Can´t live with them, can´t live without them: The Ambivalent Effects of Existential Outgroup Threat on Helping Behavior

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Abstract

Social comparison theories suggest that ingroups are strengthened whenever important outgroups are weakened (e.g., by losing status or power). It follows that ingroups have little reason to help outgroups facing an existential threat. We challenge this notion by showing that ingroups can also be weakened when relevant comparison outgroups are weakened, which can motivate ingroups to strategically offer help to ensure the outgroups' survival as a highly relevant comparison target. In three preregistered studies, we showed that an existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity relevance affected strategic outgroup helping via two opposing mechanisms. The potential demise of a highly relevant outgroup increased participants' perceptions of ingroup identity threat, which was positively related to helping. At the same time, the outgroup's misery evoked schadenfreude, which was negatively related to helping. Our research exemplifies a group's secret desire for strong outgroups by underlining their importance for identity formation.

Keywords: intergroup processes, strategic outgroup help, identity threat, social comparison, social identity

Much research in the domain of intergroup relations has been devoted to processes that enhance or threaten social identities. A central tenet of social comparison theories suggests that a group's identity is strengthened whenever an outgroup with high identity relevance is weakened (Festinger, 1954; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). In us-versus-them settings, any failure of the outgroup simultaneously enhances the identity of the ingroup (Cikara et al., 2011). Conversely, successful outgroups threaten the ingroup's status and identity, which is one of the main reasons why people are unwilling to help other groups (e.g., Levine et al., 2005; Weisel & Boehm, 2015). We challenge this paradigm by proposing that a group's identity can also be threatened when a highly relevant outgroup is weakened, for instance, by losing status or power. The context of sports fans illustrates this claim: despite their overt hate and disdain, fans have shown willingness to donate money to save their biggest rival from bankruptcy (T-Online, 2013). Even though weakened outgroups can boost the ingroup's identity and instill feelings of schadenfreude (Leach et al., 2003), they can also deprive the ingroup of an important way to define the self (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). This is particularly the case when outgroups with high identity relevance are weakened to the point of existential threat, which refers to a situation in which the "culture, symbols and beliefs are threatened to the point that the group might transform and change into another unrecognizable entity" (Hirschberger et al., 2016, p. 2). In three studies, we examined how the potential demise of an outgroup with high identity relevance influences the ingroup's willingness to help in order to prevent the loss of the outgroup. Our findings provide unique insights into how threats to outgroups can affect the ingroup and illustrate the important role of strong outgroups in maintaining the ingroup's identity.

Identity Relevance of Outgroups

In order to build and protect a positive self-concept, people constantly compare their own groups with other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Yet some outgroups are more relevant

than others as they help people define themselves by showing who they are not (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Democrats, for example, define themselves in contrast to Republicans, some Apple consumers describe themselves as nonusers of Samsung, and fans of the New York Yankees (baseball) feel they are everything Boston Red Sox fans are not. Thus, certain outgroups become part of the ingroup's identity as they can be used to convey one's own characteristics. Most research has looked at intergroup comparisons from a zero-sum perspective, promoting the widespread (and intuitive) belief that whenever a highly relevant outgroup is weakened, the ingroup will be strengthened. Thus, it is generally suggested that when outgroups have a high identity relevance (i.e., they are primary targets for comparison with the ingroup), they are likely to evoke a wide range of negative reactions (e.g., bias, stereotyping, derogation, hate, and violence) to protect the ingroup's self-concept (Cikara & Fiske, 2012; Hewstone et al., 2002). However, this view tends to disregard a benefit that outgroups can provide, i.e., the opportunity to define the self and highlight the ingroup's uniqueness. Social comparison theories suggest that when comparison groups persist over time, they become so important that they define the ingroup's identity (Festinger, 1954). It is vital that such outgroups remain within that realm of relevant comparison groups. Hence, an existential threat to a relevant outgroup may bear some negative consequences for the ingroup.

Existential Outgroup Threat and Perceived Ingroup Identity Threat

According to Hirschberger et al. (2016), an existential threat, at the most basic level, is a threat to survival. However, there are different manifestations of an existential threat, ranging from situations in which a group fears physical extinction to situations in which a group may transform into an unrecognizable entity because its culture, symbols and beliefs are threatened (Hirschberger et al., 2016). For example, a merger between two companies poses an identity threat because it can dilute or destroy defining features of the two pre-merger groups (Giessner et al., 2006; van Leeuwen et al., 2003). Most research on identity

threat has focused on threat to the ingroup, but we argue that an existential threat to an outgroup can also have profound effects on the ingroup. Existential outgroup threat refers to the perception that the outgroup's defining characteristics are set to change. Any major change to an identity-relevant outgroup, whether forced or voluntary, and whether caused by losing status, power or other defining features, can have consequences for other groups that regularly compare themselves with that outgroup. For example, members of the Creative Labs brand community (sound cards) still get nostalgic about Aureal, which used to be their main competitor before disappearing from the market in 2000 ("Anyone else miss Aureal?"; Bankie, 2008). Similarly, soccer fans admit to missing the games against their archrival after the latter have been relegated to a lower division (Nolte, 2022).

We propose that an existential threat to a highly relevant outgroup results in perceptions of identity threat for the own group among ingroup members. This type of threat bears some resemblance to distinctiveness threat, which is experienced when the ingroup is perceived as indistinct from other groups (Branscombe et al., 1999). The need for group distinctiveness has been universally recognized (Brewer, 2003). In our case, feelings of threat do not result from the blurring of intergroup boundaries but from the prospect of losing the outgroup for future identity-relevant comparisons. As the outgroup is part of the ingroup's identity, the potential demise likely deprives the ingroup of an important way to define the self.

H1: An existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity relevance will increase perceived ingroup identity threat.

Past literature suggests that when a group's identity is threatened, its members will engage in efforts to protect the group (Brewer, 1991). Ingroup members are determined to take action to solidify distinctiveness and restore group differentiation (Jetten et al., 2004). When the identity threat results from an existential threat to a relevant outgroup, we expect that the motivation to reduce perceived ingroup identity threat triggers efforts to ensure the

outgroup's survival as a relevant comparison group through strategic outgroup helping. In contrast to ingroup helping, which is motivated by a concern for the others' well-being, outgroup helping is rooted in a different set of motives. It is strategic in nature because it is driven by a concern for the ingroup (van Leeuwen, 2017). For example, prior research has demonstrated increased efforts to help outgroups in order to improve the ingroup's public image (Hopkins et al., 2007), show dominance (Nadler et al., 2009), or increase the ingroup's distinctiveness from other groups (van Leeuwen & Harinck, 2016). The higher the perceived ingroup identity threat, the greater the desire to alleviate the threat by engaging in strategic outgroup helping. Therefore, we propose the following:

> **H2:** Perceived ingroup identity threat is positively related to strategic outgroup
> helping.

> **H3**: An existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity relevance has a
> positive indirect effect on strategic outgroup help via perceived ingroup identity threat.

