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Audience perceptions of high-status ties and network advantage: The market for coaching jobs in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2000–2011)

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Summary

Social ties with high-status others can be a potent signal of an individual's underlying quality and future promise. Individuals in competitive markets, therefore, have an incentive to publicly claim connections to high-status others. However, cognitive limitations and biases can make social network connections difficult for observers to reliably discern, and claims to high-status ties can go unrecognized by the audience. Our core contention is that claims to high-status affiliation are advantageous only when the audience recognizes the claim—unrecognized claims, like unreliable signals, do not deliver advantage and can backfire. Further, we draw on the literature on imprinting and develop arguments for why some people are more likely to make claims to high-status ties and why some claims to high-status ties are more likely than others to be recognized by the audience. We test our arguments with data from the market for head coaching jobs in NCAA basketball (2000–2011). Our study contributes to the sparse literature on how social network ties that exist in the minds of third-party observers influence individual attainment in market settings; and it offers new insights into how imprinting processes shape the perception and use of high-status network ties.

KEYWORDS

cognition, imprinting, social networks

1 | INTRODUCTION

The importance of social ties for the achievement of advantage in market settings has been extensively documented, and the debate is no longer about whether social ties confer advantage, it is about how and why they do so. One line of thinking about the utility of social ties has emphasized the role they play in facilitating the flow of resources (e.g., information and advice) between individuals. Although this conception of ties as pipes has been dominant in network research (see Borgatti & Halgin, 2011), a different, more cognitive, strand of network theorizing argues that ties are not merely pipes along which resources flow; they are also social signals that attest to an individual's underlying quality and future promise (Spence, 1973; Podolny, 1993; cf. Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Social ties to high-status others, in particular, can be a source of advantage in market settings because they are a signal of an individual's underlying quality, which can otherwise be difficult to discern (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Podolny, 2001).

Cognitively oriented network research on the benefits of high-status ties has tended to study formal, readily discernible ties, such as contractual relations among firms and banks in the investment banking industry (for a review, see Podolny, 2005). The formal nature of these ties means it is a safe assumption that if a high-status tie existed, it was likely to be have been perceived by the intended audience (see Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012, p. 274). But in many settings, high-status ties are more informal in nature, which means that

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their presence has to be inferred rather than looked up in some official register. Even prosaic friendship ties in work organizations, for example, can be opaque in the sense that actors and observers can see the "same" tie differently (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Krackhardt, 1987).

The potential for individuals and audiences to see the same tie differently may be especially pronounced when it comes to informal ties with high-status others. For one thing, individuals are tempted to claim high-status connections so they can bask in their reflected glory (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). However, as observers, individuals are aware of this temptation and are therefore not likely to accept all claims to high-status ties at face value (Cialdini, 1989). Even barring skepticism, observers in the audience may fail to perceive or recall a particular high-status tie. Audience members can be variably distributed across social and physical space, giving them differential access to the behavioral and social cues from which the existence of informal social ties is typically inferred (Heider, 1958, p. 69; Bondonio, 1998). Whether a social tie to a high-status other is perceived can depend upon one's vantage point. Moreover, observers have limited attentional resources to devote to observing social network relations, and network perceptions are subject to bias (e.g., Brashears & Quintane, 2015). Any individual who makes a claim to a high-status tie, therefore, runs some risk that the claim will not be recognized by the audience.

We argue in this paper that the signaling benefits of high-status ties are grounded in audience perceptions and this means that claims to high-status affiliation are advantageous only when the audience recognizes the claim—unrecognized claims, like unreliable signals, do not deliver advantage and can backfire (cf. Connelly et al., 2011, p. 52). Further, we draw on the literature on imprinting to develop arguments for why some people are more likely to make claims to high-status ties and why some claims to high-status ties are more likely than others to be recognized by the audience.

Our study seeks to make two primary contributions. First, it offers new ideas and results to a relatively neglected branch of organizational network research, one that views social network ties not merely as entities in the world but also as cognitions in the minds of observers (Krackhardt, 1987). In particular, our study seeks to add to an understanding of the "downstream consequences of network perceptions" (Brands, 2013, p. S82) by explaining how audience perceptions play a decisive role in determining whether individuals benefit, in the market for jobs, from claims to high-status affiliation. Second, our study contributes to a line of inquiry that challenges the conventional view of social network ties as fast-decaying opportunity structures by showing how imprinted ties, forged during formative stages in an individual's career, produce benefits over an extended period of time (McEvily, Jaffee, & Tortoriello, 2012; Levin & Walter, 2018; see the discussion in Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 219). What we add to this nascent line of work is the idea that high-status ties that are forged early in an individual's career exert an imprinting effect not just in the minds of the individuals who possess the ties but also in the minds of third-party observers. Previous research on imprinting in organizational contexts has tended to leave out or assume the role of audience perceptions in shaping the outcomes that individuals experience as a function of imprinting (cf. Tilcsik, 2012).

