, including demographic data (see Appendix D), was collected from participants while allowing for flexibility and open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that were useful in asking participants to reconstruct experiences associated with the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 2019). The interviews and focus groups, which lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour, were recorded, transcribed, and coded for the purposes of data analysis, which is described later in this section.

While ethical and equitable methods were followed throughout the study, informed consent (see Appendix E) was used to help participants understand the potential

risks of being interviewed and make clear that they were volunteers in the research process (Seidman, 2019). Member checking, a qualitative research strategy that involves seeking feedback from participants regarding the preliminary findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020), also was deployed to ensure trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis phase, transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were reviewed, and noteworthy passages were labeled by coding, a process of identifying themes and patterns in the descriptive accounts provided by the willing participants (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). By allowing themes and patterns to rise from passages, as Seidman (2019) described, the coded accounts were then connected to scholarly literature related to the theoretical framework using BIRG and SIT tendencies as well as differences in NCAA competition levels.

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

The primary limitation of this qualitative study is the use of convenience sampling, which involves drawing participants who are conveniently accessible to the researcher (Andrade, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020). Although common in qualitative research, convenience sampling is not desirable because results are not generalizable beyond the sample size, which may not represent the entire community being studied and has limited external validity (Andrade, 2021; Mertens, 2020).

A second limitation was the involvement of couples in focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2015) noted a tendency of one spouse, when a couple is participating together in a focus group, to defer to their more talkative partner. Although the researcher took steps to address each participant and invited each person to answer questions asked during focus

group sessions, the researcher observed that male participants tended to dominate the discussions.

Another limitation for this study that must be acknowledged is that the researcher is affiliated with the university and community depicted in the study. The researcher's pre-existing relationship with the setting may have yielded biases in the study, which were mitigated with design controls to limit any biases. The researcher made clear to participants, through contact visits and the use of informed consent, that they were volunteers in the research process (Seidman, 2019). Member checking, a qualitative research strategy that involves seeking feedback from participants regarding the preliminary findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2020), also was deployed. Themes and patterns were allowed to rise from transcriptions through a coding process and further validated with scholarly literature and historical accounts.

Discussion and Findings

The findings of the current study, as this section will show, support and contribute to prior scholar research related to intercollegiate athletics and the impacts of a successful team on an affiliated group through the lens of BIRG (Cialdini et al., 1976) and SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as well as the concepts of team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011). As such, the narratives of residents living in a small, rural Midwestern community provided additional context to previous research and filled a gap left by a lack of qualitative research related to the topic.

"Like When the Sun Shines"

To introduce the findings of the current study, the observations of one Midwest

Town resident provide a useful overview and a metaphor for how study participants feel about Midwest University and its football team, known as the Wolverines. The resident, Mike, is an outlier among the Midwest Town residents who participated in the current study and have observed a shift in attitudes toward the Midwest University football program since it changed course from an extensive history of losing to claiming multiple national championships during the 1990s and a sustained culture of winning. When Mike was a student at the university during the early 1970s, he rarely missed a football game. Later, as he settled in Midwest Town as an adult, began his career as a teacher, and started raising a family, his game attendance and interest in the Wolverines football program declined significantly, even as its fortunes transformed in dramatic fashion. Still, the pride he feels for the team's success and the ways it has affected Midwest Town are apparent. "It's kind of like when the sun shines," he said. "You just feel better, and that's come down to the pride of just feeling like, 'Yeah, yeah. I'm, I'm from Midwest Town,' you know, and I have nothing to do with the program and have no stake in it whatsoever, but yeah. You know, 'Wolves looked good this week.' You claim their success."

Mike's observation aligns with the theoretical framework of the current study, the results will further demonstrate the pride Midwest Town residents feel toward the football program and their tendencies to more closely associate with an athletic team when it is successful.

Tendencies to Bask in Reflected Glory

The seminal research of Cialdini et al. (1976), through the findings of three field studies, identified people's tendency to BIRG and closely affiliate themselves with successful athletic teams even though they were not directly involved with the causes of

the success. That research, as shown in Table 5, showed a significant tendency of university students attending NCAA Division I institutions to wear apparel representing their schools after a victory and a higher likelihood to use the pronoun *we* to associate themselves with a team's success. Through qualitative methods, similar tendencies were documented within the current study involving residents of Midwest Town when they reflected on their affiliations with the Midwest University Wolverines football team and the ways their behaviors and attitudes toward the team changed when it became successful.

Table 5

Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies Conducted by Cialdini et al. (1976)

Field studies	Procedure	Result
Study 1	Apparel worn by students enrolled at seven NCAA Division I institutions was monitored.	Students wore school apparel on Mondays after football victories at a significantly higher rate than Mondays after non-victories.
Study 2	Students at an NCAA Division I institution with a nationally ranked football team were contacted by phone and asked a series of questions, which included manipulations, about campus life and campus athletic events.	Participants used the pronoun *we* to associate themselves more often with a positive source than a negative one.
Study 3	Students at an NCAA Division I institution with a successful football team were contacted by phone and asked to describe outcomes of their football team's games during the previous year.	Participants used the pronoun *we* nearly twice as often to describe a victory than a non-victory.

Note. Adapted from *Basking in reflected glory: Three (football) field studies* (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Apparel for the Win

Prior to the 1990s, Wolverine apparel was barely spotted in Midwest Town, nor was it widely available. Study participants remembered that the only apparel available at that time was sold in the bookstore on the Midwest University campus, and those items were in short supply and not considered fashionable to wear. Beyond the campus boundaries, Midwest University apparel simply was not sold. “It wasn’t a source of pride to know your football team won two games,” said Lou, who came to Midwest Town in 1970 to attend the university and has steadily maintained his support of the football team since then.

Access to university apparel within Midwest Town has evolved significantly since the Wolverines football program became successful, however. Since opening in the 1990s, a locally owned store that specializes in Midwest University apparel has expanded, and become a stable retail anchor in the community. Grocery stores and national retailers operating in Midwest Town now dedicate sections of their stores to Midwest University merchandise that also includes flags, license plates, car decals and mugs, among other collectibles. One shop owner reported his apparel sales jumped 200 percent during the buildup to the Wolverines’ first national championship game appearance (Kozol, 1998), and after the Wolverines won that game, an advertisement in the university’s alumni newspaper promoted Wolverine hats, shirts, sweatshirts and other paraphernalia with pictures of children and couples, young and old, wearing the apparel, all under the headline “Everyone wants to be Wolverine – now more than ever!” (Midwest University, 1999)

Study participants said they purchase and wear apparel regularly now to show

their pride for the team and their association with the university. In some families, Wolverine apparel is all their children know to wear, and even residents who do not regularly attend games wear it. Study participants described owning stacks of sweatshirts and T-shirts measuring 1 or 2 feet high. Some said they could wear one Wolverine shirt every day of the week for perhaps close to a month, which sometimes opens those fans—like Edward, a resident of Midwest Town and follower of the football program since he arrived to attend Midwest University in 1979—to some mocking for having wardrobes full of Wolverine clothing. “Now, when I go to meetings, people ask me if I have anything other than Midwest University attire,” he said.

Burt, a 46-year-old who was born and raised in Midwest Town and attended the university as the Wolverines fortunes were changing on the football field, noted the excitement of a big win has, on several occasions, motivated him to purchase a shirt from a display at one of the local retailers. “When we started winning it was, it became cool to wear it,” he said.