Existential Outgroup Threat and Schadenfreude

The potential downfall of a key comparison group is likely to cause mixed reactions. Despite perceptions of ingroup threat and the resulting motivation to help, ingroup members are also expected to show responses that reflect their general negativity towards the outgroup. A common occurrence in intergroup settings is schadenfreude (Cikara & Fiske, 2012). For example, Republicans gloat over any failures the Democrats endure and sports fans rejoice when their archrival loses. Put generally, ingroup members are likely to feel some pleasure at the misfortune of outgroups. Outgroups with high identity relevance tend to be disliked more than those with low identity relevance, and dislike and resentment have been established as strong predictors of schadenfreude (Feather & Sherman, 2006; Hareli & Weiner, 2002). This is in line with Li et al. (2016) who propose that in a workplace setting, competition and intergroup bias can lead to schadenfreude when victimization is observed. Hence, we propose:

H4: An existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity relevance

increases schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude has been linked to antisocial behavior, such as negative word-of-mouth

(Ouwerkerk et al., 2018) and intent to spread news of political failures (Crysel & Webster,

2018). Schindler et al. (2015) empirically showed that schadenfreude elicits avoidance

tendencies, including reduced helping or less willingness to grant a reward. The more

pleasure people feel from others' misfortune, the less they will be motivated to help.

H5: Schadenfreude is negatively related to strategic outgroup helping.

H6: An existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity relevance has a

negative indirect effect on strategic outgroup help via schadenfreude.

Summing up, we expect a competitive mediation that reflects an individual´s mixed

reactions to an existential threat of a relevant outgroup. Ingroup members can gloat over an

outgroup's demise while simultaneously trying to save them. Figure 1 provides an overview

of our research model.

Figure 1

Proposed Research Model
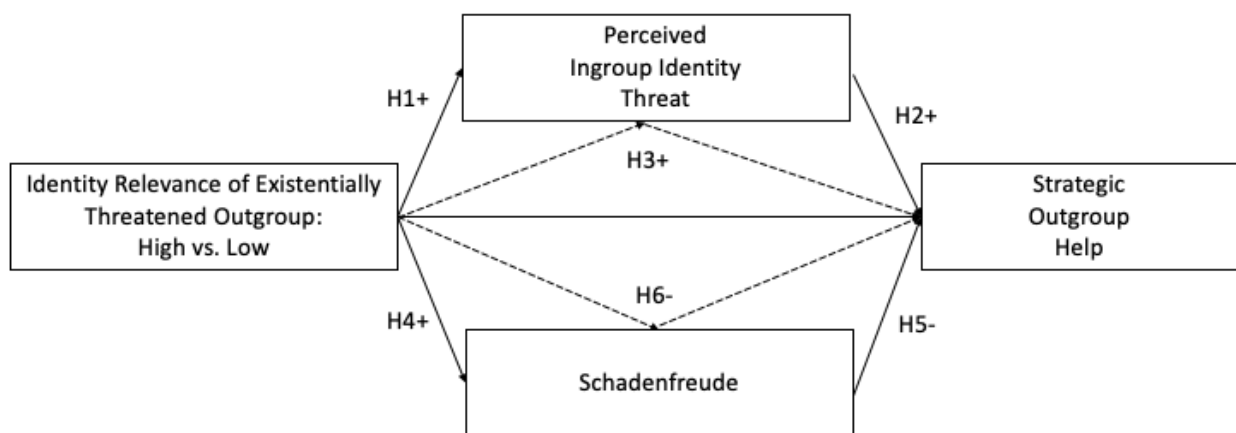
Note: Solid lines indicate direct effects and dotted lines indicate indirect effects.

Alternative explanations

Levine et al. (2005) showed that persons extended help from ingroup to outgroup members when a more inclusive social categorization had been made salient. Due to increased similarity in key comparison dimensions, the existence of a superordinate identity may be more salient for outgroups with high identity relevance than for outgroups with low identity relevance (Converse & Reinhard, 2016). For example, highly-identified sports fans acknowledge that they share certain similarities (e.g., historical connectedness, geographical proximity) with their fiercest rivals. Hence, we explore the role of categorization at a superordinate level as potential alternative explanation for increased helping. We also explored if feelings of pity for the outgroup can provide an alternative explanation for the negative pathway between identity relevance and helping. The high (vs. low) identity-relevant outgroup could elicit lower levels of pity, which could explain decreases in helping (Tarrant et al., 2010).

Empirical context

We conducted three experimental studies to test our theoretical predictions. In line with previous research (Levine et al., 2005; Weisel & Boehm, 2015), we used the empirical context of sports fans (European soccer) because this setting provides a good opportunity to manipulate the theoretical factor identity relevance. In Europe's top soccer divisions, up to 20 teams compete for the championship. At the end of the season, the first-placed team are crowned champions, while the bottom three teams are relegated to a lower division. For fans, some opponent teams have higher identity-relevance than others, which is in line with the theoretical distinction between rival and nonrival competitors (Converse & Reinhard, 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010). For example, for Real Madrid fans, beating Barcelona (a rival competitor) will be much more important than beating Real Mallorca (one of many nonrival competitors). This is because Madrid and Barcelona are similar in on-pitch performance and are connected by a shared history. Accordingly, their fans define themselves not only by

supporting their team but also by explicitly rejecting the rival team. The opposing fans display high levels of mutual disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Thus, the distinction of rival and nonrival competitors is a suitable way to manipulate high vs. low identity relevance.

All datasets are publicly available.[1] We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in this paper. Sample sizes were determined before collecting data (see SOM E1).

Study 1

Study 1 used a pre-registered one-factorial between-subjects design, manipulating the identity relevance of the existentially threatened outgroup (high vs. low). We targeted fans of the German first division soccer team Cologne Football Club, who have a famous rivalry with the team Borussia Moenchengladbach. In a survey of more than 30,000 German soccer fans, this rivalry was rated among the most intense in Germany (Pommerenke & Stotz, 2018). Hence, we selected Moenchengladbach in the high-identity-relevance condition. To reduce potential confounds relating to specific teams, we randomly used one of four different nonrival competitors as outgroups in the low-identity-relevance condition: Hertha Berlin, Augsburg, Arminia Bielefeld, and Mainz. None of these four teams has a special relationship with Cologne, and all of them held a position close to Cologne in the Bundesliga standings around the time of the data collection. As a manipulation check, we assessed outgroup disidentification. People disidentify more strongly with high identity-relevant outgroups because explicit separation from these groups is part of the ingroup´s identity (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

The stimuli described a scenario (see SOM A1) in which the outgroup would lose its status as a relevant comparison group due to a forced relegation from the first to the fourth division. The leagues' governing body can impose penalties on teams for grave financial misconduct (like failure to pay wages). The team would then be placed in a lower division from where it has to fight its way back to the top by winning the fourth, third and second

division, respectively. Due to fierce competition and smaller financial budgets in lower divisions, this is no small feat to accomplish, and many famous teams have vanished completely after being relegated (Jensen, 2018). Consequently, our scenario implied that there will be no matches against the outgroup for a long time, if not forever. It read:

"Imagine that (high/low identity-relevant outgroup) was in financial trouble and risked losing their license to play in the first division, putting them on the brink of a forced relegation to the fourth division. The exit from the Bundesliga could only be prevented with a sudden financial boost. To avoid the relegation from the first to the fourth division, several support campaigns were launched. Several fan clubs of Cologne Football Club wrote an open letter to their own fan community. It reads: 'Let us help (high/low identity-relevant outgroup) not to lose their license so that we can continue to play against each other. Every little donation helps.' With the call, fans of Cologne Football Club have started a fundraising campaign, which you will see on the next page."