We tested our arguments using data from the job market for head coaches in NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) basketball. This setting allowed us to gather fine-grained, longitudinal data regarding claims to high-status ties, audience perceptions of claimed ties, and job attainment in a market setting. Moreover, the availability of data on the historical performance of individual coaches allowed us to statistically account for the likely effects of past performance on future job attainment. We selected the context of professional sports because the richness of data it offers makes it "an ideal natural laboratory" for studying organizational behavior (Smith, 2009, p. 203; Kilduff, Crossland, Tsai, & Bowers, 2016). However, the phenomenon of people using their contacts to high-status others for occupational attainment is hardly confined to professional sports. Ties to legendary business leaders, such as Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, for example, appear to have profound and enduring effects on managerial careers (e.g., Currie, 2015). Whether in professional sports or business, individuals who claim high-status connections run the risk that audiences will fail to recognize the connection as legitimate. Our paper develops and tests theory that seeks to understand the role of audience perceptions in the process whereby job seekers' claims to high-status affiliation result in the attainment of more prestigious jobs.

2 | HIGH-STATUS TIES AND NETWORK ADVANTAGE: THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS

Social network ties can help individuals gain advantage in market settings, but not all ties are equally advantageous. Prior research suggests that advantage is more likely to accrue from high-status ties—that is, connections to individuals or entities who enjoy favorable positions in the social hierarchies that define who defers to whom (Goode, 1978; Whyte, 1943; for a review, see Sauder et al., 2012). In the job market, an individual's ties to high-status others can provide the individual with access to valuable resources, such as information, advice, and referrals (Lin, Vaughn, & Ensel, 1981). But even in the absence of actual resource transfer, high-status ties can be useful as signals that help observers dispel the uncertainty involved in attempting to discern the underlying quality of individuals. This is for at least two reasons.

First, high-status ties connect the focal individual to well-known entities in the field. Decision makers are likely to feel less uncertain about candidates with high-status connections than they do about candidates lacking such ties. High-status actors tend to be well-known individuals who serve as cognitive reference points in the field. Because high-status actors are already familiar, individuals with ties to high-status actors are themselves more easily categorized; and ease of categorization is positively related to the allocation of attention (Zuckerman, 1999; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittman, 2003). In the context of the job market, individuals with ties to high-status

others are likely to benefit to the extent that they can connect themselves in the eyes of the audience with readily recognized high-status actors.

Second, high-status ties confer legitimacy in the marketplace. This is because how a person is perceived is influenced by who the person is connected to (Cialdini, 1989, p. 45; Thye, 2000). Our social connections are signals that help convey who we are to others (e.g., Ibarra, Kilduff, & Tsai, 2005; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Thus, individuals with ties to high-status others are likely to be the beneficiaries of halo effects—their connections to high-status others reduce uncertainty about their underlying qualities and ensure that they will be judged more positively than those lacking such ties (Podolny, 1994). It is unlikely that observers expect an individual tied to a high-status other to be identical in every way to that high-status individual. Nonetheless, halo effects imply that audiences expect that the underlying qualities of individuals with ties to high-status others will, to some extent, resemble those of their high-status connections.

2.1 | Audience perceptions and network advantage

Previous work on how high-status ties confer advantage in market settings has tended to treat the ties themselves as objective and unproblematic. For example, an influential program of research on the value of high-status network ties has focused on formal, readily discernible inter-organizational ties in the investment banking industry (for a review, see Podolny, 2005). The visibility of such ties is attractive because it allows the researcher access to a rich archive of reliable network data (cf. Sauder et al., 2012). But the focus on formal, objectively discernible ties glosses over the fact that network ties are often difficult to discern. First, to discern a tie, one has to have the attentional resources to attend to it. Yet there are cognitive limits to how many ties people can attend to. Some high-status ties may not register with audiences simply because there are many possible ties to attend to and only a subset of ties that exist are actually noticed by an audience (cf. Connelly et al., 2011, p. 45).

Second, we know that the perception of social network ties tends to be systematically distorted as a function of biases that arise from our reliance on cognitive schemas to encode and recall the structure of social networks (e.g., Brashears & Quintane, 2015). To the extent that observations of social ties are shaped by cognitive schema, observers may fail to see ties that exist and may even imagine ties that do not exist (Mehra et al., 2014). Third, and most prosaically, as consumers of social information, audiences recognize that individuals are prone to exaggerate their ties to high-status others (Cialdini, 1989). Not all claims to high-status affiliations are credible signals (Spence, 2002). Taken together, these three arguments suggest that high-status ties can sometimes be difficult to discern; and this opacity offers individuals an opportunity for the strategic management of impressions (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008, p. 57). It also suggests a boundedness to agency, in the sense that one can claim high-status ties but these claims may or may not be recognized by the audience.