Levy (1959) posited that people buy an item for the personal and social meaning it represents “when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself.” That notion aligns with the descriptions and perceptions of participants in the current study, which relate directly to the findings of Ahearne et al. (2005), who determined consumers tend to purchase more and recommend an organization to others when they identify strong with the organization.

After all, such a phenomenon was the inspiration for the BIRG research conducted by Cialdini et al. (1976). On a weekday after The Ohio State University had risen to No. 1 in the Associated Press ream rankings, Cialdini himself noticed nearly

everyone he encountered on the campus was wearing red Ohio State jackets (Jensen et al., 2016). Jensen et al. (2016) confirmed the original findings in their replication of the research and suggested such shows of allegiance could be called COATing, or celebrating our accomplishment together, positing that a victory "is perceived as something that can be enjoyed collectively not just by those who participated in the game itself" (p. 158). The narratives collected during the current study reaffirm that people's decisions to associate themselves with a team by wearing school-affiliated apparel is influenced and predicated by the team's success, thus demonstrating the impact of a successful university football program on residents of the rural community. By wearing Wolverine apparel, Midwest Town residents exhibit that they are part of the social group that supports the team.

"We" Did It

As Cialdini et al. (1976) found in their research, participants of the current study were observed using the pronoun *we* when they reflected on the success of the Midwest University football program. It was a premise not lost on Wes, a retired educator who has lived nearly all of his 65 years in Midwest Town and enjoyed a close affiliation with Midwest University as the son of a faculty member before attending the university himself. "Everybody likes to have ownership," he said. "You know, 'that's my team, that's my team, that's our team.'"

Lou used the pronoun as he reflected on the turnaround in the Wolverines performance and the head coaching change that precipitated it. "I've been going to games since 1970. There were a lot of years if we could win 50% of our conference games, I was happy. … [When the change occurred] I thought, 'Why in the world would we get

rid of him? We've won like six or seven conference games? We can't do any better than that.' … We've gone from 'Forget the conference.' We're going to the national championship."

Likewise, Burt used the pronoun as he recalled attending a Wolverines game during the previous season and sitting among a group of fans, who also reportedly used the pronoun as they exhibited frustration with the team's performance in a game the team eventually won. Burt recalled, "We were down and we came back in the second quarter, and the whole first half all I heard was 'We got to get rid of [the head coach].'"

Indeed, the residents' use of the pronoun *we* supports the findings of the research by Cialdini et al. (1976), though the results of the current study are not congruent. In the original study, it was reported that 25% of the study participants used the *we* pronoun (Cialdini et al., 1976), and the study conducted by Jensen et al. (2016) found that 64% of participants used at least one first-person plural pronoun (i.e., we, us, our) in describing the results of a game. While participants in the previous studies were asked a specific set of questions to determine the research outcomes, the findings of the current study emerged from the broader semi-structed interviews during which 11 of the 25 participants, or 44%, in the current study used the pronoun and did so sparingly.

Lavish Displays of Civic Gratitude and Pride

Cialdini et al. (1976) concluded their research presented an understanding of how successful sports teams "can cause lavish displays of civic gratitude and pride" (p. 374). Similarly, the narratives of participants in the current study demonstrate the impact of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents by depicting the enhanced sense of pride Midwest Town residents began to feel when the

Wolverines football team started winning consistently. Displays of civic gratitude and pride in Midwest Town are represented by symbols that are emblematic of residents' feelings toward Midwest University and its football program.

Symbols of Gratitude. Attitudes and perceptions of Midwest University in the community improved dramatically in parallel with the Wolverine football team's success, study participants observed. Although study participants expressed a mostly positive perception of Midwest University prior to the 1990s, they viewed it merely as an educational institution and a teacher's college. Generally, study participants indicated, Midwest Town residents viewed the university and the community as separate entities. Barry, who spent his childhood in the region before leaving the community to attend college and returning to Midwest Town in 1979, said, "There was a time, which I would put in the late '70s, '80s timeframe, where there was a line of demarcation between the city and the university, that they were more a suburb component than they were an integral part of the city."

Today, however, residents express gratitude for Midwest University's role in the community's growth and perceive the institution as a highly integrated asset within the community, an economic driver, and a quality institution with athletics programs that make the town an attractive place for people and families to live. Residents generally believe the football program's success was a catalyst for Midwest University's recent enrollment increases, campus improvements and a heightened interest among people who visit from outside of Midwest Town, in addition to changes in perceptions and attitudes toward the university within the town.

Robert, who came to Midwest Town in 1969 to attend the University and stayed

as a utility worker, articulated the sense of pride by saying, "Once, you know, they started winning and showed that Midwest University could win it all, the attitude completely changed." Wes added, "The community, they really got on board. They really got on board with the university when the football team started getting some national recognition."

Symbols of Pride. Nearly all of the residents interviewed for the current study unwittingly used the word "pride" when describing their feelings about the success and the strengthened sense of community they perceive as a result of the Wolverines' success. A sample of participant quotes is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Coding quotes: Pride

Participants	Quotations
Ben	"What's been created and the businesses that have popped up and the pride that's popped up and all the stuff that comes with that creates a, in some respect has put our community on the map in a way that it had not historically been on the map."
Edward	"When teams would go eat at Hy-Vee and stuff, a lot of people would stop and talk to them. So it was just, everybody felt better, more pride in, in Midwest Town and in Midwest University."
Henry	"It gives people a, I think, a sense community pride, you know, to, you know, say that, you know, they can share that, that identity of the winning team."
Lou	"It's created a, a greater sense of pride for the community towards Midwest University. And it's, it's that, it's a pride, which that pride then has led to a connection between the two."
Robert	"As they started winning and especially when they won the first national title, the expectations and the fact that the pride is a community for the Midwest University football team changed completely because, you know, they went from a losing mentality to a winning mentality."

Additionally, like the proliferation of apparel, displays of pride for the Wolverine football program and Midwest University became more visible in Midwest Town after the team became successful. Those displays figure prominently in the town today as symbols that help residents feel a sense of unity with the university. The foremost symbol of that pride throughout the community is the Wolverines' paw logo adopted soon after the head coaching change that precipitated the success (Midwest Public Radio, 2010). The pawprints are embedded in the pavement on College Avenue, a thoroughfare that is lined with decorative lamps adorned with Midwest University banners and connects the university campus to Midwest Town's downtown. An archway outfitted with city and university logos serves as a gateway bridging the two areas of the town.

Similarly, the mascot is embedded in the names of businesses in Midwest Town, like Wolverine Lanes and Wolverine Lumber, while a bar and grille and a car dealership include nods to Midwest University's recent championship history in the names of their businesses. Posters promoting Wolverine athletics teams are common in storefronts, and flags with the paw logo fly on business facades as well as residential porches. Robert observed, "At the convenience stores, at the grocery stores, at the pharmacies you'll see a sign that says 'We are the pharmacy of the Midwest University Wolverines,' you know, 'The grocery store of the Midwest University Wolverines.' … It's all based on, on the fact that there's a winning mentality around town."

