

**"They wear green, so I support them": An exploration of identification with the Ireland rugby union team among British and Northern Irish identifying fans in Northern Ireland**

**Abstract**

This dissertation examines identification with the Ireland national rugby union team exhibited by residents of Northern Ireland who do not identify predominantly as Irish, but rather as Northern Irish or British. It does so through an analysis of this population's engagement with the symbols that are associated with the Ireland team. It argues that there are multiple ways for Irish Rugby fans to identify with the team, be that to the symbols of the Republic of Ireland used or to the provincial structure of the Irish Rugby Football Union and the symbolism that represents this. This dissertation argues that that due to the presence of these cross-border symbols, identification with the national team can take place largely outside the relationship between international sports and national identity. A survey was completed by members of an Ulster Rugby online fan group, which enquired as to the participants' responses to the symbols that surround Irish Rugby. From a thematic analysis of the results, a shared identity within the sport, spanning the nationalist and unionist traditions was observed. Establishing, in line with certain works in the field of sports sociology, that fans can possess a sporting nationality, it posits then that engagement with the Ireland team from non-Irish identifying fans represents an engagement with a sense of Irishness. The dissertation concludes with an examination of this sense of Irishness, arguing that in assessments of identity, it would prove fruitful for further research to consider attachment to a place outside the confines of traditional conceptions of nation and national identity.

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## Table of contents

Introduction	4
Historical context	7
The beginnings of rugby union in Ireland	7
Symbols and the Ireland rugby team	7
Class and The British & Irish Lions	9
Literature review	11
National identity	11
Sport and national identity	11
Sport and national identity case studies: Spain and Ireland	12
Habitus, symbols and team identification	14
Methodology	17
Discussion	22
The national identities of respondents	22
Explaining identification with the Ireland team	23
A shared Ireland rugby identity	27
The Ulster rugby team	27
The provincial structure of rugby and the sports-national identity nexus	29
A sense of Irishness	33
Identity beyond the state and nation	35
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	40
Appendices	49
Appendix 1: Responses	49
Appendix 2: Symbols	64
Appendix 3: Web survey and ethics form	66

## Introduction

This study begins from the knowledge that the Irish national rugby union team draws support from citizens of the nationalist and unionist traditions on the island of Ireland. From here, it seeks to explore patterns of identification from fans from a unionist background with the symbolism which surrounds the Ireland rugby team, which has been conscientiously managed since the partition of Ireland in 1921. These patterns of identification are examined by means of a web survey completed by fans of both the Ireland national and Ulster provincial teams, since the latter has a connection to Northern Ireland's unionist community.

The interactions between sport and national identity are worthy of academic interest. Sport has been inaccurately conceived as being both above and below 'the political dimensions of society', in that it transcends political discord or that it offers little to scholarship of such divisions (Jeffery 1996, 57). International sport as a site 'imbued with national symbols' has increasingly been viewed as offering much in studies of 'collective identifications' (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 92). Its ability to flag the nation has been elevated above 'any other form of social activity in the modern world' (Bairner 2009, 227; Billig 1995). Crucially it provides an environment for the expression of 'collective ideas of nationhood', crafted with input from its fans (Smith and Porter 2004, 52). Similarly, international sport is not only a temporary display of the nation, but provides 'memorable and meaningful personal, social and cultural experiences' (Coakley 2017, 68). Hence, representations of the nation in sport have wider implications on the individuals who engage with them.

The benefits of a focus on Irish Rugby are now assessed. In an Irish context, sports organised on an all-Ireland basis, such as rugby, can often be held up as apolitical, yet as Liston and Maguire (2022, 129) have argued, rugby 'was never immune from the fallout of partition' in 1921. Sugden and Bairner (1995, 54) in support of this have suggested that 'rugby's friends protest a little too much when their sport's capacity to unify is questioned'. Yet at the same time, rugby union as a sport followed across the world has offered 'arguably the most significant' space in which 'the imagined community of Ireland can become real' (Tuck 2003, 495). As Jeffery (1996, 85) has noted, the sports which now enable Irish identity to be performed on the world stage are not those which helped form a distinct Irish nationality, the Gaelic games, but are rather sports

introduced into Ireland from Britain. The space of rugby enables the possibility of a shared identity being made real, yet tensions within this space have been seen to persist.

These tensions are explored through this study's focus on Ireland fans from the Ulster British tradition. Fans as a topic of study offer their own benefits too. Former Ireland international Donal Lenihan, in *Shoulder to Shoulder* (Williams 2018), has spoken of players inhabiting a 'bubble of professionalism' and Hassan and Acton (2018, n.p.) have identified fandom as an 'analytically distinct sphere from players'. Fans do not share the same career considerations as players who are less often less bound to representing a particular nation and can transfer to other national teams. The incorporation of unionist views into this study enables an assessment of unionism in Northern Ireland, a snapshot of which is warranted in the current political climate. As Liston and Deighan (2021, n.p.) have written, there exist perceivable 'ideological fears about the continued dilution of Unionist/British identities'. It is thus fruitful to examine unionist engagement with symbolic representations of Ireland through rugby, for as Butz (2009, 799) has argued, understanding responses to national symbols may reveal how symbols can 'bridge divided identities' and thus potentially reduce fears of identity dilution. A further benefit of this research is that the diversity of opinion on matters of identity representation amongst those from a unionist background is explored.

This study responds to calls for further research from academics in the fields of national identity and its representation through sport. Its assessment of symbols in a national context has been encouraged by Butz (2009, 796) who has highlighted that research on the implications of national symbols was, in 2009, only just beginning and that there are 'many avenues to explore' here. Butz (2009, 797) has also argued for closer attention to be paid to the context in which national symbols are witnessed or received. Hence, this study isolates one context which is a prime site for national symbolism, international rugby, and one, in Ireland, where such symbolism can be received in varying ways. Furthermore, Bornman (2022, 298) has argued in 2022 that the relationships between identification among subnational groups in heterogeneous societies and national symbols warrants further academic attention.

With reference to sport in particular, Bairner (2015, 375) has argued that because of its centrality in national performance in the modern world, it can uncover tensions 'between the nation-state and the historic nation and between nationality and national identity'. It has been Bairner's (2015) view that the sociology of sport has focused too much on globalisation, without first offering elucidations of the complex relationship between nation, nation-state and national

identity. Getting amongst this complexity, McNicholl et al. (2019, 16) have argued for more attention to be paid to 'the "place" form of the nation'; an 'acceptance' from inhabitants of a place that this place instills pride in their minds and that claims of national identity can be unchanged by this. A key aim of this present study is thus to explore a context in which such complexities can be examined, with the benefit of primary evidence.

This study will use the term British identifier to refer to those people who claim a British national identity, either in part or in full. This is instead of the term 'PUL', which is commonly used to refer to the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community in Northern Ireland (Brewer 2018, 2). For a study focused more on questions of national identity, 'PUL' refers to other identifiers which have not been investigated in the population studied, for to have done so would have been inappropriate. Irish identifiers will be used to refer to those who claim only an Irish national identity and the rest of the respondents will be referred to as non-Irish identifiers. British identifiers are not however excluded from claiming an Irish identity as well, which the dichotomy of the PUL/CNR terminology makes difficult. The Northern Irish identity, as will be discussed, is an identity that sits apart from simple British or Irish identities, though it has important interactions with these. The Ireland team will be referred to as a national team, despite representing more than one nation-state or nation in fact, since it competes with other teams representing other single nations.

In the first section the relevant aspects of the historical context are outlined. The place of rugby in Ireland is assessed with reference to factors such as class and national identity. The history of how certain symbols came to be used within Irish rugby is also laid out. In the next section, a review of the literature seen as pertinent is carried out. The methodology employed is explained and reviewed in the following section, before an analysis of the results from the survey takes place. The themes traced in the responses are read through a theoretical discussion of national identity and supplemented through reference to the historical development of the Ireland rugby team.

## **Historical context**

### ***The beginnings of rugby union in Ireland***

Rugby in Ireland owes its origins to the spread of the sport from England. Having begun in England among the upper classes at public schools in the first half of the nineteenth century, the sport arrived in Ireland as a result of Irish educational establishments modelled on the English ones. As Bairner (2003, 520) has written, the early exponents of rugby in Ireland were likely to be graduates of English public schools and universities or their Irish equivalents. The governing body for the sport, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) was founded in Dublin in 1874, due to it being the seat of the British administration in Ireland and the home of Trinity College, an important site for the birth of the sport in the country (Jeffery 1996, 62; Maguire and Tuck 2005, 95). Initially however, there was a North-South split, as the Northern Football Union was formed in Belfast, due to the fact that the IRFU did not make full provision for players of the game in that region (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 95). Both organisations did however field one team to play England in 1875, before amalgamating formally in 1879 as the IRFU (Ibid.). In this second half of the 19th century, rugby began to spread to the other Irish provinces (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 96). Even with this growth outside Dublin however, including most prominently in Ulster, Dublin remained the administrative base for rugby in Ireland (Jeffery 1996, 63).

Since its early days, rugby in Ireland has been organised on a provincial basis. Upon amalgamation of the two unions in 1879, it was agreed that branches of the IRFU were to be formed in the provinces of Ulster, Leinster and Munster, with the Connacht branch following in 1886 (Diffley 1973). Despite the enactment of the Government of Ireland Act in 1921 which partitioned Ireland, rugby, along with some other sports, continued to be governed on an all-Ireland basis (Mallon 2021). The provincial structure therefore was unaffected, which has resulted in the inseparability of all provinces, including Ulster, as largely contiguous with Northern Ireland, from the IRFU.

### ***Symbols and the Ireland rugby team***

Whilst the IRFU was able to withstand the effects of partition on a governance level, the new reality brought considerable problems with regards to team symbols. The issue of flags was approached first by the IRFU in 1925 (Morris 2005, 190). A new IRFU banner was designed which incorporated the provincial flags and arms of the four provinces (Appendix 2: Figure 1). This flag was to be the only flag which the IRFU flew at matches in Ireland, which took place regularly in both Belfast and Dublin in the decades following. In 1932, however, the issue of flags was raised

again when the Connacht branch protested the absence of the Irish Tricolour at matches in Dublin (Morris 2005, 190). The IRFU attempted to maintain its position that no national flags were to be flown at any Ireland match (Ibid.). Nationalist pressure, however, resulted in a change of policy from the IRFU from 1932 onwards (Ibid., 193). From this point forwards, the national anthem and national flag of the host state was to be used at matches in Ireland, North and South, yet at away matches only the IRFU banner was to be used to represent the Ireland team. Today, with home matches nearly always played in Dublin, the Irish Tricolour and the Ulster provincial flag are flown with the former taking precedence over the latter, though the IRFU banner maintains precedence over both of these (Appendix 2: Figure 2; Williams 2018).

Ireland matches in Belfast would begin with the singing of God Save The King/Queen, whereas matches played in Dublin would begin with Amhrán na bhFiann. Matches proceeded like this until a protest over the anthem took place in 1954 at a Belfast match, with players from the South refusing to enter the field until after God Save The Queen had been played (Morris 2005, 210). From 1954 onwards, all matches were to be played in Dublin (Sugden and Bairner 1995, 60). There has been conflicting accounts of the protest, but there is agreement amongst historians that the decision to move to Dublin was most definitely also coloured by the increased ticket sales available from the use of the substantially larger Lansdowne Road stadium (Morris 2005, 210; Sugden and Bairner 1995, 60). The question of anthems was largely resolved for the next few decades, until the inaugural Rugby World Cup in 1987, held in Australia and New Zealand. At this first tournament, Danny Boy or Londonderry Air was chosen as Ireland's anthem, though at the next World Cup in 1991, Amhrán na bhFiann was used once again (Ibid.).

With the beginnings of regularly scheduled global rugby matches in the World Cup, it became more common by the end of the twentieth century to hear the away team's anthem as well as the home side's (Clerkin 2015). Since the peaceful execution of the IRFU's anthem policy relied on the playing of matches within Ireland, the IRFU realised that a new anthem was required if the playing of anthems away from home was to become the new norm. In the run up to the 1995 World Cup in South Africa, the IRFU commissioned a unifying song from singer-songwriter, Phil Coulter (Clerkin 2015). Since then, *Ireland's Call* has been used as the team anthem. The lyrics of this anthem make explicit reference to geographical features of the island of Ireland, such as 'The Glens of Antrim' and 'Dublin Bay', with the team (and fans) professing their origin from the 'four proud provinces of Ireland' (P. Coulter 1995). Its use as a sporting anthem has spread from rugby union and is now used by Ireland Rugby League, Ireland Hockey and Ireland Cricket.



