

Integrated Fan Identity: Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization

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While extensive work on team identification has broadened our understanding of sport fans' psychological ties to teams, it has been pointed out that limited and inaccurate use of theoretical perspectives on identity has prevented further investigation of a complex construct. In this review, we explain the concept of identity work and adopted as to understand the dynamic nature of sport fans' identities. Next, we outline the underlying theoretical perspectives for three different identity types (i.e., collective, role, and personal) and how they are represented in team identification studies. We then propose a rationale for implementing the conceptual framework of an *integrated fan identity*, highlighting the reciprocal identity work processes of the social, role, and personal identities of sport fans. Implications for future work are also discussed.

Keywords: integrated fan identity, identity work, collective identity, role identity, personal identity, team identification, developmental psychology

Introduction

Sport fan engagement is one of the dictating factors of success for sport organizations (Fulks, 1998; Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997; Stankevich, 1998). Sport marketing greatly emphasizes the importance of fans' psychological ties to sport entities (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Kwon et al., 2007; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Madrigal, 1995; Mahony et al., 2000) and a significant body of knowledge around the topic is housed under team identification literature. As the term suggests, *team identification* studies focus on fans' identities that provide psychological ties to teams (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). Since the development of this concept in the early 1990s, team identification studies have contributed

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to understanding sport consumers in a more applied fashion, while being seen as lacking theoretical detail (Wann et al., 2001). Such a pragmatic approach on team identification studies can be appreciated due to its direct and timely applicability of scholarly findings to the industry. However, without a sound theoretical foundation, it can suffer from incoherent interpretation on various observations being made, which can affect consistent improvement within the topic. Due to such vagueness, defining and conceptualizing on the construct has been rather inconsistent thus far (Lock & Heere, 2017). Especially, we assert that there has been a gap in understanding the complex and multidimensional nature of identity that has limited the advancement of team identification literature and practice. For example, there has been a distinct tendency to focus on viewing individuals' identity as sport fans (fan identity) solely as a type of collective identity (e.g., social identity), without the integration of other possible types and attributes of multiple identities (e.g., role, personal) within the sport domains (Wegner et al., 2020). Overall, this raise concerns that limiting the perspective on fans' identities may result in insufficient information and depth of knowledge surrounding an extremely rich construct.

Adjacent fields of study, such as organizational behavior, have been stressing the view that self-identity is a multidimensional and dynamic construct, rather than being unidimensional and static (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; Horton et al., 2014). In other words, these scholars imply that we cannot fully comprehend identity without considering the processes underlying identity, beyond just looking at identity strength and its outcomes (Caza et al., 2018). Indeed, we contend that the ongoing process of identifying oneself as a sport fan should involve the integration of similar perspective. Recently, similar sentiments from sport marketing scholars have been advanced by Lock and Heere (2017), suggesting that team identification studies need to move beyond focusing on identity strengths and establish a clearer theoretical understanding of different types and layers of identities that shape sport consumers. In their review, Lock and Heere (2017) distinguish fan identification and team identification based on distinct theoretical background (i.e., identity theory, social identity theory). Further, it has been suggested that scholars separate the use of each theoretical perspective to tackle different problems.

Building on their effort to provide theoretical foundations on the literature, we further assert that the types of identity and theories underpinning identity cannot be mutually exclusive to one another. Rather, the developmental process of forming a fan identity may involve multiple types of identity individually or simultaneously (c.f., Caza et al., 2018). In other words, while being able to distinguish a different theoretical lens on varying types of identity is required, we contend that fan identity cannot necessarily pertain to a particular identity

type or theory. The time is thus ideal for a conceptual, theoretical integration of fan identity. It is within our perspective that such advancement can be achieved by looking across different theories and disciplines that can be complementary to the body of work in sport marketing. Such a theoretical advancement and integration also bears the goal to enable sport fan identity (team identification) studies to become more applicable to the practitioners within the industry. Advocating similar sentiments, Côté (2006) contended that adopting a nonpartisan fashion (i.e., integrated efforts across theories and perspectives) in identity studies can initiate an expansion of findings toward practice, which has been missing in the field broadly. Ultimately, through theoretical advancement of sport fans' identities, we hope to extend our contribution to sporting organizations as well. Thus, the primary aim of this review is to advance an integrated framework that provides a multi-faceted perspective on sport fans, that are also multidimensional and dynamic. In doing so, we utilize the concept of identity work that is applied to different types of identity (e.g., collective, role, personal). The following sections provide a brief description on the concept of *identity work* and theoretical backgrounds of different perspectives that may compose fan identity. We also advance the integrated fan identity framework and provide rationale for its application in sport fan research and practice.