These symbols of gratitude and pride would not exist without the football team's sustained success, study participants said, and leaders in the community actively look for ways to align their businesses and organizations with Midwest University because of it. One of those leaders is Ben, who has lived the majority of his life in Midwest Town and

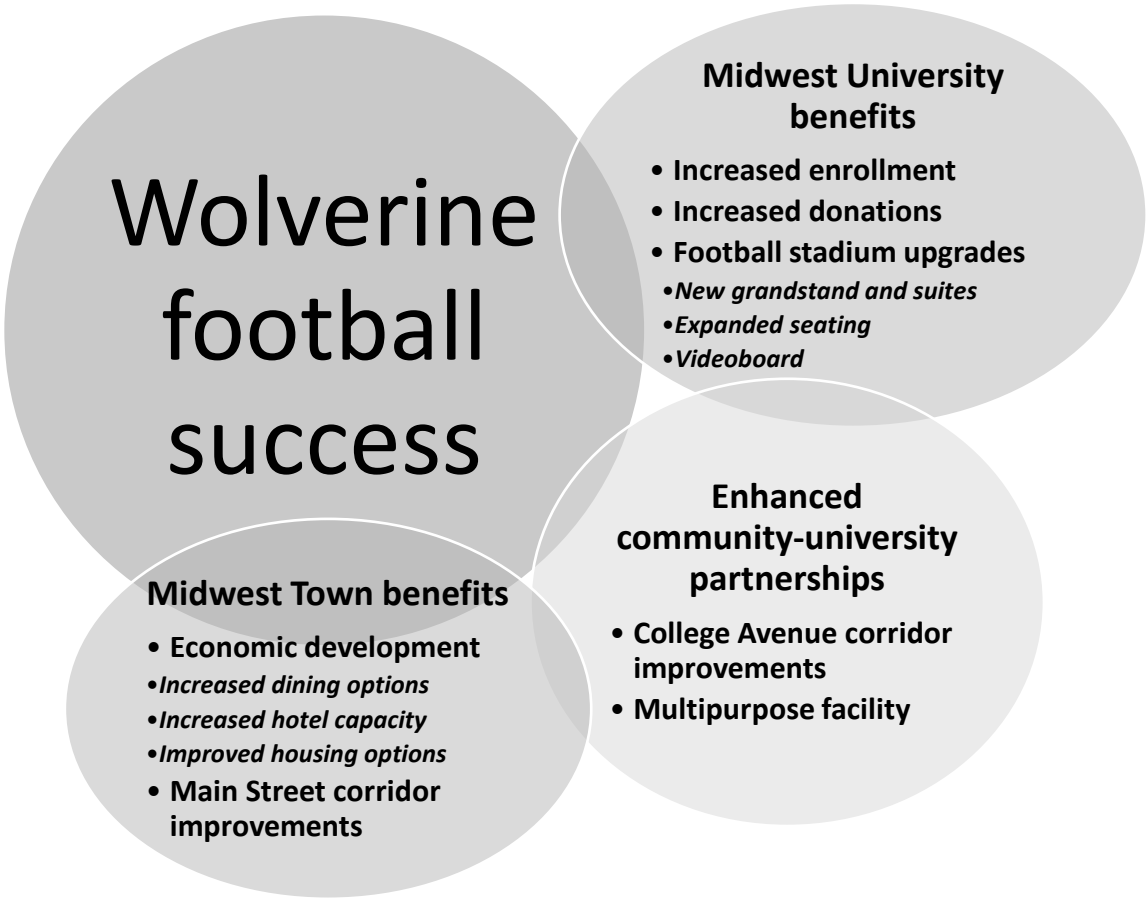
said, “One of the things that I’ve been really focused on in my leadership role here is how do we get connected to the paw? How do we, how do we become part of the university and vice versa? I mean, we, we want it to be a mutually beneficial relationship and large part of that is because you want to be connected to the success.”

Symbols of progress. Study participants also pointed to a series of enhancements within Midwest Town and on the Midwest University campus as symbols of progress, as shown in Figure 2, that they perceive to be results of the Wolverine football program’s success. Such symbols cited by study participants included upgrades to the Midwest University football stadium, among other campus facilities, as evidence of the community’s pride in the Wolverines’ success. The success, study participants said, has helped unify the community with the university, and residents have exhibited little resistance to supporting and helping fund projects such as the stadium upgrades and a new multipurpose facility. Said Rick, who moved with his family to Midwest Town in 1968, “People wanted a good venue to play in if we’re going to have a good team,” prompting his wife, Rhonda, to add, “Plus, we didn’t want the other colleges that we play outdoing us.”

Elsewhere in Midwest Town, study participants observed, a variety of retail and restaurant and lodging options that did not exist previously have opened, and housing options have improved. Study participants perceived the football team’s success as the spark to a ripple effect that has inspired a stronger sense of pride in the community’s appearance and character, leading to improvements along the College Avenue and Main Street corridors. Henry, who’s career as a teacher brought him to Midwest Town a few years before the Wolverines’ successful turnaround, said, “It almost seems like maybe

Figure 2

Midwest Town and Midwest University Improvements Resulting from Football Success



there's a little bit more … pride in the, in making the town look nicer because you were going to have people coming to see the football team. So you, you've got these, you know, this incentive."

The narratives of study participants and the sense of pride they feel toward Midwest University and the Wolverines football program because of the organizational success not only aligns with the findings of Cialdini et al. (1976) but with the research of other scholars who support the notion that sport teams are symbolic in communities. Anderson and Stone (1981) wrote that "sports teams and the facilities where they perform

may become a source of pride and thus, serve as a major source of integration in the community" (p. 167).

While Bolman and Deal (2017) noted that "symbols carry powerful intellectual and emotional messages" (p. 236), Levy (1959) defined a symbol as "a general term for all instances where experience is mediated rather than direct; where an object, action, word, picture, or complex behavior is understood to mean not only itself but also some other ideas or feelings."

Social Identity Theory

Since its establishment, SIT has been updated and expanded and has informed analysis on a range of studies regarding group processes and intergroup relations (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). The theory is based on an assumption that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem by establishing an emotional attachment with groups that contribute to the individual's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

While participants in the current study exhibited positive attitudes toward the Wolverines as a result of the football team's success, they also willingly acknowledged a losing team would not generate the enthusiasm that is so apparent in Midwest Town. Just as study participants frequently recognized the pride they hold for Midwest University and its football team, another common refrain throughout interviews and focus group during the study was, in varying words, the phrase, "Everybody wants to be associated with a winner."

Fred, for example, moved to Midwest Town with his family in 1983 as part of his work with the military. He had earned a bachelor's degree from one of Midwest University's rivals and described the ways his own apathy toward the Wolverine football

team evolved as the team became successful and he and his wife began attending more games. “Everybody loves a winner. Period. If this, if the football program starts going south, attendance will start going south. … As long as they’re winning, people will come to the stands. People come from out of town, too.”

Wes said, “If they weren’t successful, I think you’d see the support dwindle, you know. Everybody likes to be on board with a winner. It’s hard to be on board with a mediocre team or a inferior team.” Likewise, Rhonda said, “It’s not too hard to get people behind a winning team, but it was really great to see the change between just having mediocracy to having quality.”

Mike, the outlier among study participants, concluded, “It’s brought people together, you know. It doesn’t have to be just at the stadium, but the different flags people put out, their symbols of support, bumper stickers that it, you know, the guy who walks in with a Midwest University, ‘Hey, great jacket’ or whatever. ‘I love that cap.’ You know, those kinds of things that it just, you know, I keep going back to the pride of the community and a positive outlook. Everybody wants to be associated with a winner.”

By acknowledging their attachment to the Wolverines as a result of the team’s winning ways, and that the team would likely draw less support if it was losing, study participants spoke directly to one of social identity theory’s key principles that individuals attach to groups that enhance their self-esteem and, thus, recognized the impact of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents. Further, as will be discussed in the following subsections, the study participants’ narratives underpin the intergroup behavior that occurs by residents attaching themselves to the football team. Social identity is a perception of belongingness to a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and helps advance understanding of how people behave in social terms

rather than personal (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). In other words, people who associate with a group are defined by that group's characteristics rather than personal traits.

