Brief report

‘More than skin-deep’: Biological essentialism in response to a distinctiveness threat in a stigmatized fan community

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We investigated how group distinctiveness threats affect essentialist beliefs about group membership in a stigmatized fan community. An experiment conducted on 817 members of the fan community revealed that highly identified fans who perceived significant stigmatization were the most likely to endorse essentialist beliefs about group membership when exposed to a distinctiveness threat via comparison to a highly similar (vs. dissimilar) outgroup. These results bridge essentialism research and research on distinctiveness threat by demonstrating the mutability of group essentialism beliefs as a defensive response to distinctiveness threats. Implications for future research are discussed.

People want to belong to distinct groups. This desire is strong enough that people would rather identify with a stigmatized but distinct minority than with an accepted majority (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 2001; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). While research abounds demonstrating such defensive responses, no research has tested whether people defend against such distinctiveness threats by endorsing essentialism—the belief that group members share an immutable essence. This lack of research persists despite growing evidence that essentialist beliefs are selectively endorsed by minorities in response to other identity threats (e.g., marginalization, Morton & Postmes, 2009). The present research aims to bridge this gap between research on distinctiveness threat and strategic essentialism by testing whether people strategically employ essentialist beliefs to cope with distinctiveness threats.

Distinctiveness threat

Social identity theory and self-categorization theory posit that our groups become part of ourselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Two premises are central to these theories: people compare their ingroup to relevant...
outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and people want to belong to distinct groups (Brewer, 1991; Spears, Jetten, & Scheepers, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), even when distinct groups are stigmatized (Lemaine, 1974; Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996). When people compare groups, factors that reduce perceived intergroup differences undermine group distinctiveness and compromise group identity expression functions by challenging the group's very existence (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). For example, Canadians had their national identity threatened by suggestions of a North American Union. This led to concerns about Canadian identity (Wohl, Giguere, Branscombe, & McVicar, 2011), a reaction that has also been found in members of minority groups (e.g., Reicher, 2004; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Spears et al., 2002).

Group identification moderates the experience of distinctiveness threat (Doosje, Spears, Ellemers, & Koomen, 1999; Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997; Ellemers et al., 2002). People who weakly identify with a group respond less defensively to distinctiveness threats (Ellemers et al., 2002); instead, they reframe group identity to encompass both the original group and the comparison group (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1999). Highly identified group members, in contrast, are motivated to preserve their group's distinctiveness (Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Jetten et al., 2004; Reysen, Snider, & Branscombe, 2012). They preserve distinctiveness by differentiating their group from comparison groups on relevant dimensions (Brewer, 2001; Jetten & Spears, 2004; Spears et al., 2002), emphasizing and applying group stereotypes to the self (Jetten et al., 2001; Lemaine, 1974; Spears et al., 1997), and directing negative affect towards outgroups (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Reysen et al., 2012).

Although the reviewed research shows that distinctiveness threats often lead to biased application of group stereotypes, distinctiveness threats may also influence ingroup perception, including perceptions of group essentialism. However, no research to date has examined whether distinctiveness threats affect essentialist beliefs about the ingroup itself.

**Selectively essentialist beliefs**

Rothbart and Taylor (1992) defined essentialism as the attribution of group membership to a shared essence among group members (see Yzerbyt, Judd, & Corneille, 2004 for a review). Essentialist groups are seen as immutable, meaningful, and informative (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, 2002; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998), and essential differences between groups delineate members of one group from another (Desmoulin, Leyens, & Yzerbyt, 2006). Essentialist beliefs about groups, far from being fixed or objective, vary contextually (Morton, Haslam, Postmes, & Ryan, 2006; Morton, Horsey, & Postmes, 2009; Verkuyten, 2003). For example, ethnic minorities are particularly likely to essentialize their ingroup (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), and sexual minorities strategically essentialize group differences in response to marginalization (i.e., ignoring group members) but not discrimination (i.e., negative treatment towards group members; Morton & Postmes, 2009). In short, essentialist beliefs can be strategically adopted to defend against group identity threats.