To assess if the scenario was perceived as an existential threat, we asked 46 sports fans (78.3% male, $M_{Age} = 20.6$ [$SD = 2.66$]) whether the forced relegation would substantially reduce Borussia Monchengladbach's importance and status (see SOM D1). Eighty-three percent ($n = 38$) answered yes ($\chi^2[1, N = 46] = 19.56$, $p < .001$). Therefore, it can be considered an existential threat.

Participant Recruitment

Based on a pretest (see SOM E1), we expected an effect size of Cohen's $d = .60$. According to G*Power, we needed to collect about 60 participants per condition to achieve 95% power. However, we intentionally collected more cases in anticipation of data exclusions. We designed an online survey (see SOM A2) and posted the survey link on a private Cologne Football Club Facebook page with 17,000 followers. A screening question ensured that only Cologne supporters participated. Within 48 hours, 313 fans completed the survey. As described in the preregistration,[2] we excluded 147 participants (47%) for one of

the following reasons: completed the survey after a break ($n = 3$, 1%), failed an instructional manipulation check ("Write 7 in the below box," $n = 133$, 32.5%) or failed an attention check ("Tick 2," $n = 36$, 11.5%).[3] The final number of participants was 166 ($M_{Age} = 43.0$, $SD = 13.2$, 68.7% male). The sample displayed moderate to high levels of team identification ($M_{TeamIdentification} = 4.82$, $SD = 1.46$ on a seven-point scale).

Measures

Based on Reed and Aquino (2003), strategic outgroup help was measured with three items on a seven-point scale (*1 = very unlikel*y, *7 = very likely*): "How likely is it that you would financially support the fundraising campaign for (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) after the call from Cologne fans?", "How likely is it that you would tell others about the fundraising campaign to support (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) after the call from Cologne fans?", "How likely is it that you would forward the link to the fundraising campaign for (high/low identity-relevant outgroup) after the call from Cologne fans?"; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.93$, $\alpha = .85$. The mediator perceived ingroup identity threat was measured with five items adapted from Murtagh et al. (2012) on a seven-point scale, e.g., "Without (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) in the same division Cologne Football Club would be losing something as well," "With the forced relegation of (high/low identity-relevant outgroup), something that defines Cologne Football Club would be gone"; $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .88$.[4] Based on van Dijk et al. (2006), the mediator schadenfreude was measured with the single item ("When I think about the fundraising campaign, I feel [*1 = no schadenfreude, 7 = great schadenfreude*]"; $M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.98$). To measure disidentification, we used three items, e.g., "Losses of (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) are my successes"; $M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.34$, $\alpha = .78$ (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Results

The manipulation was successful as participants in the high-identity-relevance condition reported higher levels of outgroup disidentification than participants in the low-

identity-relevance condition: M_{High} = 2.47, SD = 1.46 vs. M_{Low} = 1.53, SD = 0.97, $F(1, 164)$ =

22.17, p < .001, d = .74).

We first tested the hypothesized individual paths before running the competitive

mediation model. In support of H1, participants in the high-identity-relevance condition

reported higher levels of perceived ingroup identity threat than participants in the low-

identity-relevance condition: M_{High} = 3.28, SD = 1.39 vs. M_{Low} = 1.32, SD = 0.58, $F(1, 164)$ =

127.03, p < .001, d = 1.77. There was a positive relationship between perceived ingroup

identity threat and strategic outgroup help, $r(164)$ = .60, p < .001, supporting H2. H4 was also

supported as participants in the high-identity-relevance condition reported higher levels of

schadenfreude than participants in the low-identity-relevance-condition: M_{High} = 3.14, SD =

1.96 vs. M_{Low} = 2.34, SD = 1.93, $F(1, 164)$ = 6.84, p = .01, d = .41. In support of H5, there

was a negative relationship between schadenfreude and strategic outgroup help ($r(164)$ = -.30,

p < .001).

To test the competitive mediation, we ran Hayes' Process model 4 with perceived

ingroup identity threat and schadenfreude as parallel mediators (OLS regression, number of

bootstrap samples = 5,000). As proposed in H3 and H6, respectively, identity relevance was

positively related to strategic outgroup help via perceived ingroup identity threat (indirect

effect: b = 1.36, 99% CI [.835; 1.911]), and negatively related to strategic outgroup help via

schadenfreude (indirect effect: b = -.27, 99% CI [-.611; -.013]). The positive association via

perceived ingroup identity threat was significantly stronger than the negative association via

schadenfreude (b = 1.09, 99% CI [.410; 1.727]). The total indirect effect was positive and

significant (b = 1.09, 99% CI [.412; 1.732]). The direct effect was not significant, and the

total effect was positive and significant (b = 1.60, 99% CI [.886; 2.324]). Figure 2 provides an

overview of these results. Additional analyses (see SOM A4 for details) showed that identity

relevance significantly influenced both superordinate identity and pity felt for the outgroup.

However, the proposed mechanisms were robust to including these variables in the mediation analyses.

Figure 2

Competitive Mediation Analysis (Study 1)
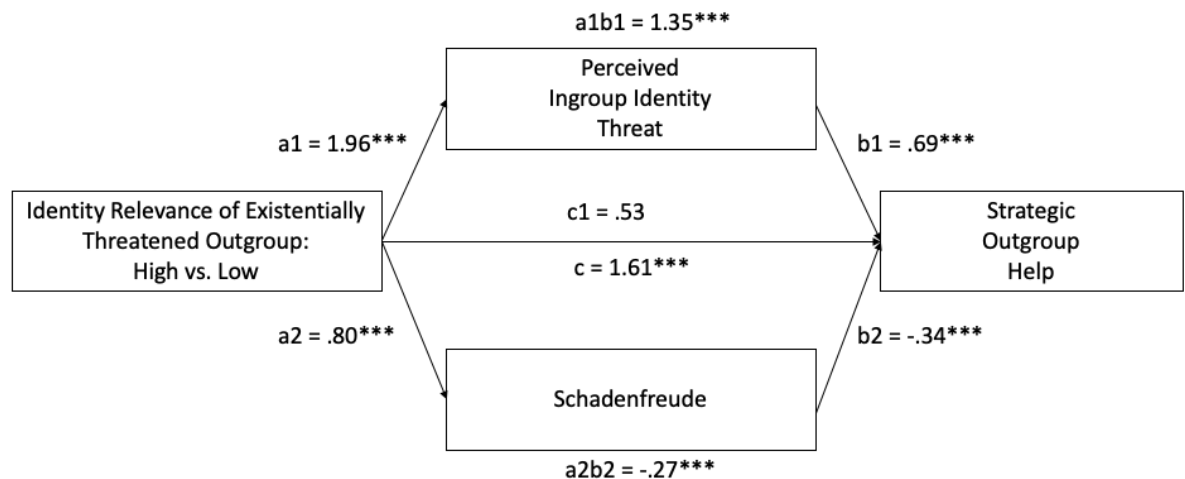
Note: ******* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Discussion