Theoretical Background

Identity Work

As suggested, team identification studies have aimed to provide applied implications by examining the strength of fans' identification with teams, and exploring its managerial outcomes (Lock & Heere, 2017). Similar patterns of research have represented the management literature in the past. However, as insights toward human identity advanced, increased interest and investment toward the underlying process of identity construction has ensued, encapsulated by the term *identity work* (Caza et al., 2018). The concept is defined as the process of "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising one's self-meanings" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). It is seen as a developmental process in which individuals constantly experiment and reconstruct their existing identities, including their fan identity (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Davies & Thomas, 2008; Fachin & Davel, 2015; Lucas, 2011). During such an extensive process, specific activities that facilitate identity work among fans involve cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral modes (see Caza et al., 2018 for detailed description on identity work modes). Thus, based on such a concept, no identities are permanent in nature. Acquiring a particular set of identities does

not imply that identity work is complete, but rather, it is followed by consequent adjustments throughout the years in various fashion. While individuals have a certain degree of agency as they engage in identity work (Frandsen, 2015), it has also been reported that it is often interpersonally negotiated (Lucas, 2011) and constrained by social contexts (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Iteratively, it is asserted that identities, and their underlying identity work, are a joint product of multiple types of identities (Caza et al., 2018). Under the assumption that fans engage identity work when forming or revising their identities, it is expected to be enabled through the interplay of various types of identities that interact in a non-linear process, and results in a number of interaction effects. Indeed, we contend that the integration of theoretical perspectives on fan identity developmental process can be critical in creating consensus and coherence that further advances the body of knowledge and ultimately how sport marketers engage their consumers over time.

Collective Identities

Individuals' collective identity is the part of an individual's self-concept that derives from being a member of a social group along with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel et al., 1979). In sport management literature, the team identification term often shares theoretical propositions and meanings with social identity theory (Fink et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Lock et al., 2011). Through self-categorization (Turner & Spriggs, 1982), fans can categorize themselves as interchangeable member of a group, which provides a basis for shared group identity (Lock & Heere, 2017). Once a fan cognitively recognizes oneself as a team member, evaluation of the group also takes place by constantly reflecting the in-group's status through comparisons with outgroups of similar interest. Lalonde (1992) explains how fans expect their team or athletes to be superior both objectively (e.g., match performance) and subjectively (e.g., better uniforms) to rival teams. Intergroup comparison is the essential component of social identities in that it brings motivation to gain distinctiveness and maintain outstanding status, resulting in identity reinforcement (Spears, 2011). It should also be noted that this process often results in numerous undesirable consequences and byproducts such as intergroup discrimination, stereotyping, and social prejudice (Moscatelli & Rubini, 2011).

Collectively, studies utilizing social identity theory have influenced the field of sport marketing and have allowed for an understanding of sport fans' psychological and behavioral outcomes (Fink et al., 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). With plenty of work accumulated, our understanding of positive social and psychological benefits of team identification (e.g., Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2000) negative consequences, and coping strategies, upon identity threats such

as team scandal or poor performance, have also been discussed quite extensively (e.g., Delia, 2019; Yost & Rainey, 2014). In such cases where [fans'] social identities are constantly challenged through practical situations (Tajfel et al., 1979), fans' reactions vary from changing their meaning and importance of identity as a coping mechanisms to exiting from it altogether (Lewis, 2001; Petriglieri, 2011). We argue that this variance in reaction to social identity threats can result from interaction effects with different types of identity. In building up to our rationale for the integrative perspective of fan identity work, we next outline the theoretical propositions of the role and personal identity and its relation to sport fandom.