As with many sports teams however, other songs which may not be performed prior to a match, can become symbolic of the team. In the case of the Ireland rugby team, *The Fields of Athenry*, written in 1979 by Pete St John has become emblematic of Irish Rugby. The song details the story of the Great Famine which began in 1845 and the subsequent transportation of the song's subject to Australia. The song could be described as a folk ballad, rather than a rebel song, despite containing lyrics such as 'against the famine and the crown, I rebelled, they cut me down'. It has however been performed in Irish republican contexts, as evidenced by an article on the satirical website Waterford Whispers News, which makes reference to the well known audience interjections of 'Sinn Féin 'and 'IRA 'on some occasions when the song is sung (*Waterford Whispers News* 2021). This is however not the style in which the song is sung at Ireland rugby matches. The Fields of Athenry can also be heard in the stadiums of other sports teams with a traditionally Irish nationalist identity, such as Celtic FC (Watterson 2010).

As has been explained, the IRFU decided to hold Ireland internationals in Dublin's Lansdowne Road from 1954 onwards. When Lansdowne Road was to be redeveloped in 2006/7, the IRFU faced the prospect of not having a suitably sized stadium anywhere else in Ireland and potentially having to hold Ireland matches outside Ireland (Fulton and Bairner 2007, 57). This resulted in pressure being placed on the Gaelic Athletic Association to amend Rule 42, which forbade the playing of 'foreign games 'such as rugby in its stadia. The GAA's Croke Park was to become the temporary new home of Ireland rugby, before the new Aviva Stadium on Lansdowne Road was built (Ibid.). The chief executive of Ulster Rugby has heralded this as a defining moment in Irish sport and its connection to Irish society, by stressing that the fusing of Irish nationalist space with British sport brought walls 'tumbling down 'and helped Ulster Rugby to appear accessible to some of Northern Ireland's Catholic population (Bannon 2012). Since 1954, only one Ireland international has taken place outside Dublin, when Belfast's Ravenhill, the home of Ulster Rugby, was used in 2007 for a match against Italy (Burgess 2015, 105). On this occasion, the Ireland team stood to attention for *Ireland's Call* only, since the IRFU deemed this to be an 'away ' match and so no other anthem was used for Ireland (Ibid.).

### ***Class and The British & Irish Lions***

One cannot overlook class factors when assessing the position of rugby in Irish society. From the sport's origins in the upper and middle classes of Dublin, the swift take up of it in Belfast followed a similar trend (Jeffery 1996, 63). In both these cities, it was played predominantly by

Protestant unionists, who formed the social elite (Morris 2005, 190). The sport is no longer the preserve of one confessional community, though in large part class continues to be a factor. Rugby in Ireland tends to be played and followed by the middle and upper classes, except in parts of Munster, where there is more of a working class fan base (Sugden and Bairner 1995, 61). In Northern Ireland, rugby tends to be played far more in Protestant grammar schools and clubs with a predominantly Protestant membership (Kavanagh 2020, 486), though there has been a gradual increase in its support base among members of the Catholic middle class (Hassan 2017, n.p.). To some extent therefore, followers of rugby in Northern Ireland are more likely to live or have grown up in areas less marred by sectarian conflict (Bairner 2003, 529). Bairner (Ibid.) has argued that in comparison to association football, where Northern Ireland has its own team and the support comes more from the working classes, rugby fans are more able to keep their 'sporting and political interests separate'.

The British and Irish Lions are a representative touring team incorporating the rugby unions of Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, formed in 1888 ('The History of the British & Irish Lions ' n.d.). The side tours the Southern Hemisphere every four years, with the latest tour taking place in 2021 in South Africa. The Lions were referred to as simply the 'British Lions ' or 'British Isles ' up until the 2001 tour, when they began to more conscientiously be called the British and Irish Lions (Ibid.). The team in fact just used *God Save The Queen* for their 1989 tour (Lenihan 2016, 214). In 2005, a sporting anthem for the team was commissioned entitled 'The Power of Four', yet it was met with little enthusiasm and has not been used since (Smith 2005). Team selection for the Lions is led by the Lions administration, itself composed of members of all four member unions ('The History of the British & Irish Lions ' n.d.). The highest number of Irish players ever selected was 14 for the 2009 tour, where they formed the majority of the entire team ('O'Connell Handed Lions Captaincy '2009).

## **Literature review**

### ***National identity***

Firstly, it is necessary to assess the state of some of the scholarship on national identity in general. McCrone and Bechhofer's 2015 work *Understanding National Identity* has provided a indispensable departure point for further study on national identity. They have argued that previously, scholars of nationalism and nations have not paid due attention to the concept of national identity, instead viewing it as a 'by-product' of nations and nationalism, responsible only for connecting the two together (McCrone and Bechhofer 2015, 12). Ismer (2011, 548) has commented that Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' continues to dominate much of the scholarship, but that it leaves the question of how a nation becomes 'an embodied part of a person's identity' unresolved. It has been argued that national identity is deeply personal to an individual. In this way, little in a national identity is fixed. As McCrone and Bechhofer (2015, 66) have stressed, national identity is not 'simply a flag to be routinely waved', but interacts with an individual on a very personal and contextualised level. They have argued that if people decide or do not decide to 'highlight their territorial identity, be it state or nation', this has to be taken 'at face value', since the claiming or performance of national identity is the result of a 'conscious process as to what is meaningful and appropriate in the circumstances' (Ibid., 196). This latter point of the salience of context must be borne in mind for this present study.

### ***Sport and national identity***

Research on the connections between sport and national identity has provided some useful additions to the wider national identity scholarship. Studies of sport and the nation emerged in the 1980s (Hunter 2003, 411). Hunter (Ibid.) has identified 1986 as marking the beginning of research on sport and the nation, citing articles by Alan Bairner and John Sugden as highly influential. Sugden and Bairner, writing in 1995, informed readers that literature which analysed the interplay between sports and politics was increasing. By 2003, Tuck (2003, 495) had observed that the links between sport, national culture and identity were of increasing scholarly attention. Bairner (2009, 227) has highlighted the continued relevancy of sports to studies of national identity having argued that playing for or supporting a national team 'is one of the easiest and most passionate ways of underlining one's sense of national identity, one's nationality or both in the modern era'. Certainly, research on the interplay between sport and understandings of the

nation and national identity have in fact increased, with early proponents of the field, such as Alan Bairner, continuing to publish articles in recent years.

As in other scholarship on nations and national identity, Whigham (2021, 1840) has noted that in studies on sport and nationalism Anderson's 'imagined community' has formed 'one of the most frequently deployed theoretical tools'. Bairner (2009, 225) has reiterated this: 'Anderson is regularly invoked in discussions on the relationship between sport and national identity formation'. Hobsbawm (1992, 143) too, has viewed sport as emblematic of the 'imagined community', having written that 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people'. The reliance on Anderson indicates the suitability of sport for investigations into nations and national identity. The argument has been made in fact, that international sports serve as the 'antipode' to globalisation, since they nearly always foreground the nation-state over any other collective and hence the nation does not lessen as an 'object of identification' for people (Ismer 2011, 553). Gibbons (2021) has utilised Elias '(1991) concept of the 'drag effect', which argues for the inability of citizens of nation-states to effectively identify with a higher order collective. Gibbons (2021, 1920) has applied it to sport, demonstrating that in this area too, the nation remains the object of 'emotional attachment'. Studies of sport, may rightly then foreground discussions of nations and nationalism as their way of getting at identity. Bairner (2003, 517, 529) has made a distinction between political nationalism and sporting nationalism or sporting nationality and political identity. While the nation remains central to sociological studies of sport, Dolan and Connolly (2018, 4) stress that there is no 'unvarying correspondence between national allegiance in general and national allegiance in sporting terms'.

### ***Sport and national identity case studies: Spain and Ireland***

The United Kingdom and Ireland have proven to be the focus of much of the extant work on how sport interacts with national identity and conceptions of the nation (Bairner 2015, 377). This prevalence is to be expected, given the 'anomalous situation' in which nation states do not align with sporting nations in this context (Ibid.). Yet, certain studies, relevant to this present study, have ventured beyond Ireland and Britain, with works on similarly complex relationships between sport and national identity. For instance, Spain has been identified as a country worthy of investigation in this regard. Bairner (Ibid.) has explained that Spain, like Britain and Ireland, allows for 'distinctions to be made between nation-state, historic nation, nationality and national identity'. Vaczi (2015) has taken Spanish football as a case study, which holds similarities to the

case of Irish rugby in some respects. For instance, Vaczi (2015, 149) has highlighted that Spanish nationalists may view national success on the football field as capable of uniting the country, yet for others 'at the Basque and Catalan peripheries' they are left asking 'whose state is embodied?' in this team. The Spanish team, Vaczi (2015, 162) has argued, is a 'site of tension' where regional or sub-national unease over identification can be routinely explored by followers of the team.

As has been noted, Ireland has formed the basis of much academic discussion of how sport and national identity relate to each other. Dine and Crosson (2010, 5) have emphasised how 'there can be no doubting the centrality of the Irish case in any informed analysis of sports-related identity construction'. Topics of interest within the Irish sphere have included a particular focus on sport within Northern Ireland, starting in 1995 (during the Peace Process) with Sugden and Bairner's work (Bairner 2015). Looking at Ireland as a whole, the Gaelic Athletic Association and its aiding in the construction of a distinctly Irish identity has received the most scholarly attention (Fulton and Bairner 2007, 59). Association football in Northern Ireland has been identified by Liston and Deighan (2021, n.p.) as a 'social site in which real, imaginary and embodied ideas about the national character are activated and become viscerally important'. Northern Irish football has been previously studied by McGee and Bairner (2011, 445), who found that players from the nationalist community, representing Northern Ireland, struggled to 'feel at home' on the team, given the presence of British and unionist symbolism within the football environment. Liston and Deighan (2019, 212) meanwhile have concluded, in their study of nationalist footballers in Northern Ireland, that these players were 'psychically unable to habituate to the contentious national sporting symbols of flag and anthem'. The authors have explained how 'personal and social conflict was manifest' in their participants' accounts of their experiences, which created a 'habitus dissonance' (Ibid., 213). The symbols were perceived as ideological barriers for the players, resulting in some feeling 'country-less' (Ibid.).

Rugby union in Ireland has been taken by Tuck (2003) (returned to in 2005) as a case study. Tuck promoted this particular case, as the union 'of two politically distinct nations through sport provides an interesting context for the researcher of national identity' (Tuck 2003, 495). The purpose of Tuck's (2005, 105) chapter was to assess the 'place' of rugby and its international players in the relationship 'between sport, national culture and identity'. This was a 'player centric' study which argued that the 'perceptions' of players could uncover the 'embodied national identities' lived by them (Tuck 2003, 495). Just as cricket, another sport organised on an

all-Ireland basis, does not play a role in the formation of an 'all-Irish political consciousness', Tuck (2005, 112) has concluded that rugby brings 'the two Ireland's together' on a sporting level, but that 'the players did not make too many references to a truly united Ireland' (Sugden and Bairner 1995, 47). With Maguire, Tuck uncovered a 'degree of "them and us" feeling' between Ireland players with a British identity and those from the Republic (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 99). Tuck (2005, 106) has also argued however, that 'in playing for the shamrock' international players represent 'a single Ireland writ large'.