Team Identification

Team identification is a concept grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that "provides ties with the larger social structure and a sense of belongingness in a society" (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116). Given that Midwest Town residents show a tendency to BIRG in relation to the Wolverine football team's success, it is plausible that they also show a high level of team identification, as Wann and Branscombe (1990) found in their study of group allegiances. While myriad studies suggest people are more likely to identify with a team when it is successful (Bass et al., 2012; Delia & James, 2018; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), the narratives of participants within the current study closely align with other scholarly research (Heere & James, 2007b) suggesting that team identity not only enhances sense of belonging but also positively influences consumer behavior and fans' decisions to purchase merchandise, tickets, and other products or services that maintain team identity.

Belonging to the Group. Since more people began wearing Wolverine apparel because it became, as Burt said, "cool" to wear it, residents have experienced enhanced identification and bonds that uplift their social structure. Residents described feeling immense pride and a sense of belonging when they wear their Wolverine apparel outside of Midwest Town, and those senses are further heightened when another person associates them with the athletics success. Such brand associations nourish the group identity (Delia & James, 2018).

Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that highly identified people are more likely

to believe other fans of their team are special and they are bonded. Similarly, study participants described feeling an immediate bond with another person representing the Wolverines even if they had not met previously, and, almost like family members who have not seen each other for a length of time, they are likely to open a conversation about their shared affiliation. While the football team's success influences their decisions to attach themselves and identify with the team, study participants described residents feeling a sense of belonging through their interactions with other supporters. Ben articulated such encounters this way:

> There's a connection that you instantly make with people. … There's that instant rapport. 'I may not know you, but we're best friends.' And, and, um, so I think it's that, it's that pride in that, that, uh, camaraderie, and, and to some degree, even that, that family, because, you know, um, Midwest fans, I'm sure, can be rowdy and be disruptive and not be, not be liked by other institutions. And I certainly get that, but I think, generally speaking, Midwest fans are kind and considerate. And so, you know, that when you see somebody wearing Midwest gear, that they're probably exhibit those attributes. And so you kind of have a more instant rapport with somebody who's also wearing the paw.

Additionally, stories abound of residents traveling for family vacations or business trips and associating with someone because one of them was wearing Wolverine apparel. Residents of Midwest Town generally are eager to show their pride for the Wolverines and Midwest University, even though, as Edward conceded—and the BIRG research of Cialdini et al. (1976) and others demonstrates—"They weren't the ones

putting in the effort." Still, study participants said, residents exhibit joy in the common identity that exists when they see someone else wearing the apparel.

Just as sports fans commonly connect over memories of favorite teams, players, and championships (Heere et al., 2011), Midwest Town residents are eager to share their stories of encounters with other Wolverine supporters. They describe such meetings in crowded places like airports and Disney World, throughout the United States from Las Vegas, Nevada, to Charlotte, North Carolina, and even across the world in Scotland and England. Residents have grown so accustomed to it, study participants said, that it seems more uncommon not to have that experience when they travel. Said Edward, "You always say, 'Go Wolverines,' or 'Once a Wolverine, always a Wolverine.' So it's nice to, it makes the world a smaller place when you see somebody. You know, you're far away, but yet here's another Midwest fan or probably graduate. So it just makes the world not so big."

Belonging to the Conversation. Residents of Midwest Town remember a time when the Wolverine football program was irrelevant within the community. Study participants described a feeling of apathy toward the football program, and it seemed few people cared whether the team won or lost on Saturdays. Burt recalled, "Used to be, it was just something that happened. You know, we, we just had to have a team 'cause that's what you did. And then, uh, no people were talking about it."

But when the Wolverine football program began having success, it became a source of conversation in the town's coffee shops, barbershops, and store aisles. Residents were suddenly enthusiastic about the team and now, Ned said, "we have more, more people talking about the football team than probably ever before."

Barry recalled, “They became a subject of positive conversation. And we had a very good friend who got off at work at times. So he’d go watch practice every day, you know? And he wasn’t the only one there. Lots of people in the community that are watching practice, and they know who’s taking reps with the team, who’s injured, who’s out, and who’s—all of that is now Sunday morning subject at church is, you know, ‘Who got hurt yesterday?’ And ‘Are they going to be back for next week?’”

Wann and Branscombe (1993) suggested that people who identify strongly with a sports team “report more involvement with the team, display a more ego-enhancing pattern of attributions for the team’s successes, … exhibit greater willingness to invest larger amounts of time and money in order to watch the team play, and are more likely to believe that fans of the team they are identified with possess special qualities.” Study participants’ narratives in this subsection align with those findings and provide more credence to the intergroup relations that define SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Anchor Theory

Presenting another concept grounded in SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Clopton and Finch (2011) reconceptualized social anchors as institutions, including corporations, schools, and sports, that “act as a support for the development and maintenance of social capital and social networks” (p. 70). The researchers further stipulated that institutions qualify as social anchors when they have established an environment in which social capital in the form of bonding and bridging occurs, and members are encouraged to personally identify across demographic boundaries. Katz & Clopton (2014) wrote that social anchors become integrated within the social context of communities and foster “an element of ‘thick trust’” (p. 290).

In Midwest Town, the success of the Wolverine football program has fostered social networks at Wolverine Stadium on Saturday afternoons as well as other community anchors, such as schools, through residents' enthusiasm for the team. Barry, who has had season tickets since the early 1980s and was an early member of the Wolverine Booster Club, said the football team became "a catalyst that brings people from both components, both the university and the city, whatever you want to call that, together for a common goal, which then fosters friendships and conversations, because they're our team."

The Stadium as a Social Anchor. Today, as the team enjoys consistent winning, crowds pack Wolverine Stadium to cheer on the team. Residents, students, and visitors alike enjoy being a part of the game day atmosphere that surrounds the competition on the football field, including the socialization that occurs during tailgating activities in the parking lots and open fields near the stadium and at after-parties at Midwest Town bars and restaurants.

But it wasn't that way prior to the Wolverines' success when seats were widely available as games kicked off. Tales of the Wolverines' not-so-glorious days are fodder for residents who now relish the team's success. Some residents used to joke that, when the team was not successful, they could invite all the people in the stadium to their house after the game and probably fit everybody inside because it seemed so few attended games.

Barry said he never envisioned a packed stadium when the Wolverines were playing poorly. He recalled, "If you wanted to lay down and take a nap, there was room.

Really, I mean, I went to a lot of games where there weren't three people within my ability to reach out and touch them."

Burt said, "I remember being out there, and there might've been a hundred to 150 of us in the stands for football games. … Now, you know, especially some of the bigger games and the playoff games, you may not be able to find a seat." Edward, a season ticket holder since 1992, said, "You could go out there and sit anywhere, you know, in 1992 or three. I mean, you could go take somebody's seat and they didn't care. … You don't ever see that now."

Some study participants said their decisions to attend a Wolverines game prior to the team's run of success hinged on weather conditions, among other factors. Tickets were rarely purchased in advance. Then, as the team began winning consistently, study participants said, more people began attending games with an interest in seeing the team that was driving conversations in the community. Henry said, "Now we have season tickets, and then it was just, you know, I'd wait and see how it was that day and I'd maybe go … and with school and family obligations, it didn't seem that important as it does now. Now you drag the whole family." In another contrast with the years when the team was losing games more often, Henry's wife, Hillary, said residents now "have to be careful when you plan something" so family gatherings, community events, and other social gatherings don't interfere with a Wolverines football game.