Role Identities

Interpersonal relationships in social groups are based on individuals' possessed roles, which is also an important concept as they provide members with self-efficacy and stronger ties between members, resulting in a strengthened identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). In this sense, perceiving fandom as an assigned and salient role to oneself can reinforce one's fan identity. While certain expectations are associated with specific roles depending on social positions and platforms (Stryker & Statham, 1985), these expectations may vary from minimal to a large part of one's range of interactions, depending on the level of role identification (Burke & Stets, 2009). In other words, the level of role identification fans possess can influence the range of platforms (e.g., home, work) and situations (e.g., family trip, conference meetings) in which they display their fandom.

Identity theory asserts that role identities, the internal meaning or roles that are applied to individuals, are primarily based on interpersonal interactions (Burke & Stets, 2009). For interactions to function, roles are paired with counter roles (Turner, 1962), which results in reciprocal "identity verification" (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). When [fan] identities are verified by others, fans can establish self-efficacy in performing their roles as sport fans and in life in general (Burke & Stets, 2009). Nevertheless, enacting the fan role can lead to complications as individuals possess multiple roles. Identifying with multiple role identities increases the likelihood that identity conflict will occur, in which voluntary roles such as "sport fan" may lose the opportunity to be enacted over other crucial roles in one's life in various circumstances (Horton et al., 2014). Thus, understanding whether the fan role gets enacted over others involves applying the theoretical mechanism behind *role salience*, *salience hierarchy*, and *commitment*, which is often referred to as *social commitment* as to avoid overlapping terminology (Burke & Stets, 2009; Lock & Heere, 2017; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1980).

Role salience is an essential concept to the theoretical propositions in identity theory that must be considered in sport fan identification (Lock & Heere,

2017). Stryker (1980) asserts that among multiple roles that are organized in a salience hierarchy, the more salient role will get enacted over less salient others. Accordingly, some fans may display their fan identity over other roles, while some may limit their enactment in confined situations. Generally, individuals are not aware of how their roles are positioned in the hierarchy, yet their behaviors reflect their ranking among other roles (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Accounting for role salience and the overall hierarchy within individuals is crucial because it can predict persistent behaviors (Stryker, 1980). Furthermore, the degree of role salience is associated with social commitment—the cost individuals suffer for not enacting particular roles (Stryker, 1980). The extensivity of social commitment indexes the number of relationships established upon a given role, and the intensiveness represents the depth and proximity of relationships (Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991; Stryker, 1987).

Comprehensively, further exploration of fan role salience concerning social commitment and behavioral outcomes may add to our understanding of sport fans. In particular, although there have been reports on how multiple roles relate to conflicts or the level of identification with teams (e.g., Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Simmons & Greenwell, 2014), there is an existing gap in examining fan identity as a role by integrating the complete theoretical propositions. While empirical studies from neighboring fields have shown the association between role salience, social commitment, and role behavior (Callero, 1985; Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991), these theoretical propositions have been widely neglected within sport marketing literature (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Personal Identities

In addition to social factors that influence identity work, personal identity involves the set of meanings that characterize the individual as a unique entity rather than as a role enactor or member of a group (Stets, 1995; Stets & Burke, 1994). While social and role identities compose individuals' identities from a social category perspective, personal identity serves as categories that define people in exclusive ways (McCall & Simmons, 1966). Personal identity holds importance as the meanings derived from it are internally appreciated and serve as identity standards, guiding identity-verification processes (Burke, 2004). They are constantly activated and highly salient, which significantly shape into interaction (Burke, 2004). In other words, personal identity can be assumed to be the most stable and core of an individual's identities while being influenced by the predominant effects of outer layers of identity (Albarello et al., 2018). This idea asserts personal identity as the “master identity” that influences the meanings held in individuals' roles and social identities (Burke, 2004). For example, for a fan who values moral dimensions (e.g., being ethical and honest), encountering incidents that contradict their moral

standards (e.g., illegal substance use, rule violation, scandals) can impact their identity as a sport fan and supporter of a team.