We acknowledge previous research that has stressed the value of high-status ties as signals of an individual's underlying quality (for a review, see Sauder et al., 2012). But the invocation of a tie to a high-status other is only effective if the audience recognizes the high-status tie. If we think of personnel selection as a signaling game (Spence, 1973), then claims to high-status ties that are not endorsed by the audience are failed signals. Rather than signaling a clear and desirable social identity, claims to high-status ties that are unrecognized by the audience may have the opposite effect; they may even suggest that the person is desperate or dishonest (cf. Connelly et al., 2011, p. 52). To the extent that the benefits of high-status ties depend upon audience recognition, we expect that an individual's claimed high-status ties that are recognized by the audience will be valuable, whereas claimed high-status ties that go unrecognized by the audience will not.

Hypothesis 1. *An individual's claim to a high-status tie is advantageous (to the individual) only when the claimed tie is recognized by the audience.*

We have argued that high-status ties that are recognized by the audience will be valuable in market settings because such ties serve as signals that ameliorate uncertainty about the person's underlying quality and future promise. This reasoning suggests that high-status ties that are recognized by the audience should be especially valuable to individuals who are relatively early in their careers. This is because individuals who are early in their career have not yet produced a substantial enough record to allow observers to reliably gauge their underlying quality. There is, therefore, greater uncertainty about how these individuals will go on to perform in the future. In such cases, social credentials may be especially valuable signals of quality and future potential. Suggestive evidence for this reasoning can be found in a study of career success in the market for academic jobs (Miller, Glick, & Cardinal, 2005). The value of high-status ties, such as ties to prestigious academic mentors, was greater for scholars early in their careers (when they had not yet produced an extensive set of publications) than it was for scholars late in their careers (see Miller et al., 2005). Similarly, inter-organizational relationships with prominent organizations appear to be particularly valuable for young firms, for whom unambiguous measures of quality do not exist or are difficult to reliably observe (Stuart, Hoang, & Hybels, 1999).

We hypothesize that high-status ties that are recognized by audiences will be especially valuable for job attainment for early-career individuals because there is greater uncertainty about the underlying quality of individuals early in their careers and high-status ties help ameliorate this uncertainty:

Hypothesis 2. *Claims to high-status ties (that are recognized) are more advantageous for early-career individuals than for late-career individuals.*

We have argued that claims to high-status ties that are recognized by audiences are advantageous in market settings whereas claims that go unrecognized provide no advantage. Because recognized high-status ties help ameliorate uncertainty about the underlying quality and promise of an individual, we have also argued that (recognized) claims to high-status ties are likely to be especially valuable to individuals earlier (rather than later) in their careers. Two questions then naturally arise: Who is more likely to claim a high-status tie? And whose claim to a high-status tie is likely to win audience recognition?

2.2 | Claims to high-status ties

Let us start with the question of who is more likely to claim a high-status tie. It seems obvious that if a person spends a significant amount of time working with a high-status other, then the person would be more likely to claim a tie to the high-status other. But the propensity to claim a tie to a high-status other may also depend on *when* the two worked together. The literature on imprinting (for a review, see Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) maintains that individuals are especially susceptible to environmental influence during particular "sensitive periods" (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 199). Just as the time when a firm is founded can be a key sensitive period that shapes the firm's structure and behavior over an extended time (Stinchcombe, 1965), so it may be that ties with high-status mentors forged early in one's career exert a disproportionate influence on individuals' professional identities. How scientists think of themselves in terms of their orientation towards commercial science, for example, is profoundly shaped by the orientations of their early-career mentors (Azoulay, Ding, & Stuart, 2009). Similarly, a study of lawyers found that mentoring ties forged early in a lawyer's career had an enduring influence on the lawyer's professional identity and approach to work (McEvily et al., 2012). A different study found that individuals were more likely to hold on to the social connections they acquired during formative stages of their working careers and life stage (Walsh, Halgin, & Huang, 2018).

Research has generally shown that the organizations that an individual works for early in the individual's career have a disproportionate influence on how the individual views herself or himself (e.g., Higgins, 2005) and the career choices they go on to make (e.g., Dobrev & Merluzzi, 2018). Of course, an individual may experience multiple periods of heightened sensitivity to social influences on identity over a career. However, we argue here that work ties forged with high-status mentors early in an individual's career are likely to be especially constitutive of an individual's professional identity over time. Because individuals are more susceptible to environmental influences early in their careers, and because ties to high-status actors are likely to be constitutive of a person's professional identity, we expect that an individual is more likely to make a claim to a high-status tie if the connection was formed early in the individual's career.