Indeed, when the team started winning consistently and appearing in playoffs, game attendance increased, as shown in Table 7. Midwest University ranked in the top 15 in football attendance among NCAA Division II institutions for three consecutive years, including a top 10 finish in 1999 (Midwest University, 2000).

Table 7

Midwest University football home game attendance

Weeks	Years							
	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Week 1	2,700	*	5,000	*	2,227	*	5,000	7,600
Week 2	3,200	4,500	*	*	3,400	*	5,000	*
Week 3	6,000	*	6,000	5,000	*	7,200	*	*
Week 4	*	2,000	*	*	6,300	*	7,900	7,750
Week 5	5,500	*	4,500	7,500	*	7,600	*	7,350
Week 6	7,500[a]	3,500	*	4,000	*	*	8,100[a]	*
Week 7	*	*	5,000[a]	*	8,200[a]	8,000[a]	*	8,250[a]
Week 8	3,200	7,500[a]	*	7,500[a]	*	*	7,700	*
Week 9	*	*	3,000	*	3,800	3,125	*	6,500
Week 10	1,500	*	500	4,000	*	6,500	*	*
Week 11	*	400	*	*	6,200	*	7,500	7,500
Week 12					*[b]	7,500[b]	7,750[b]	7,750[b]
Week 13					*[b]	6,500[b]	7,600[b]	*[b]
Week 14							8,000[b]	8,100[b]
Average	4,229	3,580	4,000	4,100	5,021	4,632	4,578	5,619
Median	3,200	3,500	4,500	4,500	5,000	7,200	7,700	7,500

Note. Data provided by Midwest University Department of Athletics. Attendance numbers for the 1990 and 1991 seasons are not available.

[a] Homecoming football games traditionally draw large numbers of alumni back to their college campuses and help generate higher attendance numbers than other games (Jensen & DeSchriver, 2002).

[b] Playoff games.

* Indicates the football team played a game away from Midwest Town at another institution.

John said he and his family began receiving tickets as a benefit from his employer when they moved to Midwest Town in 1992. They took advantage of the perk and attended the games regularly even though the team put up losing records. They were more grateful for that benefit a few years later, however, when the team began having success and saw firsthand how the stadium crowds swelled to capacity. “From about ’95 on, when they started doing well, um, I mean, we were, we didn’t miss very many games out there. … Everybody was excited about the team and look forward to, uh, you know, watching them in any ways that we could.”

“Sports viewing provides individuals with ‘something grander than themselves’ that they can feel a part of, without requiring any special skills, knowledge, or acceptance of particular institutional values” (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). While that passage may explain why residents like Barry, Burt, and Edward attended Wolverine football games during the team’s lean years, the increase in attendance at Wolverine football games correlates with previous scholarly research that indicates attendance rises in conjunction with on-field success (Jensen & DeSchriver, 2002; Wells et al., 2000).

Although researchers previously have associated game attendance with identification (Schurr et al., 1988), it is placed within this subsection of the current study because of the perceived role it plays in creating social capital and unifying bonds among Midwest Town residents who attend Wolverine football games. According to Kahle et al. (1996), consumers tend to associate themselves with winners because it fulfills a desire for self-expressive experiences and camaraderie. Clopton and Finch (2011) and Seifried and Clopton (2013) support the idea of intercollegiate athletics as a social anchor with the former pair writing that sports “provide for an environment frequently conducive to the

formation of new, diverse social networks" (Clopton and Finch, 2011, p. 77), and, as the next two subsections illustrate, the connections fans make at games span beyond their attendance on Saturday afternoons (Stensland et al., 2019).

Game days as a Social Anchor. As crowds at Wolverine football games have grown, Midwest Town residents find that they look forward to game days in ways they did not before the team was successful. Game day activities represent experiences for Midwest Town residents that bring people together. For some, study participants indicated, those experiences are more important than the games themselves. Robert noted, "On any given Saturday … it brings people together that haven't seen each other for, you know, weeks, months maybe. Maybe they were there at the last game, maybe they weren't, but it brings more people together."

Tom, who came to Midwest Town in 1972 to attend the university and remained in the community for his career while raising a family, said he has been an avid supporter of the Wolverine football team since his time as a college student. He, too, noticed considerable differences in the pride and enthusiasm exhibited by residents within the scope of social anchors when the team became successful. He said, "The town has a buzz, you know, five, six Saturdays a football season. … On Monday when you go to work, you can't wait for Saturday."

The experiences of Robert and Tom further support the idea that "social anchoring occurs as people in the community are able to spend time interacting, discussing, or participating in an activity that will encourage trust and relationship building" (Clopton & Finch, 2011, p. 74).

Notably, the idea of game days as a social anchor was found to be particularly meaningful to women, according to those interviewed as part of the current study and supported by Kahle et al. (1996). For example, Hillary, supporting her husband Henry's

claim that Wolverine football tends to be a family affair, said she doesn't like football but exhibited a pure enthusiasm as she talked about the enjoyment she gains from following the Midwest University team, saying "When you're excited and you're winning, it just makes it fun." She proudly showed a photo of her grandchildren taken before the family attended a football game together a few years prior. Her two grandsons were pictured in Wolverine football jerseys that Hillary said they insisted on having with the number one, and her granddaughter was dressed in a Wolverine cheerleading uniform while a Midwest University flag was planted in the flower garden behind them. Hillary said she enjoys going to Wolverine games to see people she may not see otherwise. "There's other people that, you know, and that is a sense of community, too, when you see people that, that you either are acquainted with or have been good friends with, and then you see them there at the game, I think it makes it even better."

Similarly, Fred's wife, Frannie, declared she has a low interest in sports but a high interest in the Midwest University football team. She observed that more cohesion exists among residents attending games as a result of the Wolverines' success. "As they have been winning for several years, it has brought people like me that will come … And you see people from the, that you haven't seen in a while, and you say, 'Hi, how you doing?' You might stop and visit a while and then you go on, but you, it's, it's a place where you can go and see people that you don't see on a day-to-day basis."

Schools as a Social Anchor. Another example of the ways Midwest University and Wolverine football has formed social networks anchored to the community is apparent to residents in Midwest Town schools, supporting the reconceptualization of

social anchors by Clopton and Finch (2011) as institutions that "enhance or construct a sense of community, trust, or reciprocation within social networks" (p. 72).

Beverly, a retired teacher, has lived her entire life in Midwest Town and noticed how children's feelings toward Wolverine football changed when the team became successful. "The kids get excited. They know, you know, when there's going to be a game. They know how they're doing. And when I first started teaching, they could have won, they could have lost, and nobody would have known anything."

Wes recalled working in one of the schools at the time of the Wolverine football program's turnaround and how exciting it was to receive a phone call from a member of the coaching staff who wanted to arrange for players to read to his young students. "He said, 'We'd like to, uh, come down and do some reading buddies.' Whoa. And I said, 'What grade level?' He says, 'It doesn't matter.' I thought, 'How neat would this be for third and fourth grade boys that don't like to read to sit down with a college football player?'"

Barry, based on his observations as a resident who is highly involved with the community, also talked about the importance of student-athletes engaging with children in local schools. "No fifth grader cares if the kid who comes and reads was 0-12 last year. But if the national championship [player] comes and reads, they're going home and talking about it."

As Stensland et al. (2019) found in their quantitative study involving data collected at a Midwestern university competing with NCAA Division I, it can be said that the results of the current study suggest Wolverine football games at Midwest University are a social anchor because they "enhance bonding social capital, maximize bridging

social capital, and are ever-present markers with which the community identifies" (Clopton & Finch, 2011, p. 79).