Rugby in Ireland has also been investigated by Bairner (2003, 2005) who has sought to understand the extent to which the sport, alongside football, 'contributes to certain politically significant ambiguities within unionism in relation to the idea of national identity' (Bairner 2005, n.p.). Bairner (2003, 522) has criticised what he has seen as a 'preoccupation with the radical periphery of unionist politics' for resulting in interpretations which overlook the views of the more silent and moderate unionist majority. Bairner (2003, 534) has concluded that many Ulster unionist rugby players have been able to recognise a sense of their Irishness, 'at least in their sporting lives' and that their 'sporting nationalism is at least partially Irish'. From this Bairner (2003, 534) has posited that this scenario 'tests the theses that one's nationalism and one's national identity are necessarily one and the same'. Bairner (2005, n.p.) has questioned how far Ulster unionists' identities mediated through sport can be 'conceptualised in relation to such concepts as the nation, nationality, national identity and nationalism'. The suggestion that unionist identities, mediated through sports such as rugby, may not be served by the traditional concepts of nation and national identity, was not fully explored in that work however. Nevertheless, Bairner's work on unionist players forms part of a practically non-existent body of literature which seeks to trace a sense of Irishness in Northern Ireland's unionist population.

### ***Habitus, symbols and team identification***

Given that in divided contexts national identities are often mutually exclusive, Norbert Elias' (1991) interpretation of the concept of habitus has been demonstrated as a useful means of comprehending these situations. Aspects of Elias' approach have been utilised in the study of sport and national identity and it is with these adaptations that this study is predominantly concerned. Maguire and Tuck (2005, 88) have described habitus as 'a complex multi-layered interlocking container for the balance of tensions (or identifications) within the subconscious'. For

a study on engagement with a social identity, such as by fans of a national sports team, Elias ' (1991, 209) idea that 'the traits of the national group identity 'or 'national character 'are deeply built into a person's social habitus, proves highly relevant since it emphasises the extent to which national identity can become embodied by an individual. People, perceiving themselves to be a 'we-less I', but at the same time being emotionally involved in the nation, seek to redress this situation by 'a strategy of encapsulation 'of the nation (Elias 1991, 209). This process of binding oneself to the we-group of the nation is achieved by means of 'habitus codes', which can include such things as the national flag or anthem (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 88; Liston and Deighan 2021, n.p.).

Sports fans have certainly formed part of studies on the sociology of sport. Wann and James (2019) have provided a recent overview of the scholarship on sports fandom. They have highlighted that it is since the 1990s that there has been a dramatic increase in research on sports fandom, of which identification with sports teams among fans is the most frequently studied topic (Wann and James 2019, 22). As Wann and James (2019, 58) have also noted, sports scholars tend to approach the topic with quantitative approaches and seek to measure the degree of identification, by the use of various identification scales and indexes (Shuv-Ami and Toder Alon 2020, 4). As leading academics in the field, Wann and James (2019, 59) have criticised much of the studies on fandom and team identification as lacking firm theoretical bases. Studies have also addressed the topic of fan subgroups, which Lock and Funk (2016, 89) have argued can satisfy the desire of sections of the team's fan base to appear distinctive, particularly if these fans perceive the 'superordinate identity 'of the team to be 'overly inclusive or nebulous'.

Sports fans have predominantly been studied through the lens of Social Identity Theory, itself propounded by the work of Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Hirshon 2020, 4). The approach has been adapted to offer explanations for how identification with a sports team occurs. Wann (2011) have defined team identification as 'a fan's psychological connection to a team and the extent to which the fan views the team as an extension of his or herself'. Similarly, Branscombe and Wann (1992, 1017) have defined it as the 'the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as fans of the team', 'view the team as a representation of themselves' and 'conceive of the team as part of their own social identity'. Heere (2016, 216) has viewed team identification as 'that part of an individual's self-concept, which derives from membership anchored around a sports team, based on the emotional value attached to that membership and the knowledge of, engagement with and

evaluation of the community itself'. Lock and Heere (2017, 3) have concluded that there is substantial consensus, that team identification 'interacts with or extends-a person's self-concept'.

As collective identification with a sports team, as with other groups, occurs as the 'result of an attraction to group totems, symbols and characteristics', it is necessary to trace the study of such symbols (Lock and Funk 2016, 86). Furthermore in relation to nations, Morris (2005, 4) has argued that nations and states 'are entities which cannot be perceived or represented except in symbolic form'. Symbols of the nation such as flags and anthems are 'conceptual representations of group membership '(Butz 2009, 780). Nations are witnessed through symbols and the 'imagined community 'is experienced by way of symbols (Morris 2005, 4; Anderson 2016). Butz (2009, 780) has argued that there has been little research which has sought to understand the effects of 'exposure 'to national symbols. Furthermore, contextual responses to national symbols has not received sufficient attention in the literature (Butz 2009, 795). Muldoon et al.'s (2020) study has looked at the hitherto under-researched area of responses to symbols in contested contexts, with theirs' focusing on responses to flags in Northern Ireland. The authors have concluded that responses to national flags are 'functions 'of their participants 'national identities, although they did not conclude much beyond the idea that national symbols could divide as well as unite (Muldoon et al. 2020, 3).



## Methodology

This study sought to uncover the experiences of a particular population, those people who identified themselves as fans of both Ulster Rugby and the Ireland rugby team. Identifying as a fan of both teams was the only criteria for eligibility for this research. Ulster Rugby, representing the historic nine counties of Ulster and including the six counties that constitute Northern Ireland was chosen as a necessary membership group, since rugby in Northern Ireland is followed the most by unionists and so fans of Ulster would also likely be from a unionist background (Kavanagh 2016).

A qualitative approach was favoured over a quantitative one as the study was not concerned with the proportion of respondents who held a certain view on symbols used within Ireland rugby. As a study it was primarily concerned with elucidating the how and why of team identification, something which would not have been best served by a quantitative approach alone. A threshold of a certain type of response was not required in order to prove any theory about identifying with the team. This study sought to uncover some of the ways of thinking that underlie how people from the British unionist tradition identify with the Ireland team. Coakley (2017, 71) has explained the utility of quantitative approaches for researchers who seek to 'discover the meanings and ideologies that underlie what people say and do' and what occurs in particular 'social worlds'. The 'social world' in this case, was Irish Rugby.

The methodologies of related studies were assessed during the phase in which methods for this study were decided. As has been seen in the review of the literature, many studies on sports fandom have traditionally sought to measure identification through quantitative means. Some however, such as Gibbons' (2011) study on English football fans, effectively employed a qualitative approach. Gibbons (2011) designed a questionnaire to collect the opinion of fans on how they saw the relationship between their national identity and their feelings towards the England team. Gibbons's questionnaire contained a mixture of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Gibbons asked the fans in this study 'how would you personally describe your nationality?', which demonstrated how open ended questions could encourage participant-led answers (Gibbons 2011, 867). McCrone and Bechhofer (2015, 33) have highlighted how the British Social Attitudes Survey has allowed for participants to select more than one national identity, though they are still restricted to the options provided.

The appropriateness of using surveys was backed up in the methodological literature, of which Coakley (2017, 34) noted their utility in studying the role of sports in society. Coakley also noted the use of interviews in the sports sociology scholarship (Ibid.). Semi-structured interviews, where the interviewee has more freedom to reply as they wish and steer the interview, albeit

within a loose framework, would have provided more detailed answers and potentially uncovered discussion points not originally considered as relevant (Bryman 2012, 471). As the researcher is not a member of the population studied, there was the potential for important discussion points to be overlooked. In possession of some knowledge of the situation however, it was ultimately decided that shorter surveys would facilitate the best results. As the population, that is fans of Ireland Rugby in Northern Ireland, has not formed the basis of any published research, it was thought appropriate to receive as many responses as possible, in order to trace patterns of identification. It was predicted that interviews would have had to have been substantially long to uncover the fullest detail and thus, due to the intended length of this study, would be limited to a small handful of participants, making the drawing of any conclusions subject to conjecture.

A web survey was identified as a suitable vehicle with which to receive responses. According to Bryman (2012, 670) web surveys are in effect structured interviews, in that the respondent is bound by the questions in front of them. In light of this constriction, the most leeway in answering the questions was provided to respondents as all the questions were open ended and every question could be left blank if desired. Research on methodologies has found that open ended questions can be considered for a considerable amount of time, longer in fact than over a telephone or video-call interview (Bryman 2012, 675)). Due to taking more time over each question, it has also been found that in general the quality of answers is likely to be better with web surveys than telephone interviews (Ibid.). Research has also suggested that drawing attention to the flexibility of responses or simply encouraging a more detailed response, does in fact lead to more detailed answers (Ibid., 676). Consequently, the first question, asking respondents to provide their national identity, did not require respondents to select from pre-determined options, for this would also have gone against the essence of the study. Respondents were also encouraged, by means of adding the following to the question: 'More than one answer is also welcome and if you do give more than one answer, it would be appreciated if you write a brief response about this.'

During the initial design of this study, when interviews were considered, focus groups were also viewed as a potentially productive method. The benefits of this approach were seen to be the possibility of a more fluid discussion, with participants being able to pick up on or probe what other participants have said (Bryman 2012, 503). However, supervisor advice was sought and in the end it was decided that the accompanying risk of group think was deemed unacceptable and would potentially raze any interesting patterns in the responses. Secondly, even though the participants in this study were chosen because they belonged to a certain group, the aim was not

to understand how they respond to Ireland rugby symbols as a group, but rather as individuals, a distinction Bryman (2012, 501) highlights as key to focus groups. Finally, the content of the study did deal with somewhat contentious issues, relating to some degree to questions of national identity in Northern Ireland and responses to national symbols. Some variance in responses was expected and therefore focus groups may have exacerbated tensions and resulted in an unclear picture of the situation.

The problem of gaining access to the desired group of fans was encountered in this study. There exist supporters 'groups for each of the Irish provincial teams which are affiliated with their respective branches of the IRFU. The Ulster Rugby Supporters Club was contacted, over email and through a request to join their Facebook group, however this was to no avail. As a second course of action, the 'The 16th Man Ulster Rugby Supporters Forum 'Facebook group was identified as a suitable alternative. The group had less members than the semi-official supporters club, but crucially a request to join the group was approved. A link to a Google form containing the survey was then able to be posted in the group. In conjunction with reaching potential participants via Facebook, the form was also posted on the IrishRugby and UlsterRugby Reddit pages.

The process of gaining access did not end upon being accepted into the Facebook group however. As Bryman (2012, 151) has noted, gaining access is frequently a 'matter of negotiation ' between researcher and possible participants. The research project still had to be promoted to members of the Facebook group in such a way as to encourage responses. Coombs and Osborne (2018, 243), in their analysis of their ethnographic sports research, have posited that objectivity may not always be possible or indeed desirable. They have argued that while researchers must carefully consider their identities in comparison to those of the participants, sharing elements of one's participants 'backgrounds can be beneficial (Coombs and Osborne 2018, 244). Coombs and Osborne (2018, 243-4) have argued that 'the authenticity to achieve insider status is explicitly connected to one's demographic profile or cultural roots'. Insider status has benefits for gaining access, but also, as Coombs and Osborne (2018, 245), have argued, so that as researchers, we can 'share in the cultural understanding of symbols 'with research participants and know which symbols are 'meaningful and relevant'. Therefore, in the post which accompanied the survey, reference was made to the researcher's British and Irish identities and their support for Irish Rugby.

It was also deemed necessary to contextualise the research to potential participants, by explaining the reasoning for it. From a preliminary investigation of the subject of Northern Irish

engagement with the Ireland rugby team, a desire amongst fans to protect the cross-border nature of the team was discernible. In light of this, a contextualising of the research was offered in the advertisement which sought to reassure participants that a difficult discussion of intra-group tension was not being ignorantly stoked. The advertisement of the research made reference to the uniqueness of the cross-border nature of the team and the value that has traditionally been seen to bring to fans of rugby. This represented an attempt to encourage participation, despite the risk of appearing to be taking a side, which was deemed as not capable of altering responses.

Participants were required to read the ethics document attached to the survey form and declare that they agreed to how their data would be processed (see Appendix 3). Since the survey was partially advertised on Facebook, a number of respondents commented on the post from their personal accounts offering their support. Despite this, the survey itself did not require participants to give their name or any contact details. The anonymised responses were stored on the researcher's university Google account and downloaded to a password protected iPad.