Hypothesis 3. *A person is more likely to claim a high-status tie if the connection to the high-status other was made early in the claimant's career.*

2.3 | Audience recognition of high-status ties

Are some high-status ties more likely to be recognized by the audience than others? To answer this question, we draw again on an imprinting lens and argue that social ties that are forged early in an individual's career influence not just how an individual sees himself or herself but also how third-party observers see the individual. Scholars and practitioners have long noted the importance of mentor–protégé relationships for shaping an individual's professional image (e.g., Kram, 1985). Ties to high-status mentors that are forged early in an individual's career are likely to be considered by external observers to be reliable signals of the individual's enduring underlying qualities as a professional. This is because, as observers, people are aware of the disproportionate influence that ties forged during the early stages of an individual's career can have on the individual's ability to perform in the future (e.g., Armstrong, 2019). Consequently, audiences routinely seek out and notice information about formative social influences that shaped an individual's career. It is not uncommon, for example, for people who spent their formative years as a professional working under Jack Welch to be labeled a "Graduate of Welch U" (e.g., Helft, 2006; Higgins, 2005). Irrespective of whether these early connections in fact exert a disproportionate influence on a person's professional qualities, audiences seem to believe they do (Kilduff et al., 2016; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013).

Suggestive evidence for this claim is reported in Milanov and Shepherd's (2013) study of the role of network relationships in the context of venture capital firms (1980–2004). Their study found that the network ties around a firm when it first entered the field exerted a disproportionate influence on the subsequent status the firm was able to achieve. This effect arises because audiences draw their first impressions of a newcomer from the quality of the newcomer's relationships to more established actors. These initial categorizations tend to endure because, as ample cognitive research has shown, people are reluctant to revise their categorizations once they have been formed (for a review of social cognition, see Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The early network ties around firms are salient to audiences because these initial affiliations are the ones that introduce the newcomers to the professional network and establish their identity in the eyes of the audience.

We expect that audiences are more likely to recognize a high-status tie if the connection arose during an early, formative stage of the actor's professional career. Audiences are more likely to recognize such ties because, as observers, people are cognizant of the disproportionate influence of early social ties on actors; and they are especially likely to attend to and notice such ties as credible signals of an actor's underlying quality and future promise.

Hypothesis 4. *A claimed high-status tie is more likely to be recognized by the audience if the connection was made early in the claimant's career.*

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Research setting

Our study draws on rich archival data on the market for jobs among head coaches in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball. We chose this empirical setting for several reasons. First, the setting allowed us to unobtrusively collect web-based data about coaches' public claims to high-status ties. Second, the enormous media attention directed towards NCAA men's basketball coaches meant that we had access to data on whether the general audience, as represented by leading sports media outlets, recognized the high-status ties claimed by coaches. Third, the setting offered clear and extensive performance metrics. These objective performance metrics allowed us to control for the effects of an individual's prior performance on the individual's subsequent success in the job market (cf. Lee, 2010). A fourth advantage of our chosen setting is that it comprises a relatively bounded sample of job candidates and open jobs. Given the public nature of these events, job contenders are typically aware of available job positions. Very rarely are candidates selected from outside of the active group of NCAA coaches.

The NCAA was founded over a hundred years ago with the primary goal of protecting student-athletes participating in college sports (www.ncaa.org). College sports are the subject of intense public interest, drawing millions of viewers each year. They also generate huge revenues, both for the NCAA and for the colleges that belong to it. Media rights alone earn the NCAA (a "non-profit" organization) hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Some college basketball programs generate annual profits in the tens of millions. Given the importance of sports programs to colleges, it is perhaps unsurprising that the salaries of some head coaches in the NCAA rival those of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in the for-profit sector. John Calipari, head coach of the University of Kentucky's basketball team, for example, recently signed a 10-year contract worth $86 million (Hale, 2019). Sports commentator Dick Vitale explicitly equated NCAA coaches with corporate executives: "If you're a leading coach at a major institution, you're a CEO. You're worth millions to that university" (McCollough, 2008).

Most coaches have prior experience as basketball players during their college years. The typical NCAA basketball coach begins in an assistant coaching position and moves from one college to another, with promotion to a prestigious head coaching position representing the pinnacle of success. Prestigious coaching positions (like prestigious jobs in the market for corporate executives) are difficult to attain, and coaches of struggling teams are often fired and forced to find employment at a different university.

We examined changes in head coaching positions in NCAA Division I men's basketball over the span of a decade (October 2000 through October 2011). During this period, there were 341 Division I colleges and universities, and 521 instances of a head coach being hired. Data identifying the complete list of Division I colleges and universities and job outcomes came from the publicly accessible archives of the NCAA (available at http://www.ncaa.org). Data on the coaching staffs of each college and university came from the official media guides posted on the athletic department websites of each college and university. Data on high-status ties were collected unobtrusively by scouring the professional websites of the head coaches and by doing extensive keyword searches of articles written by the professional sports media (cf. Deephouse, 1996; Pollock & Rindova, 2003). During our study period, the use of professional websites was the key avenue used by coaches to present their biographies and accomplishments.