In sum, through the narratives in this section, study participants described the joy, pride, enhanced self-esteem, and sense of belonging they feel as a result of the Wolverine football team's success, thus supporting the founding research of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116), and social anchor theory (Clopton and Finch, 2011) while further demonstrating the impacts of a successful university football program on a rural community and its residents.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

By interviewing residents about their contrasting perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to the Midwest University football program, this qualitative study contributes experiences of a small college environment to existing research of BIRG tendencies (Cialdini et al., 1976; Jensen et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Sigelman, 1986; C. R. Snyder et al., 1986; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) that is largely limited to research of NCAA Division I institutions. Similarly, this study contributes, through participants' narratives, to SIT established by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and the research of team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Davis et al., 2020; Fink et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Heere & James, 2007a, 2007b; Katz & Heere, 2016; Stinson & Howard, 2007; Wear et al., 2016) and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011; Katz & Clopton, 2014; Stensland et al., 2019).

Simply, the study participants' narratives of their lived experiences related to the success of a Division II football team within a small, rural Midwest community add a new dimension to the scholarly context in alignment with the recommendations of earlier

research (Bass et al., 2012; Clopton, 2008; Davis et al., 2020) to examine, through qualitative research, how intercollege athletics enhances communities and team identification. Notably, saturation within the current study was achieved quickly during the process of interviewing study participants and conducting focus groups, which signals how deeply embedded residents' social identity and pride for the football program is in Midwest Town. Further, study participants struggled to think of examples when asked whether they had observed negative impacts of the football team's success on Midwest Town, and those who did only provided annoyances such as increased traffic and crowded bars and restaurants on game days.

The research has implications on the practitioner setting in the ways residents of a rural community in the Midwest attach themselves to a successful college sports team in their city and realize a sense of belonginess. This study has implications for community and university leaders interested in leveraging successful intercollegiate athletics programs in their communities to strengthen partnerships and elevate the symbolism with which residents identify. At the same time, this study provides narrative evidence of the ways residents behave as consumers when an intercollegiate athletics program inhabiting their community is successful. The findings present business owners with implications to ensure their store shelves are stocked with apparel that represents the community's successful team, while owners of restaurants and other businesses offering services should consider the ways they may attach themselves to a team's success to enhance team identification and help foster social anchors.

Secondarily, the current study has implications for college administrators, specifically at NCAA Division II institutions, who may use the findings to help them

better understand the value and impacts of a successful intercollegiate athletics program in enhancing the identity of their broader campus communities.

This study may be replicated for future research at other college or university settings to help institutions and their communities better understand their environments in relation to their athletics programs. Recommendations for future research also include translating this study to an urban setting where a successful NCAA Division II athletics program exists to determine similarities or differences in comparison to the rural setting. Additionally, research questions used in this study may be translated to a survey for NCAA Division II institutions that could yield data for generalizable research.

Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to previous research related to intercollegiate athletics and the impacts of a successful team through the lens of BIRG (Cialdini et al., 1976), SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011). In the current study, the narratives of residents in a small, rural midwestern community provided additional context to the founding studies and filled a gap left by a lack of qualitative research centered on residents of a community inhabited by an NCAA Division II athletics program. The study participants consisted of 25 individuals who witnessed an identity shift that occurred within the community as a result of the university football program's evolution from one that was mediocre to a program that won consistently. According to study participants, Midwest Town residents exude a heightened sense of pride since the Midwest University Wolverine football program became successful, "kind of like when the sun shines," one resident, Mike, said.

Study participants described retailers stocking store aisles with Wolverine apparel and other items when the team became successful, and resident have shown an affinity for wearing their school-affiliated apparel as a demonstration of their attachment to the team. Such behavior was a key finding of the seminal BIRG research conducted by Cialdini et al. (1976). Additionally, study participants were observed using the pronoun *we* when they reflected on the success of the Midwest University football program, which also supports the findings of the research by Cialdini et al. (1976). Further, the changes in residents' attitudes and perceptions toward Midwest Universities are evident in symbols of gratitude, pride, and progress that are observed in the community, such as the pawprints embedded in a street connecting the university campus with the Midwest Town's downtown district and an archway outfitted with city and university logos as a representation of their unity.

The current study also offers narratives of the emotional boost residents feel because of their attachment to the Wolverine football program, thus offering contributions to research of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and two concepts rooted in the original theory, team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011). Study participants described ways the Midwest University football program's success has brought people together and provided people with an enhanced sense of belonging through their association with the winning program. They described feelings of strong identification with the football program and immediate rapport with others they encounter who identify as supporters of the Wolverines. Those bonds are strengthened through conversations at gathering places in the community, such

as churches, coffee shops, and schools, as well as at Wolverine Stadium on Saturday afternoons.

While the current study has implications for community and university leaders interested in leveraging successful intercollegiate athletics programs in their communities to strengthen partnerships and elevate the symbolism with which residents identify, the study also has implications for business owners through the narrative evidence of residents' consumer behavior when an intercollegiate athletics program inhabiting their community is successful. College administrators, specifically at NCAA Division II institutions, also may use the findings to help them better understand the value and impacts of a successful intercollegiate athletics program in enhancing the identity of their broader campus communities.

The author recommends future studies that address an urban setting where a successful NCAA Division II athletics program exists or involve a survey component for NCAA Division II institutions that may yield data for generalizable research.

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SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTIONER REFLECTION

Introduction

When leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they are better equipped to make decisions that place their organizations in positions for success (Northouse, 2019). Such a self-awareness includes "reflecting on your core values, identity, emotions, motives, and goals, and coming to grips with who you really are at your deepest level" (Northouse, 2019, p. 203). As I reflect on my journey during the last three years through the Ed.D. program in educational leadership and policy analysis, I have a deeper awareness and appreciation of the ways my educational experiences, in combination with professional and life experiences, have contributed to my continued development as a leader and yielded the deeper meaning Taylor (2009) described in his review of transformative learning.

As Taylor (2009) posited, experiences related to value-laden course content, intense profession-based activities, and my leadership practice have established my recognition of transformative learning as a catalyst for critical reflection. Transformative learning happens when we reflect independently and critically and make meaning of experiences, therefore transforming beliefs, values, and assumptions to better understand concepts and systems (Christie et al., 2015; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Further, rational dialogue and authentic relationships in a trusted environment help learners feel comfortable with discomfort that prompts reflection and leads to personal development (Chen, 2014; Christie at al., 2015; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Transformations may be dramatic or incremental, task-oriented or self-reflective, and they occur in processes of problem-solving (Mezirow, 2009). Citing Elias (1997),

Mezirow (2009) defines transformative learning as "the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic world views" (p. 25). Certainly, the Ed.D. program has been a transformational learning experience for me.

I am fortunate to have had such experiences not just in my graduate education as an adult learner but as a member of community-based leadership cohorts. The trusting relationships I developed in those environments not only fostered critical reflection and personal development but have had a lasting impact on my thinking and desire to continue learning. At the same time, perhaps no experience during the dissertation process has had a more profound effect on me than our cohort's analysis of the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 2017), which provides "a shared language that breaks down barriers and brings people together." The online assessment identifies an individual's talents and strengths, and my learning as a result of that analysis was a crucible experience that prompted deep self-reflection and gave me a new sense of identity (Bennis & Thomas, 2011).

In this section I will further synthesize some of the knowledge I've gained during the Ed.D. program, with a focus on how the dissertation influenced my practice as an educational leader, how the dissertation process influenced me as a scholar, and how grasping my strengths enhanced my transformation as a learner.