Endorsement of essentialist beliefs has been studied in a variety of contexts including sexual orientation, race, and sex (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Morton & Postmes, 2009; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011; Yost & Hunter, 2012). While researchers may dispute the biological or socially constructed nature of groups (e.g., Smith et al., 2011), the present research focuses on whether beliefs about a group's biological determinism change in response to distinctiveness threats, irrespective of the plausibility of biological determinism.
Overview of present research

The present study bridges the research gap between distinctiveness threats and strategic essentialism by testing whether stigmatized groups endorse biological essentialism in response to a distinctiveness threat. Past research shows that highly identified members of stigmatized groups endorse essentialism in response to marginalization, another type of social identity threat. We thus hypothesized that highly identified minority group members should also endorse biological essentialism in response to a distinctiveness threat. Additionally, we predicted that strategic essentialism should be moderated by participants’ perception of stigma towards their group. Prior research suggests that perceived stigma should lead people to disidentify with their group to avoid stigma (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research has also shown, however, that those perceiving their group as stigmatized are increasingly vigilant towards, and aware of, other identity threats (Major & O’Brien, 2005). As such, those experiencing greater felt stigmatization may be the most vulnerable to a distinctiveness threat. Given that stigmatized individuals respond particularly defensively to social identity threats (Dutton & Lake, 1973; Herek, 1996; Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2012; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Weinstein et al., 2012), we hypothesized that stigmatization may amplify a distinctiveness threat, counterintuitively leading highly identified participants to respond not by distancing themselves from the group but rather by strategically endorsing essentialist beliefs about the group. Those not perceiving stigma or who do not strongly identify with the group should not be as sensitive to distinctiveness threats or see them as personally relevant, and should be less likely to endorse group essentialism.

To test our hypotheses, we surveyed members of a stigmatized recreational group known as the furry community. Furries are people who self-identify with their interest in anthropomorphism (ascribing human traits to animals) and zoomorphism (ascribing animal traits to humans; Gerbasi et al., 2008; Mock, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2013; Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, & Reysen, in press). Many furries describe fandom identification as crucial to their identity (Roberts et al., in press). Many furries also perceive their group as stigmatized (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011), owing, in part, to negative media portrayals associating furries with bestiality and sexual deviance (e.g., Gurley, 2001; Kendall, 2008; Zuiker, Stahl, & Lewis, 2003). As a result, many furries fear the negative repercussions of identity disclosure (Mock et al., 2013; Roberts et al., in press).

Furries were chosen for the present study for two reasons. First, furry group membership may not be as readily attributable to biological factors as previously studied groups (e.g., race, sexual orientation). Second, and more important, there exists considerable overlap between the furry fandom, which emphasizes artwork and costuming (Gerbasi et al., 2008) and a related fandom, the anime fandom. The anime fandom consists of self-identified Japanese animation fans whose interests also manifest themselves through artwork and costuming (Chen, 2007). Given the considerable overlap between the two groups, intergroup comparisons between furries and anime fans may constitute a distinctiveness threat for furries. In contrast, past research on furries has shown that furries show little interest in sport fandom (Plante et al., 2011), providing a comparison group unlikely to threaten furries’ distinctiveness. For these reasons, furries represent an ideal group to test our hypothesis that distinctiveness threats lead to strategic essentialism in highly identified members of stigmatized groups.

Furries completed a survey that included items assessing identification with the furry fandom and felt stigma towards the furry fandom. Surveys randomly asked participants to either compare furries to a similar outgroup (i.e., anime), a dissimilar outgroup (i.e.,
sport), or to make no outgroup comparison. Finally, participants completed a measure of essentialist beliefs. We hypothesized that comparing furries to anime fans would represent a distinctiveness threat to furries. As such, highly identified furries who felt that the furry fandom was particularly stigmatized would be more likely to endorse essentialist beliefs about furry identity after comparing furries to anime fans than participants who compared furries to sport fans or who made no comparison at all.

Method
Participants and procedure
Participants \((N = 817, \ 76.7\% \ \text{male}, \ 85.9\% \ \text{white}; \ \bar{M}_{\text{age}} = 25, \ \bar{SD} = 7.73)\) included self-identified furries recruited in person at an annual furry convention in Dallas, Texas \((n = 278)\), and online, through various furry websites \((n = 539)\). Participants completed a half-hour long survey that asked about demographic information and identification with the furry community. The survey included the distinctiveness threat manipulation and measures of biological essentialism, stigmatization, and perception of distinctiveness from outgroups. Unless noted otherwise, all measures used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Experimental materials
To assess degree of identification with the furry community, participants rated one item \((I \ \text{strongly identify with other furries in the furry community})\) adapted from the single-item measure of social identification (Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013; Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions where they were asked either to think about themselves compared to a similar outgroup \((\text{Think of yourself as a furry compared to anime fans}, \ n = 251)\), a dissimilar outgroup \((\text{Think of yourself as a furry compared to sport fans}, \ n = 286)\), or no salient outgroup \((\text{Think of yourself as a furry}, \ n = 280)\). Following the manipulation, participants rated four items \((\text{Being a furry is caused by biological factors}; \ \text{Whether a person is a furry or not is pretty much set early on in childhood}; \ \text{People cannot change whether or not they are a furry}; \ \text{Being a furry is an innate, genetically based tendency})\), adapted from Haslam and Levy (2006), to assess biological origins of furry identity \((\alpha = .77)\). A single item \((I \ \text{feel I am treated differently (worse) when people know I am a furry})\) assessed perceived stigmatization.\(^1\) Lastly, two separate items \((\text{Furries are a distinct and unique group when compared to anime fans}, \ \text{and Furries are a distinct and unique group when compared to sport fans})\) were included to assess whether sport fans were perceived as more distinct than anime fans from furries.