3.2 | Coaching families and high-status ties in the NCAA

A prominent kind of high-status tie in the context of NCAA coaching is a tie to an elite head coach. Elite coaches in the NCAA are influential individuals at the center of what in basketball parlance are called coaching "families." Coaching families (sometimes referred to as coaching trees) form around these elite, often legendary, coaches. An example is the Coach Calhoun family, named after NCAA Hall of Fame member Jim Calhoun, who was the head coach at the University of Connecticut from 1986 to 2012. To identify such high-status ties, we first had to identify the elite coaching families in the field during the time of our study. We used the Factiva database and Google News to search for articles containing "NCAA basketball" AND "coaching tree" OR "coaching family." The Dow Jones Factiva database includes more than 14,000 leading news and business sources (available at www.factiva.com). Results included Katz's (2004) article "When it comes to family, Heathcote [of Michigan State] is at head of table," Doyel's (2004) article "Trees grow in coaching: Who's the most fertile?" and Kornheiser's (1997) article "Six degrees of Dean Smith." Other articles on coaching families described coaches with ties to Rick Pitino as "Pitino's pupils," "Li'l Ricks," and "Pitinoites" (Kirkpatrick, 1997), coaches with ties to John Calipari as "Calipari's basketball disciples" (Tipton, 2009) and coaches with ties to the Dean Smith UNC family as "a living, breathing entity, linking the past to the present" (Perry, 2004).

This text-based analysis identified 16 coaching families, each centered around an elite head coach. To check the reliability of our findings, we interviewed three individuals who worked as Division I men's basketball coaches. All three experts confirmed the leaders of the 16 recognized coaching families were high-status individuals, but one of the three industry experts questioned the inclusion of one of the families and the corresponding leader. Excluding this coaching family from consideration did not change the pattern of support for our hypotheses.

3.3 | Independent variables

3.3.1 | Claimed high-status ties

During the time period that our sample spans (2000–2011), websites were commonly used by head coaches in NCAA basketball to highlight not only their educational histories and career accomplishments but also their high-status ties to leaders of coaching "families." For instance, the biosketch on coach John Thompson III's webpage from his coaching days at Georgetown University states:

> "Coached by the legendary Carril as a student at Princeton and then working under him as an assistant coach at his alma mater for five years, Thompson brought a Princeton touch to Georgetown's rich basketball history …"

These posted biosketches are updated regularly to highlight new performance accolades and accomplishments. Biosketches from prior seasons can be found in team media guides posted on the coach's website or the athletic department website. We examined the personal web pages of all coaches who changed jobs during our time period to determine whether the coach publicly claimed a tie to a leader of one of the recognized families. If the coach made such a claim, this variable was coded as 1; otherwise, the variable was coded as 0. We accessed claims made on websites that were posted prior to or at the time of the individual's job change. There were four cases where coaches claimed preexisting high-status ties at least 1 year after changing jobs. Because these claims came long after each job change, we coded these cases as 0's. Only one coach lacked a webpage. We conducted an exhaustive search of all articles about this individual but found no claim of a tie to the leader of the family, so we coded this case as 0.

3.3.2 | Audience-recognized claims to high-status ties

We classified ties to heads of coaching families as *audience-recognized* if they were claimed by coaches *and* recognized by the audience. We used the perceptions of the professional sports media as our indicator of audience recognition. The professional media are a rich and varied source of unobtrusive data that serve as an indicator of "legitimation by society-at-large and as a source of legitimacy in their own stead" (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, p. 56). We define the professional sports media as established experts at Sports Illustrated, ESPN.com, CBS Sports, Yahoo Sports, and The New York Times. These five websites have all won or have been nominated for Webby awards for online journalism and were considered leading national sports journalism websites during the study time period. We searched articles in these outlets and coded this variable as 1 if the focal coach was mentioned by at least one expert source as being connected with the head family member before or during the year of his job change; otherwise, we coded this variable as 0.[1]

We used dummy variables to identify two other mutually exclusive categories of high-status ties:

3.3.3 | Audience-unrecognized claims to high-status ties

We classified a claimed high-status tie as unrecognized by the audience if the tie was claimed by a coach but not recognized by any of the major media sources for sports news.

3.3.4 | Audience-recognized unclaimed high-status ties

We classified a tie as unclaimed if it was recognized by at least one of the major media sources but not claimed by the focal coach.

3.4 | Dependent variables

We assessed the advantageousness of job-market outcomes for head coaches in the NCAA market in two ways:

3.4.1 | Job prestige

For every coach who changed jobs between 2000 and 2011, we assessed the prestige of the hiring institution. Our coding of this variable was based directly on a numerical ranking of every university in the NCAA, produced by industry experts at ESPN.com. Widely regarded as the leading media source for sports news, ESPN.com is a three-time Webby Award winner, six-time People's Voice Award winner, two-time Online Journalism Award winner, two-time Editor and Publisher Award winner for online sports service. ESPN's rankings are based on some (unknown) mix of historical performance and program visibility and tend to be relatively stable over time. We reverse coded the original scores so that a higher score corresponded with greater prestige. Any school that was not included in the ESPN prestige scores (e.g., schools that only recently became Division I programs) was assigned a prestige score of

[1]One could argue that it is the hiring committee rather than the sports media whose perceptions of the claimed tie ultimately matter for job attainment. Data on the internal deliberations of hiring committees, however, are practically unattainable given legal and other impediments to the sharing of such data. Moreover, although it is possible that one or more members of a hiring committee holds a different view of a claimed high-status tie than the media consensus, the beliefs of the media, even in such cases, are likely to serve as a potent endorsement that shapes the hiring committee's decisions. Indeed, prior research has shown that hiring organizations seek out candidates with high-status connections at least in part because such ties serve a prophylactic function, providing the hiring committee a way to justify its hiring decision should the candidate go on to perform poorly after being hired (Podolny, 2001; cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Following the lead of institutional theorists (e.g., Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), we rely here on the consensus views of expert third-party observers as an unobtrusive indicator of general audience beliefs.