The Dissertation's Influence on My Practice as an Educational Leader

Core elements of creating a transformative learning setting include building trust and setting conditions that push learners beyond their comfort zone (Ettling, 2012). Although barriers exist in any learning organization, organizational leaders may overcome such roadblocks by developing awareness of what stands in the way of

successful progress (Gill, 2010). While internal and external pressures on organizations may require a need for cultural transformation that creates an environment where organizational learning can occur, leaders are tasked with striving to create a culture where risk-taking, action learning, feedback, and reflection can occur (Gill, 2010).

When I began the Ed.D. program, I was feeling deflated and doubting who I was as a leader. My job responsibilities and those of my colleagues were shifting while my organization was disrupting its strategy as the result of leadership changes and restructuring. Conflicts arose and fault lines formed, as Levi (2017) described, creating out-groups and lapses in communication. It affected our team's understanding and trust, leading to what Levi (2017) further described as interpersonal problems that interfered with task performance, thus limiting our ability to reward and motivate each other. In the process of restructuring, managers had not accounted for the tension that arises from an inadequate knowledge of roles, relationships, and processes (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Northouse (2019) posited that talents, personality traits, and strengths influence followers and account for successful performance. In the midst of the workplace transformation I was experiencing, the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 2017) provided a new lens to view my strengths in ways I had not considered previously. It prompted reflection on my leadership capabilities and inspired me to embrace my strengths in achieving, adaptability, focus, harmony, and maximizing.

In my role as a communication manager, I realized my strengths as a maximizer, labeled by Gallup (2017) as an influencing theme, and in harmony and adaptability, labeled by Gallup (2017) as relationship-building themes, could be assets in my team's efforts to sell ideas and communicate to different audiences. Through my strengths in

relationship-building, I could help unify our group (Gallup, 2017). Gaining this knowledge empowered me to rely on traits I previously considered weaknesses to enhance my work environment and help my colleagues find consensus and meet goals.

Through reflection of my strength in maximizing, I realized my interests in nurturing and stretching individuals to their full potential. I found energy in helping others realize and capitalize on their strengths (Gallup, 2017). Such an approach aligns with three tenants of adult learning outlined by Chen (2014) that involve learning through life experiences to redefine and accomplish goals, personal development that fosters transformation and challenges long-standing beliefs, and critical reflection. While Chen (2014) posited that adult learning "is optimized when their experience is recognized and utilized in the learning process" (p. 407), Mezirow (2009) recognized influence as a critical piece of transformative learning, which he defined as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22).

As Levi described (2017), my colleagues were experiencing a learning curve and needed to create an environment where we weren't controlling behaviors but instead were managing processes to be successful. I embraced my strength in harmony and my ability to find common ground with others with a mindset that "we are all in the same boat, and we need this boat to get where we are going" (Gallup, 2017). I refocused on helping to create a more collaborative, trusting, and respectful environment where all people feel comfortable speaking their minds and worked to help individuals find commonality with each other. In environments where collaborative learning occurs, Bruffee (1999) noted, differences are acknowledged, and individuals negotiate boundaries between their

knowledge communities. Moreover, Taylor (2009) pointed to the need for dialogue that is relational, open to alternative perspectives, demonstrates empathy and objectivity, and develops awareness as "the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed" (p. 9). When team members communicate openly with supportive statements, others reciprocate, thus encouraging trust and openness, enhancing organizational commitment, increasing team members' willingness to communicate more often, and stimulating creativity (Levi, 2017; Northouse, 2019).

My strength in adaptability then enabled me to gain trust and provide stability between responding willingly to demands of the moment (Gallup, 2017). Such a strength, in combination with life experiences, empowered me to "explain the benefits of letting go of an original plan to try a new one to help them understand the reasons for and advantages of the change" (Gallup, 2017). Whereas transformative learning is teaching for change, Taylor (2009) posited that authenticity fosters trusting relationships between teachers and learners and helps shape an environment where such learning can occur.

Ultimately, once the transformation among my colleagues occurred and our learning curve flattened, our team regained cohesion through a reliance on a human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017) by which skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment help employees benefit and fulfill needs. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), companies improve the quality and output of their employees by investing in training, empowering them to participate in decision-making processes, fostering autonomy, and promoting diversity. Such investments help to replace "symbols of hierarchy with symbols of cooperation and equality" (p. 151).

Ettling (2012) posited that transformative learning frameworks "emanate from the same deep root of an educational world view that fosters creating a learning space that induces change in the adult learner: change of mind and change of behavior" (p. 539). Through the dissertation process and a recognition of my strengths, I am better equipped as a leader in the workplace to nurture change by creating spaces where people are comfortable questioning practices and roles to create new viewpoints and awareness (Merriam and Bierema, 2014; Ettling, 2012), or as Gill (2010) describes, "an environment that supports and encourages the collective discovery, sharing, and application of knowledge" (p. 5).

The Dissertation Process's Influence on Me as a Scholar

While adults have myriad reasons that motivate their learning, a person's purpose for learning is often related to their real, lived experiences and the practices and roles in which they are engaged (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). People learn by engaging in practice, but reflective learning is unique to each person and their experiences, with much of it happening incidentally, resulting in learning that is transformative, both personally and socially (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

The above paragraph encapsulates my experience with the dissertation process and its influence on me as a scholar. Although my journalism training established a foundation for my practice as a communicator, an information gatherer, and an investigator, and my professional experiences in the field have fortified that foundation, the dissertation process helped me add levels of perspective and inquiry I did not possess previously.

As the dissertation process began, I established my identity as a constructivist. That is, I am a researcher who emphasizes socially constructed realities and values interaction with study participants and community rapport to create findings through qualitative methods (Mertens, 2020).

Next, I learned to embrace the trials and errors involved in navigating the dissertation process. Scholarly researchers have posited that "learning often occurs best through 'play,' through interactions in transitional medium where it is safe to experiment and reflect" (Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 18), which the dissertation process allowed. The "play" for me was the process of narrowing and investigating my research topic and eventually collecting, analyzing, and writing about my data. I was inspired by reading the work of other scholars and enjoyed the process of following the breadcrumbs of scholarly literature to investigate the concepts of basking in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), and social anchor theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011) at a deeper level. Though tedious, I grew to relish the time I could invest in reviewing literature as an important process to establishing the framework and rationale for my research (Mertens, 2020). I found myself reinvigorated, too, in interacting with study participants and listening to their stories during the data collection process, followed by the process of making meaning of their narratives during the data analysis phase.

The dissertation process helped me strengthen my voice as a storyteller and the practice of making sense of theories through stories (Lipson Lawrence & Swiftdeer Paige, 2016). The process reinforced my ethical values and responsible research practices (Horner & Minifie, 2011; Mertens, 2020) while I expanded my knowledge beyond a

journalist's toolkit to one of a scholarly researcher. The process exemplified the principle of continuity, which describes learning that is related to past experiences yet holds future applications (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The process also presented its share of disorienting dilemmas (Ettling, 2012; Merriam & Bierema, 2014), from overcoming the initial anxiety I felt entering the Ed.D. program and believing I belonged to navigating it at the height of a global pandemic.

Notably, the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 2017) also influenced me as a scholar, illuminating my strengths in achieving and focus. By recognizing those strengths, I had a deeper understanding of my motivation, which Merriam and Bierema (2014) defined as "the drive and energy we put into accomplishing something we want to do" (p. 147). Recognizing my strength in focus gave me an avenue to channel energy toward the dissertation process and motivated me to persist to points in the process when I felt a sense of accomplishment. Similarly, realizing my strength as an achiever helped me feel comfortable with the "immense satisfaction in being busy and productive" (Gallup, 2019, p. 9).