In total, twenty four respondents took part in the survey, although not all of these twenty four answered every question. Nonetheless, for an analysis to take place, the data needed to be coded and then themed. The importance of these steps for any qualitative analysis has been stressed in the literature (Braun and Clarke 2006). Certainly, as a way to make sense of somewhat varied data from a number of different responses, thematic analysis is indispensable. However, it provided some challenges in this research. There was the inclination to code two subtly different responses together, such as the respondent who stated they were British by birth, but Irish by heritage and the respondent who identified as British first, then Irish, yet made no reference to being born outside of Northern Ireland. These were both initially coded as 'dual identity', yet it was subsequently felt that nuance was overlooked and more attention was paid to the response as-given. Similarly, given the research's discussion of the emotional side of team identification, the process of coding necessitated a diminishing of the emotion exhibited in the answers if multiple responses were to be coded together. Ultimately, the number of responses was relatively manageable and more attention was paid to the actual responses provided when drawing links across the data. Furthermore, as Bryman (2012, 671) has noted, web surveys, with the ability to download data can eliminate the need for coding.

Ten questions were asked in the survey (see Appendix 1). All the prominent 'national' symbolism of the Ireland Rugby Team was addressed by these questions. The participant's views on team selection were enquired about in order to provide balance to the remaining questions on symbols and provide the respondent with the opportunity to highlight selection of players from

Ulster as the only salient factor in their identification with the national team. Overall, this study does emphasise the importance of symbols for identification, yet the opportunity to disregard or argue against this assumption had to be offered to participants nonetheless. Participants were therefore asked 'in what way, if any, does team selection affect your identification with the Irish team?'. This question and the others sought to presume as little as possible. It was deemed inaccurate for instance to presume that Ulster fans would not sing *The Fields of Athenry* or even to suggest that they would not by an addition of a follow up question of 'why not?'. This did mean however, that answers in the negative were largely left unexplained. The phrasing of questions was therefore challenging. Bryman (2012, 228) has argued that a drawback of the structured interview is that 'researchers presume that interviewer and respondent share the same meaning of terms employed'. In this way, question seven, asking about the potentially symbolic role of the Ulster rugby team, proved problematic as terms such as 'country' or 'state' would make the question lack neutrality, yet the chosen term 'geopolitical entity' was slightly vague and led to some unclear answers.

## Discussion

### *The national identities of respondents*

It is necessary in analysing the responses, concerned as they are with feelings of identity representation in a 'national' context, to keep the stated national identity of respondents in mind. This study *is* concerned with the flexibility of identity, yet of course, the claiming of a certain national identity can represent the holding of a certain political outlook. Certain patterns of responses are to be expected from those respondents claiming a certain identity. For instance, it is predicted that those who identify solely or predominantly as Irish, will identify more with the symbols of the Irish state in use by the Ireland team. In Gibbons' (2011) study on England football fans and feeling represented by the team, responses to the question of representation were compared with how the respondents stated their national identities. Aspects of identity are here explored beyond the national identities stated, without de-centring these national identities and losing sight of their importance.

It can be observed initially that the act of identifying as an Ireland rugby fan does not invariably result in the claiming of an Irish national identity. Many of the respondents did not claim an Irish national identity, with some claiming a single British identity. Many respondents answered the first question (Appendix: Table 1) with a single answer of Northern Irish. This is an identity that has been observed in other surveys of the people of Northern Ireland only relatively recently. Garry and McNicholl (2015) have, in the past decade, conducted a report on the Northern Irish identity for the Northern Ireland Assembly. They have outlined how this identity, as a relatively new identity, carries meanings which are not fixed and 'appear to be very much in a state of flux' (Garry and McNicholl 2015, 2). They have suggested that the identity appears to be associated with positive or non-negative attitudes towards 'outgroup members' (Garry and McNicholl 2015, 5). It is an identity that appears to be associated with those who claim it 'having contact with religious outgroups' (Garry and McNicholl 2015, 2). Furthermore, Garry and McNicholl (2015, 2) have suggested that it is a more prevalent identity in areas in Northern Ireland touched less by violence during The Troubles and subsequently. In studies analysing the perception of this identity, it has been found that people in Northern Ireland generally associate a Northern Irish identity more closely with a British identity as opposed to an Irish identity (Garry and McNicholl 2015, 2). The prevalence of the identity in this study may therefore be expected, in light of rugby's following in Northern Ireland among the British identifying middle classes who generally inhabit less segregated areas.

### ***Explaining identification with the Ireland team***

From adapting the social identity approach to sports, as has been done in the past, identification with a sports team can be seen to involve the incorporation of the team's identity into an individual fan's self-concept (Thomas et al. 2017, 508). To identify with a team has been defined as engagement with the team which subsequently forms part of an individual's self-concept (Heere 2016). Identifying with a team involves recognising identifiable characteristics of the team and viewing these as an extension of the fan's self-concept (Lock and Heere 2017, 10). For instance, a fan of the Ireland rugby team identifies the symbols of the team as relating appropriately to their own sense of identity. It is chiefly symbols, which constitute a team's identity; a sports team can be identified by its emblems, songs and identities of those on the field wearing the team kit. The identities of the players too, for example their own national identities, can be seen by the fan to align with their own identities and thus the wider identity of the team is incorporated into the fan's sense of being.

There is evidently identification with the Ireland team from all respondents. After all, participants in this research all self-identified as Ireland fans. If this widespread identification, at varying degrees, with the national team does not result in all of the fans claiming one national identity, then the symbols of the Ireland team which are detached from conceptions of national identity must be salient. The nature of the fans' responses to the state symbols remains to be seen, yet if we have accepted the tremendous power of symbols in bringing about identification then symbols of a state, in any context, will be a prime cause of identification with that state, where such identification exists. In other, perhaps more simple contexts, identification with a nation-state is mediated through the symbols of that state and identification will result in the claiming of the national identity intrinsically tied to that state. If a large proportion of the fans in this study do not identify predominantly as Irish, but remain committed to the Ireland team, then it is clear that what will be termed here the 'unifying symbols', including the IRFU flag and *Ireland's Call*, act as important objects of identification. This is to stress the power of these sports specific symbols for the facilitation of identification or the strengthening of the Irish rugby identity.

This is not to say that the symbols of the Republic of Ireland used by the Irish team are not of importance. We can observe, somewhat predictably, that predominantly it is those who identify as Irish first and foremost who can identify with these symbols. A number of the Irish identifiers in this study can not only identify with these symbols, but actively support their inclusion in the

Ireland rugby context. In reference to the Irish national anthem, strong feelings of support for the playing of the anthem at home matches were expressed by some of those who identified as Irish. For instance, respondent four stated: 'I love it I think it speaks more as a nations anthem and a fight mentality song as a way to hype up things going into a game'. Respondent five wrote: 'It's our anthem and should be played always. Has a special place in my heart'. Respondent seven answered along similar lines, but qualified their response writing: 'I love it. Ideally I'd have it played before all games but I'm happy with the status quo if that is the compromise needed to have one Irish rugby team' (Appendix 1: Table 2). Mitchell et al. (2022, 47) have argued that in the context of Northern Ireland, the peace process has not been able to encourage unionists and nationalists to 'fully relinquish "their" sporting domains 'and the 'associated symbolism such as national anthems'. Evidently, for these respondents the symbols of the Republic of Ireland possessed more meaning for them.

Amongst these Irish identifying fans, the unifying symbols are viewed as important for inclusion and there is even some unease about the use of the national symbols of the Republic, yet mostly the all-Ireland symbols are not viewed as possessing the strength of the state symbols. There was a perceivable lack of enthusiasm for the more recent symbols designed to be more neutral. Respondent four said of Ireland's Call: 'I think it's a nice song but I don't have any identity with it. I don't believe it's a national anthem but it is a unifying song for sport'. Respondent five echoed this to a very close degree, writing: 'Yes I feel represented since it's about Ireland, however it's a glorified pub song. Good song but definitely not an anthem'. Respondent seven felt that *Ireland's Call* did represent them, but 'not to the same extent as *Amhran na Bhfiann* though'. They added 'at the same time I would consider it more of an anthem than other relative songs, *The Fields of Athenry* for example' (Appendix 1: Table 3). With regard to the use of the IRFU flag, although an older symbol, the Tricolour and the Ulster provincial flag, respondent five wrote that this was 'excessive', however they understood their 'use for inclusivity' (Appendix 1: Table 5). There was some unease expressed by fans identifying as Irish over the use of symbols associated with the Republic of Ireland. Respondent fourteen wrote of the use of the Irish national anthem, 'Not inclusive , it's ok for GAA games' (Table 2). The same respondent saw the use of the IRFU's flag as 'forward thinking' (Table 5). This view was however rare in comparison to those Irish identifying fans who saw the unifying symbols as lacking some meaning.

It must be said that the prevalence of responses from those who would identify as Irish predominantly was not expected. Although as has been alluded to earlier in this study, there is



evidence that support for the Ulster team is increasingly not limited to a certain section of Ulster's population. Despite the team itself largely containing players from the six counties of Northern Ireland (Bairner 2016, 4), support for the team stretches to the other three counties of the province, confirmed by Shane Logan, head of Ulster Rugby, who has said 'we are nine counties, not six' (Bannon 2012). Furthermore, support is increasingly cross-community in Northern Ireland. Hassan (2017, n.p.) has highlighted a 2013 survey which found that 70% of Northern Irish Catholics surveyed expressed their willingness to attend an Ulster rugby match at Ravenhill Stadium. It was also found, that even a decade ago, between 20-25% of the supporters at Ravenhill are from Northern Ireland's nationalist community (Bannon 2012). The fact that the level of Ulster support from Irish identifiers was unexpected, was the result of outdated preconceptions from this researcher.

The more forthcoming support for the unifying symbols came from those who did not identify as Irish predominantly. Whereas Irish identifiers were more likely to view symbols such as *Ireland's Call* or the IRFU flag as lacking in comparison to symbols of the Irish state, non-Irish identifiers welcomed their inclusion with greater fervour. Respondent nine, identifying as Northern Irish, in reference to *Ireland's Call*, wrote 'I sing it heartily' (Table 3). Respondent six, another Northern Irish identifier, praised the team anthem for its neutrality, describing it as 'iconic' (Table 3). The theme of neutrality and inclusion was expressed in the responses of respondents eleven and twenty two. Respondent eleven wrote 'It is a well received acknowledgement that the IRFU represents the four provinces', while respondent twenty two stated that *Ireland's Call* does make them 'feel included', since they could not sing the Irish national anthem and it enables them 'to join in' (Table 3). There were similar patterns of support for the IRFU flag or the Ulster provincial flag. Respondent one, identifying as Northern Irish or as an Ulsterman, wrote of having no issue with the IRFU flag since it included the four provinces (Table 5). Respondents eight, nine, seventeen, twenty one and twenty three, also Northern Irish-British fans, echoed this, with respondent nine expressing a desire for the IRFU to only use the IRFU banner (Table 5). Respondent twenty three offered an explanation for why they favoured a use of the provincial flags. They opined that 'the use of all four provincial flags would be a great solution' for 'Ulster supporters know that our province crosses a border between NI and ROI' (Table 5). This suggests a comfortableness with the fact that Ulster as a province spans a political border.

There was largely respect for the presence of symbols of the Republic, with minimal opposition, though there was a lack of identification from those not identifying as Irish predominantly with those symbols. Respondent nine stated that they have 'no objections' to the Irish national anthem and 'respect it' since it is the national anthem of another state (Table 2). Similarly, respondent twenty two explained that 'as it's the national anthem in Dublin it doesn't bother me' (Table 2). In fact, Maguire and Tuck (2005, 101) have highlighted the experience of unionist players with the Irish national anthem who claimed the anthem moved them and put them 'in the mood' for the match. There was some minimal opposition to the use of symbols of the Republic, from respondents nineteen, seventeen and fifteen, with the latter saying the presence of the anthem discourages them from watching the matches (Table 2). Largely though there was respect, only there was a lack of identification. Respondent twenty three also wrote 'I do not have a problem with it', though they added that they could not identify with it since they were 'raised to identify with *God Save The Queen*' (Table 2). Respondent twenty two returned to the topic of the national anthem in the final question writing that they 'join in as much as possible', but that they 'draw the line at singing *The Soldier's Song* but it's because 'they don't know it and it doesn't represent the whole of Ireland' (Table 10). Bornman (2022, 285) has argued that if a symbol is 'perceived as belonging' to another group of people, 'it will be difficult to convince or motivate other groups to adopt it as their own'. If that symbol belongs to a state to which a group does not belong, either in reality or allegiance, then naturally there will be a lack of identification, but as shown here there can be respect.