Study 1 offers empirical support for the notion that under conditions of existential threat to an outgroup, the identity relevance of this outgroup is related to strategic outgroup help via two opposing mechanisms. High (vs. low) identity relevance increased both perceptions of ingroup identity threat and feelings of schadenfreude, which were positively (identity threat) and negatively (schadenfreude) related to intentions to help the outgroup. These findings support previous research showing that people respond negatively to relevant outgroups and see a threat to the outgroup as a gain for the ingroup (Hewstone et al., 2002; Hogg & Abrams, 1990). We contribute to the literature by highlighting that a threat to the outgroup can also be perceived as weakening the ingroup's identity, which in turn motivates people to help the outgroup overcome the threat. Our results show that the positive relation to helping via perceived ingroup identity threat even outweighed the negative relation via schadenfreude. This appears to indicate that the potential loss of a highly relevant outgroup

and related concerns about the own group's identity are more relevant than the immediate pleasure derived from the outgroup's misfortune. Next, we sought to replicate the findings and test a potential boundary condition for the effects.

Study 2

Study 2 examines whether the effect of identity relevance on outgroup helping is moderated by who instigates the help. We expect that a person is more willing to help when the ingroup initiates the support as opposed to the outgroup. Strategic outgroup help is ingroup-serving, which means that people provide help with the aim of benefitting the ingroup rather than the outgroup (van Leeuwen, 2017). The fact that the outgroup is the immediate beneficiary of the help can even be considered an undesirable but unavoidable effect of strategically motivated outgroup helping. Given that both groups benefit from the help, it should matter whether the help is offered in response to a request from the outgroup vs. the ingroup. When responding to a request from the outgroup, the requested help is framed as serving the outgroup's needs, whereas help in response to a request from the ingroup is framed as serving the needs of the ingroup. The latter is more in line with the motives behind strategic outgroup helping.

A second reason for expecting higher compliance rates with a help request originating from the ingroup is that group members are motivated to follow social injunctive norms, which indicate what significant others approve of or think one ought to do (van Knippenberg & Wilke, 1992). In many groups, it is normative to dislike or even hate the outgroup. Consequently, helping a highly relevant outgroup that asks for support may be perceived as a violation of ingroup norms and as threatening a person's in-group standing. By contrast, when the ingroup initiates the outgroup support, any helping would be legitimized and socially approved from an ingroup point of view.

H7: The effect of an existential threat to an outgroup with high (vs. low) identity

relevance on strategic outgroup help will be moderated by the instigator of the support.

More help will be offered when the ingroup (vs. outgroup) calls for help.

Design and Manipulation

We conducted a preregistered 2x2 between-subjects experiment: identity relevance of

existentially threatened outgroup (high vs. low) x instigator of help (ingroup vs. outgroup). To

collect the data, we cooperated with WAZ, Germany's biggest-selling regional newspaper,

and used two of the strongest sporting rivalries in their distribution area. To manipulate

identity relevance, we used the same scenario as in Study 1 but targeted Moenchengladbach

instead of Cologne fans. Additionally, we used the famous rivalry between Borussia

Dortmund and Schalke 04. In our survey, we invited fans of either Dortmund, Schalke or

Moenchengladbach. In the high-identity-relevance condition, we asked them about Schalke,

Dortmund, and Cologne, respectively, whereas in the low-identity-relevance condition, we

randomly used one of four nonrival competitors (Bremen, Augsburg, Bielefeld, and Mainz)

who have no special relationship with the focal teams.

We first asked fans to name their favorite team. The participants then read the same

stimulus material as in Study 1 (see SOM B1). In the ingroup-instigated help condition, the

manipulation read: "Several supporters' clubs of (favorite team) have written an open letter to

their own fan community. It reads: 'Let us help (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) not to

lose their license so that we can continue to play against each other. Every little donation

helps.' With the call, fans of (favorite team) have started a fundraising campaign." In the

outgroup-instigated help, the manipulation read: "Several (high-/low- identity-relevant

outgroup) supporters' clubs have written an open letter to the entire fan community of

(favorite team). It reads: 'Please help (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) not to lose their

license so that we can continue to play against each other. Every little donation helps.' With

the call, the (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) fan clubs have started a fundraising campaign."

Participant Recruitment

Based on a pretest and a G*Power analysis (see SOM E1), for an estimated effect size of Cohen's d = .30, we needed to collect about 240 participants per condition to achieve 95% power. WAZ newspaper asked their readers to participate in the online survey. A total of 1,355 participants completed the survey. As described in the preregistration,[5] we excluded 715 participants (52.8%) for one of the following reasons: completed the survey after a break (n = 24, 1.8%), failed an instructional manipulation check ("Write 7 in the below box," n = 592, 43.7%), failed an attention check ("Tick 2," n = 171, 12.6%), failed an additional attention check ("Which team was supposed to receive help?", n = 77, 5,7%) or failed a manipulation check ("Who initiated the fundraising campaign," n = 131, 9.7%). The final number of participants was 640 (M_{Age} = 45.2, SD = 13.7, 94 % male). Team identification levels were moderate to high ($M_{TeamIdentification}$ = 4.60, SD = 1.53 on a seven-point scale). Fifty-three percent were Schalke fans, 42% were Dortmund fans and 4% were Borussia Moenchengladbach fans.

Measures

We used the same measures as in Study 1 for strategic outgroup helping (M = 3.67, SD = 1.89; α = .84), perceived ingroup identity threat (M = 2.83, SD = 1.73; α = .90), schadenfreude (M = 3.05, SD = 2.25), and outgroup disidentification (M = 2.12, SD = 1.54).

Results

The manipulation of identity relevance was successful. Participants in the high-identity-relevance condition reported higher levels of outgroup disidentification than participants in the low-identity-relevance condition: M_{High} = 2.72, SD = 1.65, n = 387 vs. M_{Low} = 1.20 SD = 0.63, n = 253, $F(1, 638)$ = 196.17, $p < .001$, d = 1.13.

