Abstract 2014 - Winner
Student Research Competition: 2014-132
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20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Grand Ballroom)

Recent statistics show that 80% of Black women in the US are overweight or obese (Ogden et al., 2010). These levels can be attributed, in part, to leisure constraints that are inherent to both their race and gender (Eyler et al., 2002; Hall, 1998). The present study explores the membership identification of Black Girls Run! (BGR!), an organization that strives to create a unique running identity for Black women, acting as a facilitator of increased physical activity for this group. Specifically, this study uses social identity theory (SIT) to explore the underlying structure of BGR! members’ identification with both the organization as well as the activity of running. It highlights how membership in the organization facilitates the creation of this new, distinctive identity, in an attempt to understand the extent to which organizations can foster new identities for individuals.

SIT suggests that there are two components to an individual’s self-concept: that which is unique to the individual and that which “derives from knowledge of membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, 63). This basic understanding of SIT has formed the foundation for understanding identification with numerous types of social groups, ranging from a priori groups such as gender and race (e.g. Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Sellers et al., 1997), to self-selected groups, including organizations such as BGR! (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The question surrounding the antecedents to identification is both personal and political. Personally, as human beings seek a balance between belonging and individuality (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004), they seek social identities that are congruent with or complement their other identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), as well as social identities that are themselves distinct, offering an individual the opportunity to belong and be different at the same time (Hornsey & Jetten). Social identification does not occur in a vacuum, developing politically to varying degrees through social structure. A priori groups that are socially assigned, such as race and gender, often require individuals to make a decision to what extent they choose to identify with, and conduct the core attitudes and behaviors of the social norms of their gender and/or race (Callero, 2003). For example, Ogbu (2004) outlines the strategies used by Blacks struggling to negotiate their ethnic identification with performing behaviors seen as “acting white.” Eagley and Carau (2002) contend that social role expectations require women to negotiate the conflict between their identities as women and as leaders, as the behaviors socially prescribed for the two are incongruent with each other. Despite incongruence, individuals have the ability to use and manipulate identities in building a coherent self (Warren, 1995), and it is possible for agents such as individuals and groups to create new identities (Callero, 2003).

If individuals utilize their ability to build a self through the creation of a role identity (Warren, 1995), it follows that organizations may too have the capacity to provide a new social identity for individuals through mechanisms that promote the components of identification. The mission of BGR! is to create a unique connection to running for Black women through the organization. They have, in essence, attempted to create a positive identity for the Black female runner where one has not historically been prescribed and barriers to participation attached to their race and gender identities still exist. As this organization attempts to shift the meaning of running for this population, this study examines the mechanisms through which this meaning occurs, under the umbrella of identification to this organization. It hypothesizes, in consonance with previous literature, that there will be a positive relationship between the tenure of members and their organizational identification, as well as their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors associated with the organization (H1). Furthermore, it hypothesizes that tenure in the organization will have a positive relationship with members’ identification with running, as well as their attitudes and behaviors associated with the activity (H2).

An online survey was sent to 63,013 members of BGR! that comprise the 76 chapters located throughout the United States. While identification has been measured using several different scales depending on the context, in this study, identification with both the organization and with running were measured using two items from each of the three dimensions of Kyle and Mowen’s (2005) scale of psychological involvement. Previous literature has used these items
in measuring the core facets of identification with leisure activities (Jun & Kyle, 2011) and voluntary organizational affiliations (Lock et al, 2012). Attitudes towards the organization were measured through perceived value of membership, using seven items on a 6-pt Likert Scale, and organizational behaviors were measured through number of organizational events attended in the last year. Negotiation efficacy, one’s perceived ability to overcome constraints, was measured as a particularly salient attitude towards running for this population, with three items on a 7-pt Likert Scale. Miles per week and running events per year were used to assess running behaviors.

A total of 3,925 valid responses were captured. Univariate analysis of variance supported H1. Tenure in the organization was positively associated with identification with the organization (F = 59.728, p<.001). There was a significant positive relationship between tenure in BGR! and perceived overall value of the organization (F = 41.199, p<.001). In terms of behaviors associated with the organization, there was a positive relationship between tenure and frequency of participation with BGR! running groups (F = 67.850, p<.001). Support was also found for H2, as there was a positive main effect of both tenure (F = 22.002, p<.001) and running group frequency (F = 318.932, p<.001) on running identification. There was also a positive main effect of both tenure with the organization (F = 5.566, p<.01) and frequency of running group participation (F = 157.861, p<.001) on negotiation efficacy. Finally, in terms of general running behavior, there was a positive direct effect on both miles per week and number of running events in the past year.

The purpose of the current study was to measure Black Girls Run! members’ identification with both the organization and running, and examine how membership in the organization facilitates the creation of this new, distinctive identity over time. The existing literature suggests that sustained membership in an organization produces a stronger identification with that organization both in terms of attitudes and behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and analysis confirmed this. Social identity theory also proposes that individuals look for congruency with their other identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which suggests that Black women might not seek out an organization that facilitates running, an activity that is predominantly white (Running USA, 2013). However, individuals also seek out distinctive identities (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004), and BGR! offers Black women a unique identification with running through the support of an organization created by and specifically for Black women. Furthermore, the organization, as an agent, has the power to create a new role identity where one previously did not exist (Callero, 2003) through both the identification itself as well as the behaviors associated with it (Warren, 1995). This study utilized SIT to find that tenure in and frequent exposure to BGR! had a significant positive relationship with identification with running, general running behaviors, and negotiation efficacy, a particularly important attitude for Black women who are forced to overcome not only general constraints, both those that are antecedent to both their race and gender. These findings suggest that organizations may harness the power of identity creation in the same way that individuals do, and that they may be important agents of change in critical social issues.