1. (For more information on the justification of the ranking metrics, see Shelton, Loucks, & Fallica, 2008.)

3.4.2 | Attendance

As an alternative measure of program/job prestige, we used archival data from the NCAA to identify the attendance at home games at a university in the year prior to the one in which a coach secured the new head coach job at the university (available at http://www.ncaa.org/championships/statistics/ncaa-mens-basketball-attendance). Nine positions were obtained at universities that did not report attendance figures. For these nine jobs, we used the average attendance figures from that year for universities in the same athletic conference as the focal university. This variable was coded as the number of people that attended each home game (on average, over the course of the season). Universities with high levels of attendance at home games are considered more prestigious places to work as a head coach because such universities tend to enjoy greater revenues, higher professional visibility, and bigger salaries.

To test our arguments about which high-status ties coaches are likely to claim and which high-status ties the audience is likely to recognize, we coded two variables:

In the NCAA, one of the most formatives stage for a coach is the time the coach spent as player. Many coaches credit their university coach as a mentor who first exposed them to the profession and inspired them to become coaches themselves (e.g., Auerbach, 2015). An additional formative period is when a coach first enters the coaching profession and is employed as an NCAA basketball assistant coach. Thus, we used two approaches to identify high-status ties formed relatively early in an individual's career; (1) we coded whether the focal coach had played on a team coached by a leader (*Played for family leader*) and (2) whether the coach's first job was on the staff of the leaders of one of the identified coaching families (*First job was for family leader*). For example, when Coach Johnny Dawkins attended Duke University as a student athlete, he played on teams coached by Mike Krzyzewski, the leader of the Coach K coaching family. Later, when he entered the coaching profession, his first coaching job was as an assistant on the coaching staff led by Mike Krzyzewski. If the coach, while a university student, played on a team coached by a family leader, the *played for family leader* variable was coded as 1; otherwise, the variable was coded as 0. If a coach's first coaching job was on a staff led by a family leader, the *first job was for family leader* variable was coded as 1; otherwise, the variable was coded as 0.

3.5 | Control variables

Past performance is likely to influence job outcomes. We thus included variables capturing the *cumulative winning percentage* of each coach and the cumulative number of appearances in the prestigious post-season NCAA tournament (*cumulative NCAA appearances*). To capture these two variables, we utilized the NCAA statistics archive (available at http://www.ncaa.org). We also controlled for the prestige of each coach's previous employer (measured in terms of two of our dependent variables of *prestige* and *attendance*). Coaches with high cumulative winning percentages, more appearances in the NCAA tournament, and job experiences at elite schools (i.e., high prestige scores and high attendance) will likely have greater professional visibility and recognition than others.

To account for each coach's professional experience, we controlled for *tenure*, measured as the total number of games coached prior to changing positions. This variable was measured using data available on each coach's website and the NCAA statistics archive.

Our theory focuses on the cognitive benefits of high-status ties. We therefore sought to control for the more pipe-like benefits of high-status ties by including a variable that controlled for the length of time that a coach had worked on the coaching staff of a high-status coach (*Years worked for family leader*). The longer the coach had worked on the same coaching staff as the high-status coach, the more likely that the tie between them had conveyed the knowledge and other benefits that flow from being connected. We coded this variable using each coach's job history listed on their webpage and confirmed in official media guides produced by the athletic department of each school. For instance, before accepting the head coaching position at the University of Massachusetts in 2009, Coach Derek Kellogg spent 8 years working as an assistant coach for John Calipari of Memphis, the leader of the Calipari coaching family.

Finally, in all analyses of job outcomes, we controlled for *year* of position change using dummy variables to account for variance attributable to contextual factors in a given year's job market.

4 | ANALYSES AND RESULTS

We used OLS regression with robust standard errors to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 when using our primary dependent variable, job prestige. Our secondary dependent variable, attendance, is a count variable (i.e., number of people that attended each game); thus, we used a negative binomial regression model with robust standard errors to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 when using this alternate dependent variable. Our use of multiple controls for past performance is intended to allay concerns that the effects of potential heterogeneity in underlying individual qualities are unaccounted for in studies of network-based advantage. This analysis allowed us to directly compare the effects of four possibilities with respect to high-status ties: (1) an individual claimed a high-status tie that was recognized by the audience (i.e., the professional sports media), (2) an individual claimed a high-status tie that was not recognized by the audience, (3) an individual did not claim a high-status tie that was recognized by the audience, and (4) an individual did not claim a high-status tie and the tie was not recognized by the audience. In our models, we used the not-claimed and not-recognized category as the reference category. We considered using a fixed-effects model, which could potentially account for additional sources of individual heterogeneity—but such a model was

inappropriate for our data given the small number of coaches who made more than one job move during our observation period.