In a similar way then, *The Fields of Athenry* was not entirely viewed as a symbol of Ireland Rugby which all fans possessed ownership of. Respondent twenty three wrote that ultimately they would join in with the signing of the song, but they made clear that they perceived it to be 'really Connacht's home song, even though Munster sometimes sing it' (Table 4). Other non-Irish identifying fans expressed a lack of connection with *The Fields of Athenry*. In fact, all of the responses which stated the fan did not sing *The Fields of Athenry*, bar one, were given by those identifying as British or Northern Irish, including respondents eight, fifteen and seventeen. It can be inferred from this pattern, that even though the song is not a symbol of the Irish state, symbols such as this still have to be perceived as unifying. For some of these fans perhaps, the song holds particular connotations. As a lament on the injustices of the Great Famine, the song is critical of the British administration in Ireland. Consequently, respondent twenty three wrote: 'I prefer not to think about the possible political connotations of the song as I think this could possible alienate

Ulster supporters more' (Table 4). While this was not the majority response to the song, Buckley's (1998, 100) argument that it is the 'nature of symbols to be polysemic and have the capacity to mean different things to different people' is important here. This demonstrates that the context of the reception of symbols must be recognised, but also that symbols possess flexible meanings in these different contexts depending on who is witnessing them.

### ***A shared Ireland rugby identity***

Nonetheless, fans who do not identify predominantly as Irish expressed great support for the Ireland team and a shared identity as rugby fans can be observed. Feelings of pride before matches were not only reported by Irish identifiers, with respondents eighteen and twenty one citing these feelings as their most common response to pre-match ceremonies (Table 10). Symbols that are perceived to be belonging to the Ireland rugby community do continually create a shared identity among this group. For instance, most of the fans identifying as Northern Irish or British stated that they did in fact sing *The Fields of Athenry*, though some of these respondents suggested that this act would be context specific, with respondents eleven and eighteen saying they would sing it 'at Ireland matches' (Table 4). In fact, respondent twenty two argued that the song would hold meaning for non-Irish identifiers and both traditions on the island of Ireland, writing: 'Yes at every opportunity, the song highlights the difficulties the people of Ireland suffering during the famine. What some people forget is the famine and severe English rule affected working class Protestants as well' (Table 4). There is certainly evidence of rural Protestants in Ireland being affected by the Great Famine in similar ways to Irish Catholics, though as a total population, there was far less death (Gregory and Cunningham 2016). Therefore, through *The Fields of Athenry*, inhabitants of the island of Ireland can be 'reminded of their common heritage' and find connection to a common identity (Smith 1991, 17). Cronin (1999, 19) has identified sport as unique in its ability to forge 'an identity and a commonality of experience' amongst those who have taken part in a match as a fan. In this case, a true shared identity can be fostered through Ireland Rugby's symbols, particularly through anthems which have rightly been identified as providing the 'most significant generation of we-identity' (Tuck 2005, 121).

### ***The Ulster rugby team***

With the existence of a Northern Ireland football team which in many ways creates an 'imagined community' of Northern Ireland, it is of note that Ulster Rugby does not appear to fulfil

this role for its fans (Anderson 2016). The need to belong to a traditional and easily bound 'imagined community', demonstrated by fans of the Northern Ireland football team, does not appear salient to Ulster rugby fans. Northern Ireland football matches allow a distinct imagined community of a recognised jurisdiction to be performed. Bairner (2003, 526) has stressed how the Northern Ireland football team holds tremendous 'politico-cultural importance' for its fans, who can compete as a constituent part of the United Kingdom. The Ulster rugby team could be 'construed' as being the 'national' rugby team of Northern Ireland and one respondent alluded to the equating of Ulster with Northern Ireland (Bairner 2016, 4). Respondent fifteen, when asked what geopolitical entity an Ulster player is representing, replied with 'Ulster/Northern Ireland' (Table 7). This perception has been found among rugby and hockey players in other studies (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 99; Liston and Moreland 2009, 136). On the whole however, and in the context of increasing 'ideological fears about the continued dilution of Unionist/British identities', Ulster fans do not appear to require Ulster Rugby to aid in the imagining of Northern Ireland (Liston and Deighan 2021, n.p.). For non-Irish identifiers in this study, an Ulster player was representing Ulster the province and not any nation state, including Northern Ireland. In fact, respondent twelve questioned the purpose of question seven writing 'why are you asking this question?' (Table 7). The perceivable annoyance shown here, followed by their insistence that Ulster represented the nine county province of Ulster, suggests that the provincial nature of Ulster rugby is highly valued.

Ulster Rugby does however have great importance for the relationship between its fans and their support for the Ireland team. For the fans surveyed here, the Ulster team still represents *their* province, rather than *their* country, so there can still be very high degrees of attachment and loyalty to it. As a result of this, the vast majority of Ulster fans valued the inclusion of Ulster players in the Ireland squad. Some respondents went further and stressed the link between team selection and identification. Respondent eight wrote that 'less Ulster representation means less identification' with the Irish team. Respondent fifteen went further still and said that they wouldn't watch a match if there was 'only one Ulsterman on the bench'. In the context of the 2022 Ireland tour to New Zealand, the lack of Ulster players in the Ireland team appeared to drive respondent twenty three to wish that New Zealand won the final game of the series (Table 8). For many respondents, the Ulster team plays a highlight important role in binding them to the Ireland team. Belonging to the Ireland team fan group is facilitated by the IRFU's complete inclusion of the province of Ulster. The locating of Ireland rugby within the home of Ulster rugby was also identified by the respondents as of great value, for most wanted to see Ireland games being

moved around the country to venues such as Ravenhill, Ulster's stadium (Table 6). Ulster Rugby does seem to offer non-Irish identifiers membership of a distinctive subgroup, which aids in their attachment to the 'superordinate identity' of the Ireland team, which may be perceived on occasion as slightly too 'nebulous' and possessing symbols which lack personal relevance (Lock and Funk 2016, 89).

### ***The provincial structure of rugby and the sports-national identity nexus***

As Ulster Rugby is on the whole conceived of in provincial terms, that is it is viewed by non-Irish identifiers as representative of all nine Ulster counties, and helps bind its fans to the Ireland team, it can be observed that there is fundamentally identification with the all-Ireland, provincial character of Irish Rugby. It has been shown that the non-Irish identifiers in this study valued symbols such as the IRFU flag which visually represent the four provinces and branches of the IRFU. It is worth remembering that Ireland rugby has been organised on this basis since 1879 and there is therefore a desire amongst fans to protect this history and the fact that the team predates the Partition of Ireland by around four decades. Respondent sixteen drew attention to this fact highlighting that the Ireland team 'was in place before N.Ireland/Republic of Ireland existed' (Table 7).

Identifying with the all-Ireland nature of the team therefore enables a stepping outside of contentious politics. For those who seek to protect the provincial character of the team, Irish rugby can be detached from conceptions of nation on the island of Ireland and the opposing aspirations associated with these. Irish Rugby has been lauded for holding firm in the face of division and conflict on the island of Ireland. Ireland players have declared that The Troubles never impacted on the cohesiveness of the team, even during the darkest times in that conflict (Maguire and Tuck, 2005, 13). The idea that rugby is above political divisions has been echoed by many involved in Irish Rugby (Maguire and Tuck, 2005, 14). Former Ireland international Willie John McBride declared that he was only committed to his 'performance on the field' and added 'I want nothing to do with politics. I am not a flag waver and never will be' (Bairner 2003, 529). In this present study, Respondent twenty three closed their response to the use of flags by the IRFU with the comment: 'like many people from Northern Ireland we are pretty sick about discussions around flags...or as we call them flegs!!' (Table 5). It would be inaccurate to argue that rugby is capable of completely transcending political divides, for evidently there are divisions, yet it must be recognised that sports fans are motivated to engage with sports 'as a means of escape' (Wann

and James 2019, 66). The IRFU as composed of four apolitical provinces offers this means of escape.

The identification with the team from non-Irish identifiers might best be conceived as a result of their holding an Irish aspect to their habitus, an Irish' sporting habitus '(McGee and Bairner 2011, 451). McCrone and Bechhofer (2015, 195) have stressed how certain identities are claimed or performed depending on which one is 'appropriate to the circumstances'. In the context of rugby, it may appear most appropriate for non-Irish identifying fans to express an Irish sporting nationality. Crucially, this sporting layer of an individual's habitus can coexist with any other social identity they hold, for it is a layer that be can elevated or suppressed at will. In their study of nationalist football players for Northern Ireland, Liston and Deighan (2021, n.p.) have argued that these players experienced a 'habitus mismatch 'which has been' managed through a flexible sporting identity'. Non-Irish identifying fans can experience a similar problem, but negotiate it through explanations such as being 'Irish in rugby terms '(Table 1).

Identifying with the all-Ireland character of the Ireland rugby team represents a connection to an older and distinct team identity. This identity has been challenged over time as the bond between sports and representations of national identity has strengthened worldwide. Sociologists of sport have identified such a development. Maguire and Tuck (2005, 106) have argued that the 'sport-national identity nexus has a processual, or historical, dimension'. They have argued that the bond between national identity and international sports has 'accelerated notably 'in recent decades, as sport has enabled the 'symbolic rank order of nations 'to be tested on the field (Ibid.). Scholars have suggested that this development has taken place in the context of peacetime, or rather the absence of war. Hobsbawm (1992, 143) has identified the inter-war period as the point at which sport engendered 'gladiatorial contests between persons and teams symbolising state-nations', while Tuck (2003, 511) has traced this to the post-war period, since when the mass media have reinforced narratives of the nation through sport. Such a strong bond between national identity and international sports is to be expected given that international teams across sports nearly always represent sovereign nation-states (Bairner 2009, 228). A number of responses did reinforce this link too, with respondent five, identifying as Irish, writing that an international match takes place in Dublin because 'it's the capital so where else would it be? '(Table 6). For some Ireland fans this development in the 'sport-national identity nexus 'has seemingly been accepted (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 106).

In finding identification in the aspects of the Ireland team identity unbound to nation-states, these fans express a continuing attachment to an older culture in international sport in general. Whilst international sports closely followed the birth of codified, modern sports in the nineteenth century, such contests did not originally reflect political performances of nation-states. Hobsbawm (1992, 142) has illuminated how international sport had the initial aim of 'integrating the national components of multi-national states'. Rather than politically opposed nation-states settling their differences through sports, international sport originally reflected 'friendly rivalry' between culturally distinguishable aspects of a state or empire (Ibid.). Approaching international sport in this manner has in the past enabled unionists in Britain and Ireland to become patriotically Welsh, Scottish or Irish when facing England on the sports field (Jeffery 1996, 71). Such rivalries may only be temporary however and the existence of some identification with The British and Irish Lions, represents a further connection to an older norm in international sports, that of multi-national teams. For fans who did not identify solely as Irish, the Lions were on the whole followed more closely than other Ireland fans. Respondent eight wrote that 'The Lions represent the British isles and Ulster are very much a part of that'. Similarly, respondent eleven wrote: 'The Lions represent the 4 home unions and so Ulster as part of the IRFU are incorporated into the Lions' (Table 9). Reference was made predominantly to the honour of Lions selection for players, rather than identification with the specific multi-national symbolic character of The Lions, yet any identification with the concept of a transnational team represents an ability to support international sports outside the context of the 'sport-national identity nexus' (Table 9; Maguire and Tuck 2005, 106).

As the locating of Ireland home games within the political centre of the Republic of Ireland, Dublin, with the resultant accompanying symbolism, has come to be the norm in recent decades, fans who cannot identify with this development appear to cling to older symbols which help locate them in their social group. This has been predicted by Elias (1991, 211) and his tracing of the implications of 'social development processes'; his idea of a 'drag effect'. He has argued that these processes include moving from one stage of social organisation to another, which crucially 'may be higher or lower' (Ibid., 211). In a way therefore, the strengthening of the bond between Irish Rugby and the Republic of Ireland represents the advancement towards a lower order of identification. Elias has argued that 'the people affected by this change cling to the earlier stage in their personality structure, their social habitus' (Ibid., 211). This present study offers evidence of non-Irish identifying Irish Rugby fans seeking to protect the original formation of their social

habitus, even if the development processes have been gradual and, through the creation of symbols such as *Ireland's Call*, sensitive to the unique tradition of Irish Rugby.