The work of Erikson (1968) first proposed the idea of human identity development throughout the course of life, mainly in adolescence in his work, which included eight successive psychosocial stages. Following an identity crisis, Erikson suggested that individuals successfully or unsuccessfully overcome these crises to reach the next stage of identity work. His ideas have inspired identity scholars in that it has served as foundational work in understanding individuals' identity development. Following Erikson's theoretical propositions of ego identity, the identity status paradigm was introduced to empirically operationalize the concept of ego identity (Marcia, 1966), which serves as the most prominent and dominant conceptual platform for personal identity studies (Wendling & Sagas, 2021). In the paradigm, the two criteria for the presence of identity formation are exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to a period of reconsideration, sorting through, and experimenting with various roles and life plans, while commitment is the degree of personal investment an individual expresses in the course of action or belief (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Four identity statuses can be derived from these two distinct processes: achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and diffusion (see Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia, 1966). While Erikson's ego identity proposition focused on career, religion, and political identities, it has been noted that various domains of personal identities are essential to individuals, depending on their cultural background, age, gender, and more (Schwartz et al., 2015). Considering the longevity and involvement of sport within our society, it is plausible to assume that an individual's personal identity development processes around the sport domain is applicable in that sport has a significant influence on many fans' overall self-esteem, values, and goals in life.

Conceptualization of Integrated Fan Identity

We outlined the importance of adopting the concept of identity work, along with providing a brief background on different types of identities that individuals engage in identity work. Iteratively, most team identification studies have viewed fan identity as a collective type of identity, with limited understanding of identity itself as a construct, holistic integration of identity work and different types of identities in understanding fans' identities has the potential to add value toward better understanding valued fans (Lock & Heere, 2017). Hence, we propose an integrated fan identity perspective that suggests scholars combine role and personal identities as dimensions for understanding fan identity, on top of what has been already advanced in team identification work through the social identity lens. In Figure 1, we highlight the complexity of identities that could be embraced and integrated by scholars who continue to explore fan identity in their work.

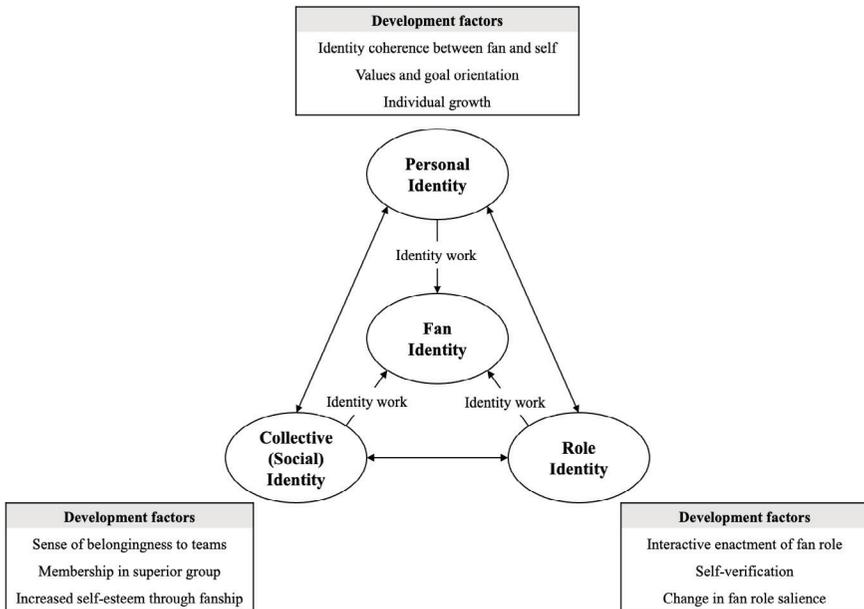


Figure 1. Visualized concept of integrated fan identity.