\(^1\) Our survey included additional items that assessed identification \((‘\text{How strongly do you consider yourself a part of the furry fandom}’ \ \text{and} \ ‘\text{How important is the furry community in defining who you are as a person}’ \text{on a 10-point scale from 1 = extremely weakly to 10 = extremely strongly})\) and perceived stigma from specific targets \((‘\text{Non-furries are prejudiced against furries};’ \ ‘\text{Sport fans are prejudiced against furries};’ \ ‘\text{Anime fans are prejudiced against furries},’ \ \text{all assessed on 7-point scales})\). After standardization, the identification measures formed a reasonably reliable scale \((\alpha = .75)\), as did the stigmatization measures \((\alpha = .69)\). When the multi-item measures were entered as predictors, however, they did not significantly change the direction or significance of the results. When the multi-item measures were included in the analysis, the three-way interactions remained in the same direction and were significant – control: \(b = -.29, \ \text{SE} = .11, \ t(805) = -2.58, \ p = .010\); sport: \(b = -.29, \ \text{SE} = .11, \ t(805) = -2.52, \ p = .012\). To simplify reporting and interpretation, we therefore used the single-item measures of identification and perceived stigma in the analyses.
Results
To ensure that sport fans were perceived to be more distinct from furries than anime fans, we conducted a paired-samples t-test. Sport fans ($M = 5.96, SD = 1.57$) were seen as more distinct from furries than anime fans ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.70$), $t(816) = 16.97, p < .001, d = .59$.

Next, we examined associations between all assessed variables. As shown in Table 1, identification with the furry fandom was positively associated with greater essentialist beliefs and the perception that furries are distinct from anime and sport fans. Perceived group stigmatization was not significantly related to ingroup identification, although stigmatization was related to greater essentialism and perceived distinctiveness.

Next, we examined whether identification, essentialism, stigmatization, and perceived distinctiveness scores differed between conditions. The omnibus test was not significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .99, F(5, 810) = 1.03, p = .415, \eta^2_p = .006$ (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations), and there were thus no significant differences between conditions with regard to the extent to which participants identified as furries, considered furry to be biologically essential, or perceived stigmatization towards furries. Although participants considered sport fans to be more distinct from furries than anime fans, the ratings did not differ significantly across conditions (with the exception that participants in the sport salience condition perceived the sport fandom as marginally less distinct than furries than participants in the control condition).

To examine the interaction of condition, furry identification, and perceived stigmatization on biologically essentialism of furry identity, we conducted a hierarchical regression analyses. We constructed two dummy-coded variables with the distinctiveness threat (i.e., anime) condition as the reference group (i.e., anime = 0, sport = 1, no comparison = 0; anime = 0, sport = 0, no comparison = 1). Next, we centred the

Table 1. Correlations between assessed variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Stigma</th>
<th>Essentialism</th>
<th>Anime distinct</th>
<th>Sport distinct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigmatization</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Essentialism</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anime distinct</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport distinct</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.67**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **p < .01.