Fans who identified as Irish only however, in valuing the symbols of the Irish state within rugby and thus the connection between national team and nation-state, found it harder in general to identify with the Lions. These fans tended to hold more neutral views towards the Lions. Respondent four wrote that they don't relate the Lions to the Ireland or Ulster teams adding: 'the Lions to me is different entirely and really it feels more British given the influence they have on it and the management team.' Respondent seven, identifying as Irish, echoed this sentiment and also added that they would be in favour of a Northern Hemisphere representative team, including France, instead of the Lions (Table 9). The latter point is of note since it suggests a detachment from the idea that one sports team can represent the islands of Ireland and Britain. The sense expressed by Irish identifying fans, therefore, was that the Lions are anachronistic in a world where nation-statehood is performed via the means of international sports.

There does appear therefore to be a substantial division between those who can detach national sports teams from nation states and those who value such a connection. This division is to a reasonable degree reflected by differences in national identity. Only one fan who did not identify as Irish suggested that nation-state symbols of the United Kingdom could be included in Irish Rugby. Respondent nineteen wrote that they were 'happy enough for Soldiers Song to be sung at Dublin games if God Save the Queen was played at the occasional Ravenhill international' (Table 10). For this fan it appears that the Ireland team's representation of two political entities, divided by a border is salient, for they still find value in the unifying symbols (Tables 3 and 5). However, this fan seeks greater representation for Northern Ireland as a constituent part of the UK, rather than greater representation for Ulster the province as the majority of other British and Northern Irish fans desired. The importance placed on national sports teams has been stressed in this study and at this stage it can be observed that battles can take place over what these teams as symbols represent.

It must be explicated though that many fans who did not identify predominantly as Irish did not wish to change the status quo to any significant degree and took largely pragmatic positions towards questions of symbolism in Irish Rugby. With regard to team selection, a significant number of respondents explained that team selection does not affect their identification with the Irish team in any way. Respondents explained how a lack of Ulster players selected could be frustrating, but that in the end they are still able to identify with the team selected. Respondent twelve wrote: 'they wear green, so I support them', while respondent



sixteen wrote: 'Would always want more Ulster representation but that's part of the game. Once selected, agree or disagree, they are my team'. Respondent twelve pointed out that Ulster club players have long dominated the Ireland team, as confirmed by Burgess (2015, 105), suggesting that for this fan, team selection balances out if the bigger picture is consulted (Table 8). In addition to pragmatic positions over team selection, the practicality of holding Ireland internationals at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin was an idea put forward by many of the fans surveyed. For instance, respondent six wrote that the 'Aviva has a stadium capacity that can't really be matched' (Table 6).

Perhaps in light of such pragmatism, one might be tempted to suggest that for those fans who do not identify predominantly as Irish, that they are simply fans of rugby the game rather than fans of the internationality of international rugby and the symbolism that comes with that. International rugby provides the highest level of the game and fans may possibly overlook the national aspects of it. Wann and James (2019, 16) have argued that fans can identify with a sport played by a team and not just the team itself. They have posited that there can be multiple 'points of attachment' for a fan in that they can identify with 'multiple sports objects' (Ibid., 54-55). Respondent twenty four wrote that 'rugby shouldn't be about emblems or anthems', which at first would lend weight to the argument for identification with the sport being most salient (Table 8). Indeed, one must entertain the idea that sport may not be a means for reflections on social identity for everybody. Bairner (2009, 227) has argued that for some people they simply may not be interested in the relationship between the nation and sport. The value of escaping contentious politics through rugby has been elucidated as a theme of the results earlier in this analysis and therefore may at a first pass lend weight to the idea of identifying only with the sport of rugby and 'making do' with the Irish team.

### ***A sense of Irishness***

This would, however, overlook the observable connection that fans from all identities had to various symbols which pertained to the island of Ireland. If there was only identification with the sport of rugby, British fans expressing their support for the unifying symbols which make reference to all corners of the island of Ireland would not be seen. The same respondent who put forward their view that rugby 'shouldn't be about emblems and anthems', also wrote of the value that following their country brought them (Table 8, respondent 24). This must represent some connection to a sense of Irishness. Bairner (2016, 4), in leading the research on unionists' engagement with an Irish identity, has concluded that for the Irish Rugby internationals he

researched 'a sense of being Irish' was able to co-exist alongside their British identities and thus arguing slightly beyond his conception of an Irish sporting nationality. Bairner (2003, 523) had earlier suggested that 'at some level' of these player's consciousness there is 'an awareness of an Irish identity'. Bairner (2005, 170) also highlighted rugby as the single vehicle for this, having argued that soccer and Gaelic games have been 'demonstrably unsuccessful' in encouraging 'Ulster unionists to recognise their Irishness'. Tracing this Irish part of their identities, may expand on Diffley's (1973, 14) argument that rugby has provided a 'different definition of Irishman from the acrimonious political one'. The nature of this sense of Irishness is still unclear however.

The concept of a sporting national habitus can explain the 'apparent malleability of identity' involved in supporting or playing for Ireland, but it is somewhat restricted by its focus on sport (Liston and Moreland 2009, 129). Conceived as a layer of a person's habitus which is foregrounded in the context of sports, we are still unable to observe and understand the effect that this sporting identity may have beyond sport. Not dissimilarly Bairner (2003, 529), has drawn a distinction between an Ireland rugby player's 'political identity' and their 'sporting nationality'. Such a distinction could fit the situation with fans as well, for respondent eighteen stated their national identity was 'British, but Irish in rugby terms'. Yet, creating a new category of sporting nationality may not be the best way to trace any wider sense of Irishness felt by those who do not claim an Irish national identity. In a way it isolates sport from other meaningful aspects of a person's life. Sugden and Bairner (1995, 19) have in fact viewed unionist support as engaging in a 'form of cultural nationalism not dissimilar from the symbolic sportive nationalism of the Scots and Welsh'. Sporting nationalism is here closely compared to cultural nationalism by the authors, which appears to open up a useful, wider discussion of unionist engagement with Irishness.

At this point, it is fruitful to recognise some of the forces that have been at work on this sense of Irishness. These forces, shaping a negotiation of an Irish aspect of social identity, have historically come from within the island of Ireland and from outside it. Prior to the culmination of the independence movement in Ireland, many unionists across Ireland regarded themselves as Irish, as well as British (Morris 2005, 108). As C. Coulter (1999, 22) has explained unionists increasingly came to accept the Irish nationalist idea that Britishness and Irishness were mutually exclusive. Yet even by 1968, 20% of Northern Ireland Protestants who were surveyed claimed a national identity of Irish (Morris 2005, 108). By 1986 however, 3% of Northern Ireland Protestants identified as Irish (Stringer 1991). Forces from outside the island of Ireland, which interact with rugby and sport must also be recognised. Maguire and Tuck (1998) have studied the reporting of rugby by The Times of London and found that the Irish team has been regularly characterised in

stereotypical ways which create one single Irish character, with references to 'war-like tribesmen' and the creation of 'emerald commotion' through their style of play. Burgess (2015, 100) has pointed out that it is generally the case that sporting figures from Northern Ireland are viewed as Irish by British people in Great Britain, regardless of those athlete's own national identities. There is therefore some evidence of competing pressures on unionists in the North and their engagement with a sense of being Irish as well as British.

Stepping back slightly allows a situating of this discussion in a wider context. Here a scenario can be observed in which a group of people, many of whom do not predominantly claim an Irish national identity, can identify with symbolism pertaining to the island of Ireland. Taking Sugden and Bairner's (1995, 19) idea that those who identify in part as British, will be 'engaging in a form of cultural nationalism' when they support the Irish team, offers the beginnings of a break from the more narrow focus on sport. It is outside the scope of this present study to depart too much from the argument that fans who identify predominantly as British possess an Irish sporting layer to their habitus, yet at the same time, following sports must be situated within a person's wider sphere of cultural engagement. Maguire and Tuck's (2005, 88) definition of habitus as possessing 'interlocking' layers is crucial here. Furthermore, McCrone and Bechhofer (2015, 17) have posited that it would be beneficial for studies of national identity to move away from conceiving national identity as a noun and instead see it more as a verb; the 'doing' of national identity which varies with context. This present study has highlighted some shifting of nationally related identification based on context, yet these contexts McCrone and Bechhofer (2015) have suggested, must be seen to overlap and not exist independently. When a fan in particular is able to identify with symbols in international sport which pertain to a particular territory, the different layers of their social habitus must feed into each other, for none is totally distinct.

### ***Identity beyond the state and nation***

If sporting nationalism forms a part of cultural nationalism and interacts with other formations of identity, then it is still curious that in many of the cases shown here, national identity appears to remain an independent variable, nominally unaffected by engagements with Irishness. National identity may therefore be a limited framework for understanding someone's rootedness to a territory. McNicholl et al. (2019, 14), in their study of the Northern Irish identity, have suggested that one of the ways in which that identity is conceptualised is as a 'banal indicator of place' in that people's Northern Irishness is not proclaimed for political reasons in every case, but rather it can derive from living within a certain area of the island of Ireland. In a similar way

then, an Ireland fan's sense of Irishness may derive from being a resident of the island of Ireland, without much dialogue with their national identity, which may not include an Irish component. Former Ireland international Jeremy Davidson put it thus: 'I am British. I have a British passport but at the same time I am Irish. It's a strange situation. I am British but I live on the island of Ireland so I am Irish as well' (Bairner 2003, 529). In a similar fashion, respondent sixteen wrote: 'I am definitely British, but was born on the island of Ireland' (Table 10). Therefore they accept that Ireland is their national team (Table 10). A connection to the island of Ireland thus seems possible, with *some* implications for an individual's sense of social identity.

In this way, we should not be blinded by the 'allure' of the nation-state's relation to identity and hence overlook the ability of identity construction to 'take place at regional territorial scales below, above and across the nation-state' (Charron and Diener 2015, 13). Identification can evidently, as this study has attempted to show, be fostered at territorial scales outside the conceptual confines of the nation-state. Identity must continue to be seen in less 'state-centric' terms, as Murphy (2015, 769) has highlighted it is less and less, but also in less nation-centric terms too. Importantly, the nation and the state have increasingly been viewed as non-congruent and social identities are not viewed as bound to one political jurisdiction, for in many cases nations straddle more than one state. However, the formation of meaningful social identities relating to entities besides the nation is a process that remains largely elusive. This study has uncovered a comfortability amongst non-Irish Ireland rugby fans with a sense of Irishness and a rootedness to the geographical territory of the island of Ireland. A case study has been examined which raises the question of territorial identity formation irrespective of national identity.

A recognition of an identity tied to a territory, does not, it must be stressed, exclude greater understandings of nationalism. As Charron and Diener (2015, 14) have stressed, understanding national identities and nationalism in part requires a consideration of how social identities are formed around territory 'at all spatial scales'. Nationalism is still highly relevant in any appreciation of the links between territory and identity. Hence, in this case, a sporting nationalism can occur symbiotically with identification with a territory, the island of Ireland; the adoption of a sporting nationality is detached from concepts of the nation and intrinsically bound to territorial identification. Elias' argument for the continued dominance of the nation, due to its strong binds to an individual's 'we-image', as the highest object of identification, must not be forgotten (Elias 1991, 221; Elias et al. 1996, 352). In fact, Dolan and Connolly (2018, 3) have argued that 'it is through sport that we often recognise the persistent significance of national

identification'. Aughey's traditional interpretation of unionism in Northern Ireland has argued for the ability of unionists to detach from ideas of nationalism altogether and identify rather as citizens of a complexly-rendered state, the UK (Aughey 1989). However, this does not appear to be the case in the context of sport. Supporting a sports team involved in international sport involves sporting nationalism as a requisite and any identification with a nation-state can be augmented to this. To argue that unionists in Northern Ireland cannot take part in nationalism, even if only a sporting nationalism is to overlook the extent to which there can be identification with the territory of the island of Ireland and some awareness of an Irish part to their identities.