The central concept of our integrated perspective on fan identity can be categorized as twofold: (a) fan identity appertains to multiple identity types collectively, and (b) the dynamic and fluid nature of fan identity is facilitated through constant identity work. Elaborating on the first proposition, we assert that being a sport fan may speak for different types or layers of identities depending on the individual. It greatly differs from the prominent perspective on fan identity that assumes it to be mostly influenced at the collective level of identities (i.e., social identity theory). Also, our perspective shares similarities, yet differentiates from the suggestions made by Lock and Heere (2017) in that the facets of fans’ identities cannot necessarily be singularly assessed depending on individuals’ circumstantial contexts. For example, a fan may be interested in being a fan for the label it gives. Such a motivation is the result of relying on group membership as a means to be within a social group hoping to gain ramification for their self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). On the other hand, one may pursue fan identity to enact certain roles, or to establish interpersonal interactions with others. Further, being a sport fan may simply give internal coherence with one’s own values and beliefs. The overarching idea is that the aforementioned motivations behind fans’ identity work can be a mixture of all identity types simultaneously in various ways. Overall, it is within our perspective that fan identity itself is multi-faceted, incorporating different types of identities (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Further, we suggest that these facets are not necessarily fixed, but rather, each can collectively shift in the degree of contribution to the overall fan identification. In tandem, how each of these types contribute collectively to the temporal status of a fan's identification should be considered holistically for a more advanced understanding.

Theoretical support for such perspectives can be supplemented through identity work literature. By assessing the what, how, when, and why behind identity work, the multidimensionality of sport fan identity can be well comprehended. Recently, Caza et al. (2018) suggested an integrated approach on identity work. In their review, they assert, "scholars see different things when studying the construct of identity work, based upon the theoretical angle they adopt ... however, seeing different things does not mean that the construct is fractured" (p. 895). In context, scholars adopt different theoretical lenses to assess fan identity and its formation, but it does not necessarily mean that each are assessing different constructs, but rather, looking at a broader construct from different angles that are complementary to each other.

Different theories have distinct yet complimentary stances on identity work. Theories provide different nuances on what, how, when, and why individuals engage in identity work (see Caza et al., 2018). For example, social identity theory that analyzes identity from a collective perspective focuses on how individuals are motivated to position themselves relative to ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel et al., 1979). On the other hand, theories that assess role or personal identity types sees identity looks at interpersonal verification or internal coherence as to understand identity work (Bruner, 1991; Stryker, 1987). Such discrepancy is not a consequence of looking at different constructs, but rather, originates from differences in epistemology and fundamental assumptions regarding defining what identity is (Côté, 2006). Iteratively, these are not at all mutually exclusive, and identity scholars strongly suggest that the complexity of identities can be understood in various levels and manifestations of reality in a complementary way (Caza et al., 2018; Côté, 2006). In alignment, it can be assumed that fan identity can engage in identity work through any of the suggested perspectives, or by utilizing all of them simultaneously. For example, a fan may start to support a different team, where the fan can take on a more recognized role within the team that can enhance self-enhancement and self-verification. In this case, the individual's fan identity is engaging in active identity work based on collective and role identity types synchronously. As another example, when teams create and communicate their collective values with fans, such as diversity or sustainability, it can engage individuals who share the same value within themselves. Such initiatives represent how fans' motivation for developing a collective identity can originate from being coherent with their personal identities. Overall, through

these commonly viewed examples, we share Caza et al.'s (2018) perspective on identity work, and assert that the dynamic nature of identity work underlying fan identity holds accountable for its multidimensionality.

Implication of Integrated Fan Identity

Based on our integrative perspective on fan identity, we highlight a few implications that can be applied. First, our framework can shift the way in which researchers assess sport fans' level of identification with teams. Specifically, fan identity can be advanced into a latent construct with multiple factors that are representative of different types of identities. In that way, each factor can be assessed to evaluate the summated fan identity. Such assessment can add more value when applied into a person-centered design of study involving cluster analysis, in that it can categorize fans in a more dynamic way. It is our perspective that such scrutinization on fan identity may add insights for understanding the variance on identity outcomes, especially upon the identity crisis, between fans displaying a similar level of collective identity. To further elaborate, with the earlier notion that [fans'] identity work is a developmental process throughout their life span (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Davies & Thomas, 2008; Fachin & Davel, 2015; Lucas, 2011), the strengths and influence of each identity type on fan identity are anticipated to constantly shift in ways that result in different outcomes over time. Thus, in sum, we contend that a deeper understanding of each identity type individually, as well as embracing the developmental and integrated perspective of [fan] identity, has significant potential to advance our body of knowledge within the fan/team identification context (McLean et al., 2016).