As in Study 1, we found consistent support for H1–H6. Participants in the high-identity-relevance condition reported higher levels of perceived ingroup identity threat (M_{High} = 3.76, SD = 1.53 vs. M_{Low} = 1.42, SD = 0.79, $F(1, 638)$ = 505.15, $p < .001$, d = 1.82) and higher levels of schadenfreude (M_{High} = 3.94, SD = 2.29 vs. M_{Low} = 1.69, SD = 1.30, $F(1, 638)$ = 220.82, $p < .001$, d = 1.15) than participants in the low-identity-relevance condition. Perceived ingroup identity threat was positively ($r(638)$ = .36, $p < .001$) and schadenfreude was negatively ($r(638)$ = -.20, $p < .001$) related to strategic outgroup help. A test of the competitive mediation along with the moderation of the direct effect on strategic outgroup help (Process model 5, OLS regression, number of bootstrap samples = 5,000) showed that perceived ingroup identity threat was positively related to helping (indirect effect: b = 1.40, 99% CI [1.067; 1.730]), while schadenfreude was negatively related to helping (indirect effect: b = -.39, 99% CI [-.607; -.182]). The positive association via perceived ingroup identity threat was significantly stronger than the negative association via schadenfreude (b = 1.01, 99% CI [.577; 1.433]). The total indirect effect was positive and significant (b = 1.01, 99% CI [.570; 1.438]).

The interaction between identity relevance and instigator of help on strategic outgroup help, however, was not significant (b = .44, p = .10), providing no support for H7. The total effect of identity relevance on strategic outgroup help was not significant (M_{High} = 3.74, SD = 1.94 vs. M_{Low} = 3.56, SD = 1.98, $F(1, 638)$ = 1.32, p = .25; see SOM B4 for cell means). Figure 3 provides an overview. Identity relevance influenced superordinate identity, but did not impact pity. Again, the results were robust to including superordinate identity as alternative explanation (see SOM B5).

Figure 3

Competitive Mediation and Moderation Analysis (Study 2)
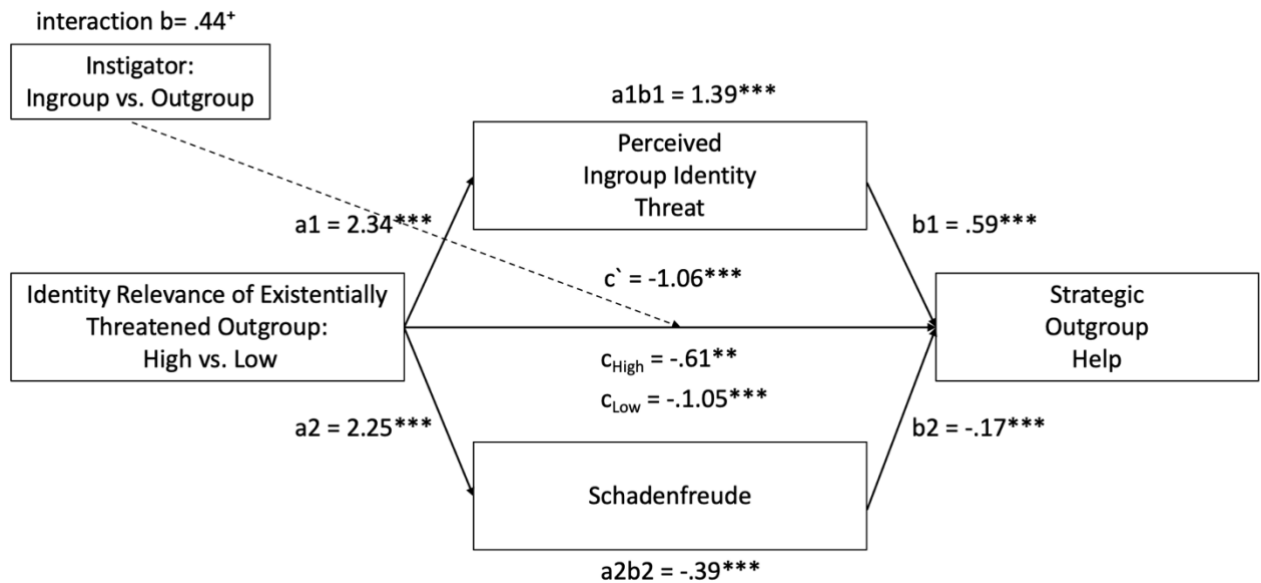
Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p \leq .10$.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the proposed competitive mediation. As in Study 1, the positive pathway through perceived ingroup identity threat was significantly stronger than the negative one through schadenfreude. We predicted that people would engage in more strategic help for relevant outgroups facing an existential threat when the ingroup (vs. the outgroup) requests the help but found no empirical support for this prediction. Theoretically, a call from the ingroup should carry more weight than a call from the outgroup. However, the motivation to prevent the loss of an outgroup that is part of the ingroup's identity may be strong enough to overrule people's tendency to adhere more strongly to demands from the ingroup compared to those from outgroups. Another potential explanation could be that the request for help included a hint that helping the outgroup also benefits the own group. Thus, the commonly expected reaction to reject what the outgroup calls for may have been alleviated by the awareness of the ingroup benefits that come along with the help.
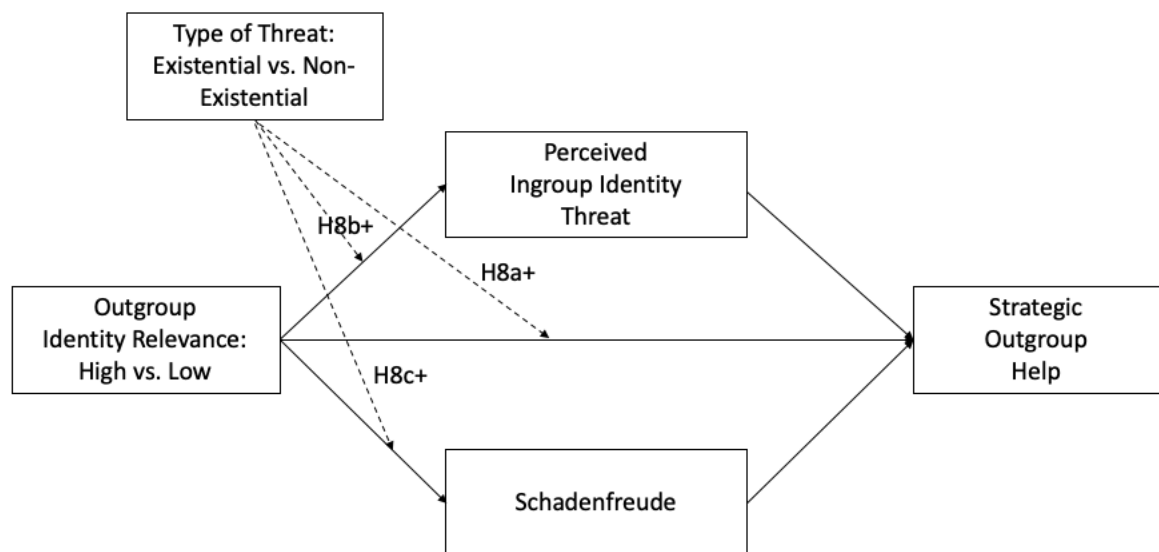
Study 3