To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, we ran logistic regression models to investigate factors that influence whether or not (1) a coach has claimed a high-status tie and (2) audiences have recognized the claimed tie. Specifically, in these tests, we investigated the effects of the coach having formed a tie during an early formative period (i.e., *played for family leader*, *first job was for family leader*), while controlling for *years worked for family leader*, individual performance (i.e., *cumulative NCAA appearances*, *cumulative winning percentage*), experience (i.e., *tenure*), and desirability (i.e., *prestige of prior employer*).

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of variables in Study 1. The mean job prestige for coaches who voluntarily changed positions was 135.40 (*SD* = 92.23). The mean home attendance of these positions was 4442.15 (*SD* = 4081.57). The zero-order correlation between these two dependent variables was 0.63. We excluded family leaders who accepted new jobs from our sample, bringing our final sample size to 515. One hundred of the 515 new positions were obtained by coaches who claimed a high-status tie (i.e., a tie to a leader of coaching family). Of these 100 claims, 87 were recognized by the audience (i.e., the sports media), and 13 were not. Twenty-three of the new positions were obtained by coaches who were identified by media experts as possessing a high-status tie but who did not claim the tie. Sixty-six coaches in our sample first interacted with their high-status tie when they played under the legendary coach as college players, and 43 obtained their first coaching job on the staff of a family leader.

According to Hypothesis 1, claimed high-status ties confer advantage only if the claimed tie is recognized by others. To test this hypothesis, we distinguished claimed ties that were recognized by the audience from claimed ties that were not, and we compared the prestige of jobs attained by individuals who made these two kinds of claims from that of the prestige of jobs attained by all other coaches. As shown in Table 2, Model 3, of all coaches who changed jobs in the observation period, those whose claims to high-status ties that were recognized by the audience obtained more prestigious jobs (b = 40.27, p < .05). Those whose claims went unrecognized failed to obtain more prestigious jobs. This same pattern of results emerged when we used attendance at games as our alternate dependent variable (Table 3, Model 3, b = 0.36, p < .05). Hypothesis 1, therefore, received robust support. [2]

According to Hypothesis 2, claims to high-status ties that are recognized by the audience will tend to be especially valuable to individuals early in their careers. Results from Model 4 of Table 2 show that recognized claims to high-status ties are associated with higher prestige jobs for those early in their careers (i.e., fewer games coached) than for those later in their coaching careers (i.e., more games coached) (b = −0.12, p < .05). Specifically, a "floodlight analysis" (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013) indicates that the positive effect of recognized high-status ties on job prestige decreases in magnitude and is only significant for values of tenure up to 450 games. When using attendance at home games as our measure of job advantage, we find a similar pattern (b = −0.001, p < .01), indicating a positive but diminishing effect for values of tenure up to 450 games. These results show support for Hypothesis 2.

Our third hypothesis predicted that a coach is more likely to claim a high-status tie to a legendary coach if the tie occurred early in the claimant's career—that is, as a player learning under the high-status head coach or in the first job on the coaching team lead by the high-status head coach. Our analysis controlled for the expected positive effects of the length of time that the coach had worked with the legendary coach as part of the elite coach's coaching team. We found support for this baseline expectation: Results reported in Table 4 indicate the greater the number of years an individual worked with a family leader, the greater the likelihood that the individual claimed the tie in his biosketch (b = 0.62, p < .001). But even after accounting for the effects of time spent working together, we found that coaches who played under an elite coach and coaches who started their career working on the staff of an elite coach—both of which are formative periods in any coach's career—were more likely to make claims to the high-status tie with the coaching family around the elite coach (*played for*, b = 4.40, p < .001; *first job*, b = 2.35, p < .001). These results support Hypothesis 3.

Our fourth hypothesis predicted that the audience is more likely to recognize claimed high-status ties if the tie was forged early, during a formative period, in the coach's professional career. To test this hypothesis, we restricted our sample to the set of 99 coaches that claimed a high-status tie (see Table 5). We used playing for a high-status coach and whether a coach's first job was for a high-status coach as two measures of formative contact early in the claimant's career. We found a positive and significant effect of having early contact as a player on the likelihood that the claimed tie would be recognized by the audience (b = 1.49, p < .05), and a positive effect, albeit not statistically significant, of obtaining one's first job on the staff of a legendary coach on the likelihood that a claim would be recognized. We therefore found modest support for Hypothesis 4.