## Conclusion

The 'unifying' symbols employed within the Ireland national rugby team culture are identifiably salient in bringing about identification with the team from those who do not predominantly identify as Irish. Identification from this group of the respondents was therefore brought about by identification with the provincial structure of the IRFU, with the national team being representative of this. Thus, it was concluded that identification with the team takes place outside of the 'sport-national identity nexus' that characterises international sport (Maguire and Tuck 2005, 106). The idea that fans can possess a 'sporting habitus' was identified as a highly useful means of understanding the phenomenon examined in this study (McGee and Bairner 2011). The interlocking nature of the layers forming an individual's habitus was subsequently stressed, which sought to remove an identifiable sense of Irishness from existing in isolation from other social identities. This sense of Irishness appears in many ways to be rooted in the 'place form' of Ireland, beyond more national conceptions (McNicholl et al 2019, 16). Viewing the sporting nationalism of non-Irish identifiers as a form of cultural nationalism, it was further argued here that these nationalisms are capable of existing symbiotically with territorial identification, with the island of Ireland.

At the outset of this analysis, the social identity approach, as adapted to the context of sports fans, was taken to explain team identification through symbols identified as interacting suitably with a fan's self-concept. Responses to the symbols used in Irish Rugby were then compared between those who identified as Irish and those who possessed another predominant identity, either Northern Irish or British. Despite this comparison illuminating varying patterns of identification based on national identity, it was subsequently concluded that a shared Irish Rugby identity exists. A contrast was then made between Ulster Rugby and the Northern Ireland football team, where it was argued that the former, as representative of a province, binds non-Irish identifiers to the Ireland team. Uncovering identification with the provincial structure of Irish Rugby enabled an investigation into the ways in which identification with a national team can be detached from conceptions of nation. At this stage, the idea of a sporting habitus was raised as a key explanation for the flexibility of identity observed in the results. Following this, a sense of Irishness was then explored, given the identification with symbols referring to Ireland and it was posited that a sporting layer of an individual's habitus could be seen to interact with other social identities. Finally, greater appreciation of identity construction outside the concepts of state and nation, but relating to territory was heralded as a fruitful approach for further research.

This study enquired about the nature of feelings of inclusion, yet it could not ascertain any perceived consequences resulting from any lack of national identification, since to do so would require a greater theoretical grounding in psychology. This would however be a topic of potential interest to studies focusing on divided societies and intergroup relations. Due to the fact that non-Irish identifying fans of the Ireland rugby team have hitherto suffered from a lack of scholarly attention, a relatively short survey was chosen as the method for this study. More lengthy interviews however would likely yield greater understandings of the cognitions of participants in the unique context of Irish rugby. Not only this, but opportunities for further research around the intersection of national identity and international sports abound. This study has argued that the bond between nation and a national sports team remains strong, but that attention should also be paid to which nation is being represented. Distinctions between nation, nation-state, nationality, nationalism and national identity need to be continued to be made. Spanish sport has proven to be a notable alternative context to the focus on Britain and Ireland (see Vaczi 2015), but the equivalence often made between these concepts and the assumption that sports teams represent one 'imagined community' needs to be tested further, in other international contexts (Anderson 2016).

This study has offered some contributions to the field of sports and their intersection with national identity. Firstly, its focus on the unionist tradition in Northern Ireland has gone beyond that of other studies on Northern Ireland which tend to centre their discussions on the less moderate wings of the two main communities. Through rugby, many views characteristic of moderate unionism have been assessed. This study has further traced a sense of engagement from this community with a sense of Irishness, which has often been overlooked. This study has aspired to offer some contributions to understandings of the nation, nationalism and national identity. It has sought to contribute to the literature which pays closer attention to national identity as a concept which is not necessarily bound by its relationship to nationalism and the nation. National identity has been here recognised as being embodied as a layer of an individual's habitus and how its claiming and performance is contextually dependent. Finally, through its assessment of participant responses to nationally related symbols, it has found inclusive symbols to be capable of bringing about identification across politically divided groups.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Responses

Table 1: How would you identify yourself in terms of national identity? More than one answer is also welcome and if you do give more than one answer, it would be appreciated if you write a brief response about this.

Respondent	Answer
1	I identify as northern Irish or an Ulsterman
2	Irish
3	British/ Irish (born in England to Irish family)
4	Irish
5	Irish
6	Northern Irish
7	100% Irish
8	Northern Irish, British
9	Northern Irish
10	Irish
11	British
12	Northern Irish
13	Irish
14	Irish first
15	Northern Irish
16	British
17	Northern Irish
18	British, but Irish in Rugby Terms
19	Northern Irish
20	Northern Irish
21	British/Irish
22	I've always identified as British because of my passport, I was always told I had to get a British passport but I find myself telling people I'm Irish if asked.
23	Primarily Northern Irish, then British, then Irish
24	

Table 2: What are your thoughts on The Soldier's Song/Amhrán na bhFiann being played at home games?

Respondent	Answer
1	I have no issues with this as they also sing irelands call
2	Fine to hear, enjoy singing it
3	I like it
4	I love it I think it speaks more as a nations anthem and a fight mentality song as a way to hype up things going into a game
5	It's our anthem and should be played always. Has a special place in my heart
6	Grand
7	I love it. Ideally I'd have it played before all games but I'm happy with the status quo if that is the compromise needed to have one Irish rugby team
8	Should not be played, it doesn't represent Ulster
9	I have no objections & respect it. It is the national anthem of Southern Ireland.
10	No problem with it
11	It is the National Anthem, but it only represents 3 provinces.
12	I'd prefer it not to be but there's no alternative
13	That is the anthem of my country
14	Not inclusive , it's ok for GAA games
15	Hate it- turns me off watching
16	Should be played
17	Dont agree with it
18	I don't mind
19	Would really not like it
20	Should be played.
21	No issues with it
22	As it's the National Anthem in Dublin it doesn't bother me.
23	I do not have a problem with it per se although I do not identify with it as it the ROI National Anthem. It does not relate to me as an anthem as I was raised to identify with God Save The Queen. I am not intimidated by it either ...I would be neutral in my attitude.
24	

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Table 3: What are your thoughts on Ireland's Call? Do you feel represented by it?

Respondent	Answer
1	Yeah I do, it's a fair representation of all provinces
2	Enjoy it, associate it with rugby
3	Not the best song but serves a purpose to unite people
4	I think it's a nice song but I don't have any identity with it. I don't believe it's a national anthem but it is a unifying song for sport
5	Yes I feel represented since it's about Ireland, however it's a glorified pub song. Good song but definitely not an anthem
6	Yes - very neutral song, iconic now
7	I do. Not to the same extent as Amhran na Bhfiann though. At the same time I would consider it more of an anthem than other relative songs, The Fields of Athenry for example.
8	Yes, it is a great anthem
9	Yes. I sing it heartily
10	Not really
11	It is a well received acknowledgement that the IRFU represents the 4 provinces
12	Yes
13	I think it is all inclusive to keep players of the six counties which is fair
14	Serves a purpose - but we could do better. I have remind friends this is not the national anthem.
15	Not massively
16	Love it in addition to National anthem
17	I like Ireland's Call. Represents all 4 regions
18	I like it and feel this does represent me
19	Yes
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	I actually like it and it does make me feel included, I don't think I could sing the soldiers song and this allows me to join in
23	Not really. I understand why it was written.. to engage the Ulster fans. However it is just a song and as someone who grew up in 1970s Belfast I find it hard to connect to songs relating to my background. I see it as an appeasement to Ulster supporters .. to try to include us. I would prefer they included our players in the team instead...then I would feel connected to an anthem
24	

Table 4: Do you sing The Fields of Athenry or would sing it if at an Ireland match?

Respondent	Answer
1	I've sang it at an Ireland match
2	Yes
3	Yes
4	Yes I do sing it
5	Yes
6	If I know the words yes
7	I definitely would. An amazing song completely symbolic of Ireland, Irish sport and Irish rugby.
8	No
9	Yes I do sing it and will continue to do so
10	Yes
11	At Ireland matches
12	Yes
13	No
14	Yes
15	No
16	Yea
17	No
18	I would sing it at an Ireland match
19	I would
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	Yes at every opportunity, the song highlights the difficulties of the people of Ireland suffering during the famine. What some people forget is the famine and severe English rule affected working class Protestants well.
23	I have no problem singing it ...although it is really Connacht's home song, even though Munster sometimes sing it. Feel it is just a song that everyone knows and therefore it gets sung. I prefer not to think about the possible political connotations of the song as I think this could possible alienate Ulster supporters more
24	

Table 5: What are your thoughts on the various flags used by the IRFU to represent Ireland?

Respondent	Answer
1	No issues. They are of the 4 provinces
2	No thoughts
3	Positive to represent different communities
4	I have no major thoughts either positive or negative. The flags are representing the teams
5	Excessive but I understand its use for inclusivity
6	They do a good job
7	I mildly dislike the use of the tricolour and Ulster flags side by side. I 100% love the use of the standard provincial flags by the teams as it increases the tribal element of supporting the province you're from. I would prefer a national flag to the IRFU one but as with other things, understand the compromise.
8	The 4 provinces flag is good
9	I would prefer 1 flag representing all 4 provinces
10	No problem. They are the province flags and are entirely appropriate
11	The 4 province flag represents the 4 branches of the IRFU.
12	I'm happy with the two flags.
13	every province is on the flag which is fair
14	The flag with all the provinces - Forward thinking . Similar used by other sports.
15	N/a
16	Approve - includes Ulster
17	Should just be an Ireland rugby flag
18	I have never been unhappy with the flags on display
19	Agree
20	All ok.
21	I would prefer one consolidated flag
22	I think they have a difficult time trying to balance Irish identity for both sides of the border. If it helps support the team then so be it.

Table 5: What are your thoughts on the various flags used by the IRFU to represent Ireland?

Respondent	Answer
23	The IRFU use the 4 provincial flags and I have no issue with that. But the The hierarchy of flags says it all. They should just have the IRFU flag with all 4 provinces represented. To have the Tricolour and the Ulster Provincial flag separate clearly shows the division is within the IRFU. Most Ulster supporters would not have a problem if all provincial flags were flown with The Tricolour third choice. I am fairly middle of the road in my politics and am not worried about the use of The Tricolour for an Ireland team but if inclusion is genuine and IF, a big if, Ulster players were represented then the use of all 4 four provincial flags would be a great solution. Ulster supporters know that our province crosses a border between NI and ROI so there may be division within Ulster supporter ranks about The Tricolour being used ahead of the provincial flags. with the 3 ROI counties very comfortable with the Tricolour and the NI 6 countries maybe less so. Like many people from NI we are pretty sick about discussions around flags...or as we call them flegs!!
24	

Table 6: What are your thoughts about home games being played in Dublin only in the last few decades?

Respondent	Answer
1	They should move them around
2	Would be nice to have a few in Belfast, Limerick, or Cork
3	Would be better if they were played in more places
4	It's slightly annoying for non Leinster based fans but I understand with the airport and the bigger capacity in the Aviva it draws more for international games. I would like to see smaller games like the winter tests being held around in different stadiums
5	It's the capital so where else would it be?
6	Aviva has a stadium capacity that can't really be matched
7	No very strong opinion. I wouldn't be opposed to occasionally playing games in other stadia (esp. ones where this wouldn't limit attendance) but understand that the aviva is the home ground.
8	Not right, more should be played at various venues
9	No objections- it provides the biggest stadium. Would be a good idea to have matches against lower tier teams, "A" matches & others spread round the 4 provinces
10	Would be nice to spread the games around the island
11	It would be appropriate to play at least 1 game a year away from Dublin
12	It's the only practical solution.
13	Ravenhill doesn't have the capacity only for lesser games , so where do you go ?

Table 5: What are your thoughts on the various flags used by the IRFU to represent Ireland?