A key element of our theorizing is that it is an existential (vs. nonexistential) threat that harms the outgroup to create perceptions of ingroup identity threat. Study 3 serves as an explicit empirical test of this argument. We conducted a preregistered study with a 2x2 between-subjects design, manipulating the type of threat (existential vs. nonexistential) and outgroup identity relevance (high vs. low; see Figure 4). We predict that high (vs. low) identity relevance will elicit more helping only when the outgroup faces an existential (vs. nonexistential) threat. The rationale for the prediction that perceptions of ingroup identity threat will not occur in situations of nonexistential threat is that in this case the outgroup will not be lost as a comparison target that helps define the ingroup's identity. Thus, in this case, there is nothing to be gained from helping the threatened outgroup overcome the threat. With respect to the negative relation to helping via schadenfreude, we expect the effect of outgroup identity relevance to be stronger when the type of threat is existential (vs. nonexistential) because this type of threat represents a bigger misery and hence offers more potential for feelings of pleasure resulting from the outgroup's misfortune.

> **H8:** Only in the case of existential (but not in the case of nonexistential) threat, there is a positive effect of high (vs. low) identity-relevance on strategic outgroup help (H8a) and on perceived ingroup identity threat (H8b), while the positive effect of high (vs. low) identity-relevance on schadenfreude is stronger in the existential (vs. nonexistential) threat condition (H8c).

Figure 4

Proposed Interactions Between Identity Relevance and Type of Threat

Manipulation

As in Study 1, we targeted fans of Cologne Football Club. In the high-identity-relevance condition, we asked them about their rival Borussia Moenchengladbach, and in the low- identity-relevance condition, we asked them about one of four randomly selected nonrival competitors (Augsburg, Bielefeld, Bochum, and Fuerth). In the existential threat condition, we used the same stimulus material as in Study 1. In the nonexistential threat condition, the opposing team was described as suffering from the same financial problems as in the existential threat condition and also faced a possible penalty imposed by the league's governing body (see SOM C1). However, instead of the severe penalty of being relegated from the first to the fourth division (= existential threat condition), they would remain in the first division and only receive a six-point deduction (= non-existential threat condition), a less dramatic consequence. The cover story further stated that Cologne fans initiated a fundraising call to collect money for the outgroup because these donations would help the outgroup overcome their financial problems. The call stated that the outgroup should be helped because the on-pitch competition between the teams should not be influenced by actions of the

league's governing body. We tested the manipulation of type of threat among 94 sports fans

(82% male, M_{Age} = 20.3, SD = 2.18; see SOM D2), using a 4-item measure to determine the

consequences for the team (e.g., "Due to the *[forced relegation to the fourth division / 6-point*

deduction], Borussia Moenchengladbach would substantially lose importance and status," *M*

= 2.75, SD = 0.91, α = .83). Participants in the existential threat condition scored significantly

higher on this measure compared to those in the nonexistential threat condition: M_{Exist} = 5.09

(SD = 0.91), n = 46) vs. $M_{Nonexist}$ = 2.85 (SD = 1.19), n = 48, $F(1, 92)$ = 104.81, $p < .001$, d =

2.11.

Participant Recruitment

We assumed a similar effect size as in the pretest for Study 1. According to a

G*Power analysis, for an effect size of Cohen's d = .65, we needed to collect about 50

participants per condition to achieve 95% power. Research assistants were tasked to recruit

Cologne Football Club fans for course credit. Participants were recruited via personal contacts

and social-media-based supporters' clubs and randomly assigned to one of the four

conditions. A total of 559 Cologne fans completed the survey.

As described in the preregistration,[6] we excluded 227 participants (40.6%) for one of

the following reasons: completed the survey after a break (n = 20, 3.6%), failed an

instructional manipulation check ("Write 7 in the below box," n = 154, 27.5%), failed an

attention check ("Tick 2," n = 27, 4.8%) or failed a manipulation check ("Which consequence

did high- (low-) identity-relevant outgroup face? Forced relegation or a six-point deduction?":

n = 75, 13.4%). The final number of participants was 332 (M_{Age} = 34.14, SD = 15.01, 78.3 %

male). The sample exhibited a moderate to high level of team identification ($M_{TeamIdentification}$ =

4.62, SD = 1.40 on a seven-point scale).

Measures

We slightly adjusted the perceived ingroup identity threat items to ensure they fit in

both threat conditions (e.g., "The games against (high-/low-identity-relevant outgroup) are a

distinctive feature of Cologne Football Club that would be negatively affected in case of the (six-point-deduction / forced relegation)," "The (6-point-deduction / forced relegation) would hurt one of Cologne Football Club`s traditions," $M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.26$, $\alpha = .82$, see SOM C2). Strategic outgroup helping ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.64$), schadenfreude ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.26$), and outgroup disidentification ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.29$) were measured as in Study 1.

Results

The manipulation of outgroup relevance was successful as participants in the high-identity-relevance-condition reported higher levels of outgroup disidentification than participants in the low-identity-relevance condition: $M_{High} = 2.32$, $SD = 1.50$, $n = 172$ vs. $M_{Low} = 1.38$, $SD = 0.75$, $F(1, 330) = 50.16$, $n = 160$, $p < .001$, $d = .78$.

The moderation analysis (Process model 1, OLS regression, number of bootstrap samples = 5,000) showed a significant interaction effect of identity relevance and type of threat on strategic outgroup help ($b = 0.94$, $p = .01$). In support of H8a, high (vs. low) identity relevance increased helping only in the existential threat condition ($b = .58$, 95% CI [.045; 1.118]) but not in the nonexistential threat condition ($b = -.35$, 95% CI [-.822; .113]). There was also a significant interaction between identity relevance and type of threat on the mediator perceived ingroup identity threat ($b = 1.15$, $p < .001$). High (vs. low) identity relevance elicited stronger levels of perceived ingroup identity threat in the existential threat condition ($b = 1.58$, 99% CI [1.089; 2.077]) than in the nonexistential threat condition ($b = .44$, 99% CI [.007; .868]), offering partial support for H8b. However, H8c was not supported as there was no interaction effect on schadenfreude ($b = .04$, $p = .92$). Figure 5 provides an overview of the interactions.