Table 2. Means (standard deviation) of dependent measures by salient outgroup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Anime</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>$F(2, 814)$</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>5.06 (1.49)</td>
<td>5.09 (1.53)</td>
<td>4.95 (1.66)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.523</td>
<td>.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigmatization</td>
<td>3.78 (1.76)</td>
<td>3.73 (1.81)</td>
<td>3.77 (1.72)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.948</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essentialism</td>
<td>2.85 (1.47)</td>
<td>2.70 (1.28)</td>
<td>2.70 (1.26)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.339</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anime distinct</td>
<td>5.20 (1.74)</td>
<td>5.08 (1.70)</td>
<td>5.26 (1.65)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>.427</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport distinct</td>
<td>5.94 (1.62)</td>
<td>5.81 (1.65)</td>
<td>6.14 (1.43)</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
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Note. Responses made on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.
independent variables and constructed all possible interactions. Identification, stigma, and the two dummy-coded condition variables were entered in step 1; two-way interactions in step 2; and three-way interactions in step 3.\(^2\) As shown in Table 3, the predicted three-way interactions were observed when the control – \(b = -.25, SE = .11, t(805) = -2.28, p = .023\) – and sport – \(b = -.38, SE = .11, t(805) = -3.36, p = .001\) – conditions were compared to the anime condition. Simple slopes analysis revealed that for highly stigmatized furries in the anime comparison condition, greater identification with the fandom led to endorsement of essentialist beliefs – \(b = .69, SE = .11, t(805) = 6.04, p < .001\); see Figure 1. The extent to which participants identified with the fandom did not predict essentialist beliefs for highly stigmatized participants in either the sport – \(b = -.08, SE = .11, t(805) = -0.75, p = .452\) – or control – \(b = .10, SE = .11, t(805) = .92, p = .359\) – conditions. For participants low in perceived stigma, there was no effect of fandom identification on essentialist beliefs – Anime: \(b = .17, SE = .12, t(805) = 1.44, p = .151\); Sport: \(b = .15, SE = .11, t(805) = 1.41, p = .158\); Control: \(b = .14, SE = .11, t(805) = 1.20, p = .226\). Table 3. Regression analysis for outgroup comparison, ingroup identification, and stigmatization predicting biological essentialism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
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<td>(b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>3.68**</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>5.20**</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>5.08**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigmatization</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>5.94**</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.68**</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.30**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport (vs. anime)</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control (vs. anime)</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.21</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification (X) Stigmatization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-3.50**</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-3.46**</td>
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<td>Identification (X) Sport (vs. anime)</td>
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<td>-.35</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-3.16**</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-3.08**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigmatization (X) Sport (vs. anime)</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigmatization (X) Control (vs. anime)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>-1.88</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification (X) Stigmatization</td>
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<td>-.38</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-3.36**</td>
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<td>Identification (X) Sport (vs. anime)</td>
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<td>-.25</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-2.28*</td>
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<td>Identification (X) Control (vs. anime)</td>
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<td>(R^2) change</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>(F) change</td>
<td>13.32**</td>
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<tr>
<td>(df) Change</td>
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<td>2,805</td>
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Note. Identification and stigmatization were centred prior to conducting analyses.
*\(p < .05\); **\(p < .01\).

\(^2\) When we conducted the same regression analysis with participants’ age, sex, ethnicity, and level of education as covariates in step 1 there were no changes in the significance of main effects or interactions. Therefore, we report the analyses without covariates.
Simple effects analyses revealed that for highly stigmatized, highly identified furries, anime comparisons led to greater essentialist beliefs than the sport – \( b = .97, SE = .21, t(805) = 4.56, p < .001 \) – or control – \( b = .91, SE = .21, t(805) = 4.27, p < .001 \) – conditions, which did not differ – \( b = .06, SE = .21, t(805) = 0.30, p = .765 \). For participants high in perceived stigmatization but low in fandom identification, neither participants in the anime condition – \( b = .28, SE = .23, t(805) = 1.22, p = .224 \) – nor the sport condition – \( b = .299, SE = .226, t(805) = 1.32, p = .187 \) – differed from the control condition, though participants in the sport condition were significantly more likely than those in the anime condition to endorse essentialist beliefs – \( b = .580, SE = .23, t(805) = 2.48, p = .013 \). Finally, for participants low in perceived stigma, there were no significant differences between conditions with regard to essentialist beliefs (all \( p > .35 \)).

**Discussion**

The present study examined whether members of a stigmatized minority group – furries – would respond to a distinctiveness threat by asserting the biologically determined nature of group differences.