Transformations, Mezirow (2009) posited, may be dramatic or incremental; they may be task-oriented or self-reflective and occur in processes of problem-solving. Citing Elias (1997), Mezirow (2009) further defined transformative learning as "the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic world views" (p. 25). Like previous experiences that have shaped my outlook, both celebrating the successes and confronting the challenges of the task-oriented, self-reflective, and problem-solving within the dissertation process fostered transformation in me as a scholar.

Summary

As transformative learning helps adult learners make meaning of their experiences, beliefs, and assumptions to better understand concepts and systems (Christie et al., 2015; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009), the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 2017) helped me identify my five greatest strengths: achiever, adaptability, focus, harmony, and maximizer. Through transformative learning experiences and embracing my strengths, I have a deeper understanding of who I am as an educational leader and a scholar.

Leaders who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses are better equipped to make decisions that place their organizations in positions for success (Northouse, 2019). My self-awareness and transformative learning experiences, in conjunction with the curricular themes of leadership theory and practice, organizational analysis, policy analysis, and content and context for learning, have yielded deeper meaning (Taylor, 2009) and contributed to my continued development.

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APPENDIX A

Email Recruitment to Study

Dear [name],

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-Columbia and seeking participants for dissertation research of a rural Midwest community and its residents' identification with the community's college football team. Because of your role as a long-time resident of the community and, thus, a witness to the college football program's success, I am interested in interviewing you about your related experiences.

If you agree to participate, the interview will be approximately one hour or less. The interview may be conducted in-person, by phone, or via Zoom, according to your preference. It will be recorded and transcribed, and you will have the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy. Your identity will be kept anonymous.

If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email so we may set up an interview time.

Thank you for your consideration,

Mark Hornickel
mdh5bd@umsystem.edu
660.541.2977

APPENDIX B

Interview Script and Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study regarding the rural Midwest community in which you live and your identification with the local college football program.

By agreeing to participate, you will be asked to respond to questions related to your perceptions of the community and your experiences with the college football team.

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour or less.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. You will be offered the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy.

Your identity will remain anonymous. Your answers will be assigned a random pseudonym and, when referred to in the study, you will be identified as either a participant in the study or by the pseudonym.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

You may contact me at mdh5bd@umsystem.edu or my advisor, Dr. Nissa Ingraham, at nissai@nwmissouri.edu.

Do you agree to participate in the interview within these parameters?

[If participant agrees] Thank you. Let's begin the interview. I will begin with a series of questions to collect demographic data, and then I will ask a series of broad questions about your experiences as a resident of the community.

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender identity?
3. How long have you lived in the city?
4. What brought you to the city?
5. What is your profession?
6. Did you attend college?
    a. What college did you attend?
7. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least interested and five being the most interested, how would you rate your interest in sports?
    a. Using the same scale, how would you rate your interest in the university college football program during the early 1990s?
    b. How would you rate your interest in the college football program today?
8. If you were to explain to someone the characteristics of the city prior to the early 1990s, how would you describe it?
    a. If you were to describe to someone the characteristics of the city today, how would you describe it?
9. How would you describe perceptions of the university in the community prior to the early 1990s?
    a. How would you describe perceptions of the university in the community today?
10. What experiences do you think foster connection between residents of the city and the university (i.e. town-gown relations)?

11. In what ways do you think the performance of the university football team has impacted the community?
12. What are some of your favorite memories related to the football program's turnaround from a losing team to a winning team?
13. How did seeing the football program's success make you feel?
14. What changes did you observe in the community as a result of the football team's success?
15. How likely were you to wear university apparel during the early 1990s?
    a. How likely are you to wear university apparel now?
    b. What experiences inspire you to wear university apparel?
    c. Describe your feelings when you see another person wearing university apparel?
16. Describe other symbols that you relate to the success of the university football program?
    a. Describe your feelings when you see those symbols?
17. To what extent did you observe attitudes toward the university and the football program change when it became successful?
18. How, if at all, do you believe the football program's success has negatively impacted the community?
19. How do you think the community would be different if the football program was not successful?
20. What role do you believe the football program has played in building community among residents?

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Script and Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study regarding the rural Midwest community in which you live and your identification with the local college football program.

By agreeing to participate, you will be asked to respond to questions related to your perceptions of the community and your experiences with the college football team.

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour or less.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. You will be offered the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy.

Your identity will remain anonymous. Your answers will be assigned a random pseudonym and, when referred to in the study, you will be identified as either a participant in the study or by the pseudonym.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

You may contact me at mdh5bd@umsystem.edu or my advisor, Dr. Nissa Ingraham, at nissai@nwmissouri.edu.

Do you agree to participate in the interview within these parameters?

[If participants agrees] Thank you. At this time, please take a copy of the paper survey I am providing to collect demographic data about this focus group. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and leave it on the table before you leave.

Now, let's begin the focus group questions.

1. If you were to explain to someone the characteristics of the city during the early 1990s, how would you describe it?
    a. If you were to describe to someone the characteristics of the city today, how would you describe it?
2. How would you describe your perceptions of the university during the early 1990s?
    a. How would you describe your perceptions of the university today?
3. What experiences do you think foster connection between residents of the city and the university (i.e. town-gown relations)?
4. In what ways do you think the performance of the university football team has impacted the community?
5. To what extent do you believe the performance of the university football program has:
    a. changed attitudes about the university?
    b. prompted you to wear university apparel?
    c. influenced you to support the university in other ways?
    d. strengthened bonds among community members?
    e. affected the self-esteem of community members?
6. How do you feel when you are surrounded by other university football fans?
7. What role do you believe the football program has played in building community among residents?

APPENDIX D

Demographic Questions of Focus Group Participants

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. How long have you lived in the city?
4. What brought you to the city?
5. What is your profession?
6. Did you attend college?
    a. What college did you attend?
7. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least interested and five being the most interested, how would you rate your interest in sports?
    a. Using the same scale, how would you rate your interest in the university college football program during the early 1990s?
    b. How would you rate your interest in the college football program today?

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Letter

Dear participant:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study of a rural Midwestern community and its college football program. This study is being conducted as part of requirements to complete a doctoral degree in education leadership and policy analysis through the University of Missouri-Columbia.

As a study participant, you will be asked to respond to questions related to your perceptions of the community in which you live and your experiences with the college football team that inhabits the community. Please read below to understand how your insight will be used in the study and how your rights as a participant will be protected.

1. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time, including the middle of the interview, or after it is completed. If you decide at a later time that you do not want your insight to be included in the study, you may withdraw by contacting me at mdh5bd@umsystem.edu.
2. Should you decide to participate, your identity will remain anonymous. Your interview will be assigned a random pseudonym, and when referred to in the study, you will be identified as either a participant in the research study or by the pseudonym.

Participant Consent Form

I, [print name] _____, have read the guidelines on the proposed study and agree to participate in the study conducted. Furthermore, I understand that:

1. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time during the study.
2. My identity will be protected throughout the process of the study and a pseudonym will be used when reporting findings.
3. I will be given the opportunity to review transcriptions.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

VITA

Mark Hornickel is the communication manager at Northwest Missouri State University, where he has guided internal and external communication as well as media relations since 2010. Prior to transitioning into higher education, he was a newspaper reporter in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and LaSalle, Illinois.

He earned a Master of Science degree in higher education leadership at Northwest in 2013 and a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism at Northwest in 2001.