Figure 5

Identity Relevance x Type of Threat Interactions (Study 3)
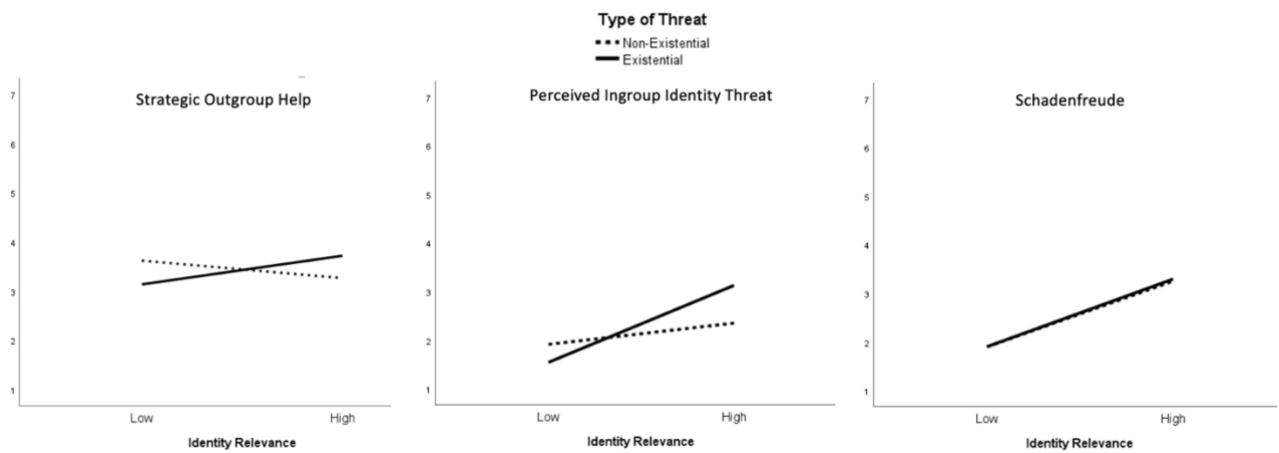
Note: See SOM C4 for cell means.

We used Hayes' Process model 8 (OLS regression, number of bootstrap samples = 5,000) to test our competitive mediation model along with the predicted interaction effects and found strong support for our hypotheses. Perceived ingroup identity threat was positively related to strategic outgroup help ($b = .53$, $p < .001$), while schadenfreude was negatively linked to helping ($b = -.24$, $p < .001$), supporting H2 and H5, respectively. As expected, high (vs. low) identity-relevance was positively related to helping via perceived ingroup identity threat in both the existential threat condition (indirect effect: $b = .84$, 99% *CI* [.515; 1.196]) and the nonexistential threat condition (indirect effect: $b = .23$, 99% *CI* [.005; .507]). However, the indirect effect was significantly stronger in the existential threat condition as indicated by the significant index of moderated mediation ($b = .61$, 99% *CI* [.259; 1.028]). Also, unlike predicted, schadenfreude was negatively related to helping in both the existential (indirect effect: $b = -.33$, 99% *CI* [-.586; -.132]) and nonexistential threat conditions (indirect effect: $b = -32$, 99% *CI* [-.636; -.127]). The index of moderated mediation was not significant. The direct effect of identity relevance on strategic outgroup help was not significant ($b = -.26$ $p = .30$), in neither the existential ($b = .07$, 99% *CI* [-.637; .786]) nor in the nonexistential

threat condition ($b = -.27$, 99% *CI* [-.838; .306]). Identity relevance influenced both superordinate identity and outgroup pity, but the hypothesized mechanisms were robust to these alternative mediators (see SOM C5).

Discussion

Study 3 empirically tested a key element of our theorizing: We suggested that the relationship between outgroup relevance and helping via perceived ingroup identity threat would only occur when the outgroup faces an existential threat but not when the threat is nonexistential. Interestingly, we found only partial support for this prediction. Consistent with our theorizing, identity relevance and type of threat interacted in influencing both perceived ingroup identity threat and, indirectly, strategic outgroup help. However, while being significantly weaker, the effect of high- vs. low-identity relevance on perceived ingroup identity threat and the relationship with helping also occurred in the nonexistential threat condition. We theorized that there would be nothing to gain for the ingroup in helping a relevant outgroup in situations of nonexistential threat. However, considering the findings, we reason that even less consequential threats to the outgroup can be perceived as negatively affecting the ingroup's identity and, hence, trigger a motivational force to help the outgroup. It may be possible that the six-point deduction for the opposing team as described in our experimental scenario decreased the appeal to make comparisons with the outgroup. That is because a higher position of the own team in the standings may be attributed primarily to the point deduction imposed on the opposing team and not to the superiority of the own team. Hence, the potential for identity-enhancing situations may be perceived as lower. Another possibility could be that the six-point deduction was seen as a precursor for more serious consequences later on, such as relegation at the end of the season because the rival did not win enough points to stay above the drop zone. Thus, the described situation may have suggested an indirect existential threat.

The finding that in the nonexistential threat condition, the negative relation with helping via schadenfreude was stronger than the positive relation via perceived ingroup identity threat indicates that the relative magnitude of the opposing mechanisms changed in favor of the negative pathway. That means that while the people are still motivated to help the outgroup in the case of a nonexistential threat, the negative responses resulting from exposure to a disliked outgroup may prevail in this situation.

General Discussion

In this research, we find that an existential threat to a relevant outgroup influences strategic outgroup helping via two opposing mechanisms. The outgroup's potential demise increased the experience of schadenfreude, which was negatively related to strategic outgroup help. This process is in agreement with previous research showing positive reactions to improvements (deteriorations) of the ingroup's (outgroup's) relative position (Hewstone et al., 2002). However, our findings suggest that an existential threat to a relevant outgroup also results in increased perceptions of ingroup identity threat, which was positively related to strategic outgroup help. Three experimental studies provide support for the occurrence of these two opposing mechanisms and their relation to outgroup helping.

This research is the first to show that the potential demise of an outgroup as a relevant comparison target can trigger attempts to preserve that group. In so doing, we provide a counterpoint to the conventional view that weakening a relevant outgroup strengthens the ingroup (Festinger, 1954; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We theorized and showed that the prospect of losing a relevant outgroup drives perceptions of ingroup identity threat and that these perceptions motivated people to help the outgroup in order to ensure its continued existence as a relevant comparison outgroup. This aspect complements a large body of work that has looked at how identity enhancements of outgroups threaten the ingroup and the negative behaviors that ensue from this (Kilduff et al., 2016; Leach & Spears, 2009). Our research integrates this previous work with the notion that losing a relevant comparison target

can harm the ingroup by suggesting a competitive mediation model that captures the trade-off between hostility towards and the inherent need for a relevant outgroup. This illustrates why some social groups apparently can neither live with nor without each other. Thus, our research highlights the importance of strong outgroups for a group's identity definition while acknowledging their threat potential.

We also contribute to the literature on existential threats to groups. Past research has focused on situations in which the ingroup directly faces such threats, analyzing ingroup behavior to alleviate the threat and secure the future of the ingroup (Wohl et al., 2010). We show that an existential threat to a relevant outgroup can have similar consequences for a group and prompt similar responses as when the ingroup is threatened directly.