There was no evidence of a zero-order correlation between perceived group stigmatization and group identification as one might have predicted from prior research showing that stigmatization of minorities can lead to ingroup identification (e.g., Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2012; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) or identity concealment (e.g., Herek, 1996). Despite this unexpected lack of correlation, we did find evidence of a significant three-way interaction between group identification, perceived stigma, and outgroup salience, supporting our hypothesis. Specifically, highly identified furries perceiving stigma towards their group were the most likely to endorse essentialist beliefs about furry identity when furries were compared to anime fans (a similar group) but not when they were compared to sport fans (a dissimilar group) or when no outgroup comparison was made. Surprisingly, the interaction of fandom identification and the intergroup comparison manipulation was significant only for those experiencing high stigma, possibly suggesting that perceiving significant stigma may leave
minority groups particularly susceptible to other social identity threats. While testing this hypothesis is beyond the scope of the present research, it would be fruitful for future research to further investigate this topic.

The obtained results are in accordance with findings that members of ethnic minorities are more likely to endorse essentialist beliefs about the ingroup (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), with research showing that minority groups strategically employ essentialist beliefs (Morton & Postmes, 2009; Verkuyten, 2003), and with research on the responses of minority group members to social identity threats (e.g., Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996; Reicher, 2004; Spears et al., 2002). While generally concurring with existing research, the current findings also extend the existing literature by bridging the literature on distinctiveness threats and the literature on strategic essentialism. The current data directly tested participants’ essentialist beliefs as a reaction to a distinctiveness threat. In prior research, strategic essentialist beliefs were present in a marginalization context, though the specific mechanisms underlying strategic essentialism were not directly tested. In the present study, one possible mechanism was tested: motivated reduction of distinctiveness threat. While our manipulation allows us to infer that distinctiveness threat contributes to strategic essentialism, our ability to demonstrate this mechanism through statistical mediation is hindered by the lack of a manipulation check, as discussed in the limitations below. The combination of low, high, and no distinctiveness threat conditions and the corresponding results regarding the relative similarity of outgroups does, however, support our claim that a distinctiveness threat was, in fact, the variable being manipulated and supports our conclusion that essentialist beliefs may be a defensive response to distinctiveness threats.

The current study also extends prior research by raising questions about the fungibility of responses to social identity threats, that is, whether responses to specific threats are interchangeable and equally effective. In their 2009 paper, for example, Morton and Postmes observed strategic essentialism in response to marginalization, but not discrimination, while in the present study, essentialist beliefs followed a distinctiveness threat. Together, these findings suggest that while strategic essentialism may not be effective against all social identity threats (e.g., threats which devalue the group), they may prove effective as a response to specific threats (e.g., threats to the group’s existence). Future research should test the specificity of strategic essentialist responses to group existence threats, testing its applicability to and relative effectiveness against other social identity threats (e.g., threatening group membership), which may reveal the mechanisms underlying strategic essentialism. Given that prior research has found a myriad of responses to distinctiveness threats (e.g., biased stereotype application in Jetten et al., 2001; negative affect towards outgroups in Reysen et al., 2012), future research should also test the conditions under which strategic essentialism is more likely than other responses, whether essentialism can operate simultaneously with other responses, and the relative effectiveness of each response for coping with distinctiveness threats.

**Limitations**

The current study has a number of limitations. One weakness is the lack of a manipulation check. While we assessed the perceived similarity of furries, anime fans, and sports fans, we did not assess whether comparing furries to anime fans threatened group distinctiveness. As such, we infer distinctiveness threat despite potential confounds arising from our manipulation. One could argue, however, that directly assessing distinctiveness threat might lead to hypothesis transparency and desirable responding.
Nonetheless, it may be worthwhile, going forward, to consider ways of covertly and directly assessing distinctiveness threat.

An additional limitation of this study is its use of a single minority group, furries, to test our hypothesis. We have little reason to believe that furries, as a group, are non-representative of stigmatized minority groups as a whole. However, future research should test the generalizability of the current results to a variety of stigmatized groups, including traditional and non-traditional groups such as members of minority religions, political minorities, and other fan communities.

A final limitation of the study involves its sampling technique – using furries whose identity was particularly salient during recruitment. Although we attained a large sample of furry participants, something that increases confidence in our findings, participants’ furry identity may have been particularly salient due to recruitment at furry conventions and through furry websites, amplifying obtained effects beyond what one may find in more mundane settings. Future research should assess participants in environments where group identity is less salient, such as having participants sign up for an email list and then contacting them several days later with an online survey.

**Conclusion**

The present research found evidence that highly identified members of stigmatized minority groups strategically adopt biologically essential beliefs about their ingroup in response to a distinctiveness threat. This research represents the natural convergence of research on strategic essentialism and social identity theory research on distinctiveness threats. The present research also demonstrates the generalizability of strategic essentialism research through its application to a relatively novel, infrequently studied group.

**References**


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