The integrated perspective on fan identity can also provide additional insights into the overall sport industry. Foremost, such an approach can diversify how organizations establish cultivating a fanbase in the long run. Based on a more detailed categorization of fans through our perspective, teams can create fan engagement strategies accordingly. While the upfront message to invite individuals to "join as a team member" can send a clear message, such an attempt, based on social identity theory, can lose its edge quite quickly once more attractive alternatives emerge. Embracing the integrated fan identity perspective suggests practitioners also invest in creating more interpersonal ties with fans by creating specific roles that fans can take on or provide opportunities to connect personal values and beliefs with the ones of the team or players. In other words, we contend that fan identity is beyond putting on the same jersey or installing license plates with logos. Instead, we take on the notion that it is a developmental process that takes building meaningful relationships with the team and other fans and connecting oneself and the team at a deeper level.

Additionally, amid the global pandemic, we see the integrated approach toward fan identity as an accommodative stance when emphasizing the online space as a primary place for fan engagement and communication. As COVID-19 swept the world, affecting nearly all in-person activities, online communication has further extended its influence among organizations. Considering the characteristics of online-based fan communication, teams must consider the shifting dynamics of how fan identity can be formed and cultivated during the pandemic in order to successfully engage with existing and potential fanbases. Varied perspectives toward computer-mediated communication have been reported regarding social identities. While some report it to facilitate social loss and reduce group pressure (Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), some argue it may promote group identity and increase its influence (Postmes et al., 1998). Thus, considering the uncertainty of fostering group-based identity among fans, teams can utilize online communication differently for fan engagement. For instance, teams can provide the opportunity for fans to communicate directly with athletes, coaching staff, and other fans using virtual outlets (e.g., Zoom), which can, in turn, increase their level of social commitment. Such an approach, rather than attempting to frame an in-group versus out-group strategy for fan engagement, can shift to creating interpersonal and meaningful experience among fans through online-based platforms.

Future Research and Conclusions

We encourage future researchers to adopt the multidimensional nature of identities in the sport fan identity context. Controlling for social identity, which has been studied extensively thus far, the difference in the other dimensions of the integrated fan identity concerning psychological and behavioral outcomes can be studied in depth. Future research can attempt to re-orient existing models that involves fans' identification with teams, using the integrated fan identity perspective. A similar attempt has been made (Lock et al., 2012) by adopting social identity theory to the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006) to understand the developmental process in which fans reach the allegiance status. We agree with their approach and further hypothesize that various developmental approaches to identity work, such as the identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1966), can broaden our understanding. Further, such a direction of research can be facilitated through the evaluation of existing scales in measuring fan identity, and potentially developing a more integrated and multidimensional tool for accurate assessments. In addition, we also recommend that future work expands on existing work that has already endorsed an integrated and developmental perspective of identities in sport. One such area

of recent work is in the case of sport hooliganism, in which *identity fusion* results in an intense form of group bonding, leading to extreme pro-group behaviors (Newson, 2019). With identity fusion demonstrating a particular integration of social and personal identities (Swann Jr & Buhrmester, 2015), future work can evaluate the value of integrating role identity into additional diverse contexts.

Human identity is complex in that it pertains to personal lives, interpersonal relationships, different domains of life, and the overall society (Gallagher et al., 2017). It is with no doubt that fully integrating fan identity and how it is sustained within individuals require multiple methodological approaches as well as a more well-organized conceptualization. There are numerous perspectives in approaching identity work, and this review did not enlist all of them, but we hope that we did begin to address avenues that could be explored and tested in future work.

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