Respondent	Answer
14	I prefer to see more game at the provisional homes for 2nd tier nations.
15	Disgraceful
16	Would prefer to see some outside Dublin but very much ground dependant
17	No issue with Dublin.Love a good day out. Its also the best stadium to hold Ireland games
18	Happy enough, it's the only decent stadium
19	Think occasional games should be played at Ravenhill
20	No issues.
21	I'd rather have the bigger venue in Dublin so more tickets are available
22	Apart from the cost it is what it is but it would be great to see them moving some of the smaller fixtures around the other 3 Provinces
23	It is the biggest rugby ground and money talks loudest. I have attended internationals when they were played at Croke Park during the refurb of Lansdowne Road. It would be good to see Ravenhill and Thomond being used for maybe the lesser rugby nation games...such as Japan, Argentina etc Reduction in the number of seats in Dublin increased prices and this can make games too costly to go to especially if an evening kick off and then accommodation required as it can be a long journey back up home to Northern Ireland
24	

Table 7: If someone is playing for Ulster, in your view what kind of geopolitical entity are they representing?

Respondent	Answer
1	Ulster
2	None
3	Ireland
4	I would first think of them representing ROI
5	In this modern day they could be either nationalist or unionist. It depends on the player in question  Wether that person views themselves as British or not, the province of Ulster is 9 counties, not just the occupied 6 counties. So therefore it's still an Irish entity in my eyes. For example Tommy Bowe is an Ulster great but is from Monaghan, in the Republic. Also more and more leinster lads are starting to line out for the province
6	That they want to play for Ulster



Table 5: What are your thoughts on the various flags used by the IRFU to represent Ireland?

Respondent	Answer
7	My home province, which is part of my home country. Politically, I would consider it to be something almost tribal and similar to supporting Cavan GAA.
8	They are not representing any political ideology
9	Ulster
10	Ireland
11	They are representing the Irish province of Ulster and not a political entity
12	Why are you asking this question? They are playing for one of the four provinces. Preferably they hail from the 9 counties.
13	Ulster
14	They represent Ulster , an Irish province . Not another country.
15	Ulster/ Northern Ireland
16	Ireland - national team that was in place before N.Ireland/Republic of Ireland existed.
17	There shouldnt be any politics in Ireland rugby.
18	An Ulster player is representing my part of Ireland
19	Ulster
20	The province of Ulster. Not Northern Ireland.
21	They are doing their job.
22	The 9 counties of Ulster and the Province as a whole
23	They are representing the province of Ulster which is the 9 counties of Ulster. Also many of our players are non Northern Irish (either born or nationality) so I feel it is important they really want to represent the shirt and our Province
24	

Table 8: In what way, if any, does team selection affect your identification with the Irish team?

Res pon den t	Answer
1	None
2	No
3	It does not
4	It doesn't really, the bias selections that happen I think come from where the coaches are based and it doesn't affect my own view
5	No way. I'm Irish, and love to see the team do well. Great to see lads from Ulster get playing but don't particularly have any strong feelings if they aren't selected
6	I feel like Ulster players in good form are often overlooked by Irish national team, who will choose a less reliable player from Leinster
7	Not at all really. That said, I will sometimes look at who I'm the Ireland the plays for which province and will sometimes feel mildly annoyed at the apparent pro-Leinster bias/number of Leinster players
8	Less ulster representation means less identification
9	It doesn't
10	Not at all
11	I identify with the team selected, but feel Ulster are often under-represented
12	They wear green, so I support them. Not so long ago the majority of the Irish team hailed from Ulster.
13	In the main the best players are picked one or two players could fell hard done by in every province
14	Little . Prefer to see more Ulster players though.
15	Massively, won't watch if only one Ulsterman on the bench
16	Would always want more Ulster representation but that's part of the game. Once selected, agree or disagree, they are my team.
17	Its all about Leinster
18	Doesn't really, I think selections are generally correct
19	Like to see Ulster get equitable representation
20	If there is an imbalance in the provincial player selection I get frustrated with the Ireland management team but still support Ireland.
21	I'd always like to see Ulster represented but accept that sometimes they are not selected. I would support the team whatever.
22	None. I believe the best team is being picked for the fixture and it's irrelevant what team/Province they come from.

Table 8: In what way, if any, does team selection affect your identification with the Irish team?-1

23	<p>it has a major bearing. I decided a few years ago to not support the Ireland team in general as the lack of Ulster Club players was abysmal. Even if our players were the inform players in their position, both in the home league and Europe, they did not get selected. Cooney and McCloskey are two examples of this apparent policy. It can very much appear that there is a bias against Ulster players and they will not be selected before Leinster, Munster or Connacht players do. I was prepared to give the Ireland selectors and IRFU the benefit of the doubt during the current tour against the AB's but again Ulster players appear to be bit part players and only good enough for the B team. Only today Keith Early who has played most of his career at wing and full back has been selected at centre over Stuart McCloskey a talented natural centre. This type of selection raises queries in my head and the fact that only two Ulster players are in the match day squad and on the bench is madness when we finished the domestic season higher than Munster and Connacht and were the only team in the URC to beat Leinster home and away. I will not be behind the Ireland team on Saturday and would go as far to say I will be pleased if the ABs win.</p>
24	<p>My views on the Ulster or Northern Ireland representation as it is supposed to be an all Ireland team (the only one) but spaces are not equally distributed, this is down to the management and coaches but as the IRFU is run from Dublin I feel that there is a bit of engrained hatred towards Ulster players; for example John Cooney, a Dublin native, plays out of his skin, shows up every other Ireland scrum half is overlooked every time! Rugby shouldn't be about emblems or anthems as rugby is a thugs sport played by gentlemen, as much as I have issues with some selections I'm not a coach with regards to selection I have no issues with following my country and I will never have an issue nor will my children, we need to get away from sectarianism not only in sport but in life in general.</p>

Table 9: In what way do you perceive the function of the Lions team in relation to the Ulster and Ireland teams? How do they relate to each other?

Respondent	Answer
1	Same as I feel about ulster and Ireland
2	
3	
4	I don't really relate the lions with the other two. The lions to me is different entirely and really it feels more British given the influence they have on it and the management team.
5	Don't really care about it too much.
6	The lions is just a tour that the best in UK + Ireland go to
7	I don't really relate to the lions strongly at all. I do appreciate that it is an excellent spectacle and that many other people buy into it tho.I would be in favour of adding France and maybe playing a southern hemisphere selection.
8	The lions represent the British isles and ulster are very much a part of that
9	The ultimate for a rugby player. Nothing else matters
10	No opinion. Don't watch the games
11	The Lions represent the 4 home unions and so Ulster as part of the IRFU are incorporated into the Lions
12	It's a tradition. That's all.
13	Lions is the pinnacle
14	N/A
15	Not at all
16	Highest honour in British & Irish rugby to be selected for the Lions.
17	Ireland always get a representation, although maybe not as much as they should
18	Lions selection is the ultimate honour for any Ulster or Ireland rugby player
19	Good add on
20	The Lions, in theory, are the players pinnacle of the 4 home nations.
21	See previous reply
22	I look at it as the pinnacle of the sport. I support my local club first, Ulster is next then Ireland and then the Lions. It's the top rung of the ladder and something else for players to aim for.

Table 9: In what way do you perceive the function of the Lions team in relation to the Ulster and Ireland teams? How do they relate to each other?

Respondent	Answer
23	<p>The Lions again is whole different scenario as that brings a massive shift away from the impact of the IRFU and Sexton. I feel that can be a good thing and in recent times Ulster have had representation at that level. I enjoy watching the games probably as a neutral in selection terms but as a supporter as the B&amp;I Lions are representative of the British Isles. I would probably be a supporter of the B&amp;I Lions as they represent Northern Hemisphere rugby and have a sense of pride if an Ulster player is selected to play for them. It always becomes a must watch series of game if Ulster players are on the field and maybe slightly less so it not. I feel the IRFU bias against Ulster players is not reflected in B&amp;I Lions as they have a much bigger selection process which included all the home nations players base. The IRFU are not influencing the selection process.</p>
24	

Table 10: Overall, during the pre-game formalities (the ceremonial aspects) of an international match how do you as an Ulster and Ireland fan feel? What would you say your most common personal response is to the content of these formalities?

Respondent	Answer
1	Brian Driscoll was a great player but a wanker of a commentator who has an anti ulster agenda
2	
3	
4	I feel represented as an Irish fan because I have never felt othered for supporting ulster
5	Proud to be Irish
6	All the ceremony is getting a bit long these days
7	Excitement for the match largely. I enjoy the buildup and anthems and flares.
8	Too many formalities
9	Respect for the anthem & enjoy Ireland's Call as it represents everybody
10	No opinion. I'm an ulster man and irish
11	I think the Irish establishment has a limited understanding of the Ulster identity and the formalities are not totally inclusive
12	They last too long. A few years ago we were at a match. A lovely girl sitting behind us commented that they only sang Ireland's Call to "keep those dickheads in the north happy"!
13	Ulster rugby represents nine counties not just six which it regularly forgets and its fans too , I have played and coached all my rugby in Ulster getting players to ulster youth teams and while I totally accept there is sensitive issues that need to be handled in the right way , but that cuts both ways, So I feel that both countries that play under the one flag are catered for
14	Proud.
15	
16	Neutral- I am definitely British but was born on the island of Ireland and as there is no n.Ireland rugby team accept that my national team is Ireland and totally support them.
17	I disagree with 2 anthems
18	Pride in our team
19	Happy enough for Soldiers song to be song at Dublin games if God save the Queen was played at the occasional Ravenhill international
20	Proud to have such an amazing stadium, group of passionate supporters and history in rugby from such a small country.
21	Pride. Sometimes tears
22	Wether I'm watching on TV or attending live it's part of the occasion and I join in as much as possible. I draw the line at singing the soldiers song but it's because I don't know it and it doesn't represent the whole of Ireland.

Table 10: Overall, during the pre-game formalities (the ceremonial aspects) of an international match how do you as an Ulster and Ireland fan feel? What would you say your most common personal response is to the content of these formalities?-1

23	<p>I have very little interest in the formalities prior to games. If watching on TV I enjoy some of the rugby pundits discussing players, coaches, tactics etc although my interest is much more if it is an Ulster game and I want to hear what Dan McFarland is saying. I am less interested in what Andy Farrell says if no Ulster players are in the mix. In summary I am driven by my support for Ulster and Ireland is way down the list with their current selection process and what feels like very strong bias against selecting Ulster players. Cooney had been the biggest victim of this. Strong rumours abound that Sexton doesn't get on with Cooney and has been instrumental in Cooney's non selection even when a few years ago he was the in form 9 in Europe and Ireland kept selection Murray who was pretty dire at the time. Also I feel that the IRFU has shown it has a bias against Ulster going back to forcing Ruan Pienaar to leave us but allowing Nacewa to sign a 4th contract for Leinster. Also the budget for the 4 provinces is heavily weighted towards Leinster as shown by their ability to field 60 players this season and Ulster only had 45. All of these factors feed into my feelings of no support for Ireland as I am an avid Ulster supporter who goes to all home games as well as many away games.</p>
24	

**Appendix 2: Symbols**



Figure 1: IRFU Banner

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 2: Alternative display of flags



*Source: Reddit*

**Appendix 3: Web survey and ethics form**

Web survey: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSczvrYENwk5rdZLYCNTPfijg4LHgE\\_1gFT-SkQQLKqvJZch3Q/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSczvrYENwk5rdZLYCNTPfijg4LHgE_1gFT-SkQQLKqvJZch3Q/viewform)

DECLARATION:

- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about this research and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and understand the description of the research.

I agree that my data is used for academic purposes and I have no objection that my data is published in an academic assignment in a way that does not reveal my identity.

I understand that if I choose to voice record my responses, they will be downloaded and transcribed for the purpose of the research.

- I understand that I may stop electronic recordings at any time, and that I may at any time, even subsequent to my participation have such recordings destroyed.

- I understand that, subject to the constraints above, no recordings will be replayed in any public forum or made available to any audience other than the current researcher.

- I understand that I may refuse to answer any question and that I may withdraw at any time.

I understand that no personal details about me will be recorded in the final research output. Any identifying details from the recorded responses will be deleted at the earliest opportunity in the write-up stage.

I understand that I can request to be put in contact with the researcher's supervisor if I am not satisfied with how the research has been carried out.

- I have received a copy of this agreement.

PARTICIPANT'S NAME AND DATE:

Statement of investigator's responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

21357307

RESEARCHERS CONTACT DETAILS:

Email address: autyc@tcd.ie

Mobile number: +447887376866