Further, we extend the literature on outgroup helping in two ways. First, we derive and test a novel motivational force that initiates outgroup helping. Past research has shown that outgroups may be offered strategic help to enhance the ingroup's image (Hopkins et al., 2007) or maintain status when power relations are unstable (Nadler, 2002). In the strategic outgroup helping (SOUTH) model, van Leeuwen (2017) presented an overview of strategic motives for helping outgroups. The current motive of ensuring an outgroup's survival and thereby its continued existence as a relevant comparison outgroup adds to this model. Second, our findings complement the work of Levine et al. (2005) and Weisel and Boehm (2015), who demonstrated that an outgroup's relevance for the ingroup's identity has a negative effect on outgroup helping. We theoretically derived and empirically tested a condition under which this effect can be positive: The relevant outgroup needs to face an existential threat. That said, in Study 3 high identity relevance was positively related to helping via perceived ingroup identity threat even in the nonexistential threat condition. That fact that this effect was considerably weaker than in the existential threat condition generally supports our theorizing that losing the outgroup as a comparison target for good is the main driver of perceived ingroup identity threat and outgroup helping. However, an existential threat does not seem to

be a necessary condition for this process to occur. Situations in which comparisons with a relevant outgroup are modified or confined can apparently produce similar effects as the complete disappearance of the outgroup. In our scenario, the six-point deduction for the opposing team may have resulted in the fear that a potentially superior position of the own team in the league ranking will be attributed to external forces (i.e., the governing body's decision to deduct six points) and not to the superior performance of the own team. Put generally, when the weakening of the outgroup's relative position can be clearly attributed to factors other than the ingroup's strength, the perceived potential for identity-enhancing comparisons may decrease and this could be interpreted as a threat to the ingroup.

Our findings may be of interest in domains outside social psychology, refining theories that do not fully acknowledge the value of strong outgroups. For example, in the marketing literature, competition is considered a zero-sum situation where one firm can only benefit at the expense of another (Henderson, 1983). Consequently, brands go to great lengths to inflict harm on their rivals and eliminate them economically (Kalra & Soberman, 2008). Our findings suggest that the elimination of relevant outgroups may not be something highly-identified consumers are craving. In the aforementioned sound card market example, members of the Creative Labs brand community bemoaned the downfall of long-time rivals Aureal. In terms of identity formation, a tense co-existence with back-and-forth exchanges between brands is likely to be more meaningful to consumers than the rival`s extinction. This is also something marketing managers should bear in mind, adding some practical value to our findings.

Although the studies provide evidence for the mediating roles of perceived ingroup identity threat and schadenfreude, given the correlational nature of this evidence, it is important to acknowledge some alternative processes. Two of these were empirically explored: superordinate identity and pity felt for the outgroup. A superordinate identity may be more salient for outgroups with high identity relevance than for outgroups with low

identity relevance (Berendt & Uhrich, 2018), and a salient superordinate identity can facilitate outgroup helping (Levine et al., 2005). Moreover, identity relevance could reduce feelings of pity people feel for the outgroup's demise, and feelings of pity are positively related to helping (Tarrant et al., 2009). However, while evidence for mediation was found for both variables, the proposed competitive mediation model held in both studies after including these variables. A third alternative process that we did not consider in our studies is the desire to earn bragging rights in response to an existential threat to a highly relevant outgroup. People may be motivated to save a relevant outgroup from demise because this provides them with the opportunity to make fun of the outgroup's miserable situation (and how the ingroup came to the rescue) in the future. A fourth alternative process relates to the concept of deservingness (Feather, 2008) because people may consider the highly relevant outgroup as more deserving of the miserable situation.

Limitations and Future Research

First, we acknowledge the correlational nature of the mediation processes that were tested in this work, which limits the causal conclusions that can be drawn about the mediators' relation to helping. Further, as correlations stabilize only at around 250 participants (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013), the within-condition analyses in studies 1 and 3 may not have been sufficiently powered. To rule out the potential influence of third variables, the model could be tested with a manipulation-of-mediator design. One could manipulate levels of perceived ingroup identity threat, potentially by spelling out (vs. not spelling out) the consequences of losing the high identity-relevant outgroup (e.g., "Life won´t be the same without the games against X. Being better than them is part of who we are."). One could also block the mediator by giving participants a writing task that focuses on other parts of their identity (e.g., "What makes your club unique?"). Likewise, levels of schadenfreude could be manipulated by telling participants that it is appropriate (vs. not appropriate) to feel this emotion.

Second, we used a relatively benign intergroup setting. While sports fans, brand community members or workplace rivals may secretly commiserate the loss of a highly relevant outgroup, it may be a different story in conflicts where losses of life frequently occur. Given the gravity of certain intergroup settings (e.g., Israel vs. Palestine), it seems unlikely that the potential demise of the outgroup would elicit any help at all, which could make the context of life-and-death situations a potential boundary condition of our findings. Future research should investigate this notion and assess whether our model may be limited to fierce but relatively benign intergroup comparison contexts.

Third, we opted for a hypothetical scenario approach, a technique that has successfully been used in identity threat studies, such as merger research (Giessner et al., 2006). Since we relied on existing groups with strong feelings for each other, our design would have been difficult to implement in natural settings. Pretending something sinister as existential problems of comparison groups seemed unethical. On top of that, any reference to a real existential threat could have shifted participants` attention away from the survey, prompting immediate web searches for more information. The approach allowed us to only measure intended instead of actual behavior. Since these two are usually highly correlated and our focus was on the underlying processes, we considered hypothetical scenarios appropriate.

Fourth, a downside to our field experimental approach is the limited control over participants compared to a lab setting. On average, we excluded 47% of the participants, most of which failed an instructional manipulation check. Similar exclusion rates have been reported in other studies of sports fans (Berendt & Uhrich, 2018), especially when they receive no compensation. Importantly, all exclusions were made following preregistered criteria which applied to all three studies, and the results hold when running the analyses with the full sample.

In future research, it would be interesting to explore how members of the existentially threatened relevant outgroup react to the support offer. They may be grateful for the

instrumental assistance that ensures their survival ("a rival in need is a friend indeed"). On the other hand, being helped by the biggest rival could be a huge blow to ingroup identity, especially since it gives the nemesis something to brag about for years to come. Indeed, research has shown that people are reluctant to seek help from a competing outgroup, and view help from such outgroups as a way of asserting domination (Halabi et al., 2016). Consequently, group members may conclude they are better off without the support. In any case, they now have a new, counter-intuitive place to look for help in times of existential need.

Lastly, it would be interesting to investigate whether our findings can be used to explore novel ways of improving intergroup relations. Many people may be unaware of their secret desire for strong outgroups. Asking people to reflect about how life would be without their fiercest rivals may lead to the realization that both groups are better off with than without each other. Perhaps this could ease intergroup tensions and build some mutual appreciation, at least to some extent.

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Footnotes

1 https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/GQ7OVO

2 https://aspredicted.org/HN3_51R

3 In all three studies, the results hold when not excluding any participants. Please see SOM

A3 for details.

4 Unless indicated otherwise, items were preceded with 'To what extent do you agree with the

following statements?', and the scales were created by averaging the items.

5 https://aspredicted.org/38D_16M

6 https://aspredicted.org/VZ1_SGW