5 | DISCUSSION

Prior organizational research has found that actors who are connected to high-status others enjoy a competitive advantage in market settings. However, research has tended to treat high-status ties as objective and readily discernible. For example, the inter-organizational ties in the banking industry that have been the focus of some of the most influential studies in this line of work are formal, contractual relationships that have a legal facticity—they can be looked up in databases by any interested market observer (for a review, see Podolny, 2005). The observability of such ties is a boon in the sense that it allows researchers to readily access a rich repository of reliable data on high-

[2]We also explored the alternative possibility that our findings are the result of a tendency among elite schools to hire coaches from the same coaching family due to reasons of sponsorship or social exchange. To address this possibility, we reran this model excluding the 13 schools that hired multiple coaches from the same family. The results, which are available upon request, were consistent with those reported here: Coaches with recognized high-status ties obtained more prestigious jobs (as measured by ESPN prestige rankings), than did the other coaches.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations in the NCAA basketball study (n = 515)

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.	Job prestige of new employer	135.40	92.22													
2.	Job prestige of prior employer	164.47	107.70	0.22												
3.	Attendance of new employer	4442.15	4081.57	0.63	0.19											
4.	Attendance of old employer	7367.65	5358.11	0.17	0.53	0.20										
5.	Cumulative winning percentage	57.32	13.89	0.19	0.31	0.18	0.16									
6.	Cumulative NCAA tournament appearances	4.06	4.00	0.29	0.32	0.34	0.24	0.39								
7.	Tenure (total games)	445.13	221.36	0.10	0.08	0.17	0.001	0.37	0.52							
8.	Played for family leader	66 = y		0.16	0.06	0.15	0.05	0.10	0.06	−0.12						
9.	First job with family leader	43 = y		0.21	0.16	0.23	0.13	0.19	0.19	−0.01	0.33					
10.	Years worked for family leader	1.06	2.84	0.13	0.20	0.11	0.21	0.24	0.26	0.07	0.33	0.53				
11.	Ego claims high-status tie	100 = y		0.20	0.19	0.17	0.15	0.15	0.13	−0.03	0.60	0.53	0.61			
12.	Audience-recognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is recognized by audience	87 = y		0.23	0.19	0.20	0.16	0.16	0.16	−0.03	0.60	0.52	0.59	0.92		
13.	Audience-unrecognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is not recognized by the audience	13 = y		−0.05	0.02	−0.05	−0.01	0.01	−0.06	0.001	0.09	0.09	0.11	0.33	−0.07	
14.	Audience-recognized unclaimed high-status tie: ego does not claim tie that is recognized by audience	23 = y		0.08	0.06	0.03	0.12	0.07	0.06	0.01	0.28	0.07	0.17	−0.03	−0.02	−0.03

Note. Coefficients greater than 0.09 and less than −0.09 are significant at $p < .05$.

TABLE 2 Results of ordinary least squares regression models with robust standard errors predicting job advantage as measured by prestige of new employer (N = 515)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Ego claims high-status tie		20.85 (15.11)		
Audience-recognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is recognized by audience			40.27* (16.67)	38.66* (16.91)
Audience-unrecognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is not recognized by audience			−1.37 (26.71)	−0.46 (26.37)
Audience-recognized unclaimed high-status tie: ego does not claim tie that is recognized by audience			35.38 (23.15)	37.03 (22.69)
Audience-recognized claim to high-status tie × Tenure[a]				−0.12* (0.05)
Control variables				
Played for family leader	28.84 (13.48)	18.39 (15.21)	3.84 (15.82)	−2.15 (15.86)
First coaching job with family leader	50.20** (16.53)	44.46* (17.33)	42.19* (17.01)	40.28* (16.80)
Years worked for family leader	−2.86 (1.63)	−3.93* (1.82)	−4.96** (1.85)	−4.15* (1.93)
Cumulative NCAA appearances	6.18*** (1.16)	6.30*** (1.16)	6.13*** (1.17)	6.44*** (1.19)
Cumulative winning percentage	0.40 (0.33)	0.41 (0.33)	0.42 (0.33)	0.41 (0.33)
Tenure (total games)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Prestige of prior employer	0.09 (0.04)	0.08 (0.04)	0.08 (0.04)	0.07 (0.02)
Year ("dummy" variable)[b]	…	…	…	…
Constant	90.92*** (19.95)	89.78*** (20.67)	88.31*** (20.11)	78.12*** (20.69)
R^2	0.17	0.17	0.18	0.19

Note. Entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates; robust standard errors are in parentheses.
[a]Variable mean-centered before creating the interaction term.
[b]Dummy variables corresponding to year were included as controls in the model; coefficients not reported here.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

status ties (Sauder et al., 2012, p. 274). But this focus on formal ties has meant that theory and research has neglected the fact that in many market contexts, high-status ties are more informal and harder to confidently discern. This ambiguity opens up opportunities for individuals to claim high-status connections in an attempt to secure competitive advantage (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008, p. 57; McLean, 2007). However, because high-status connections can be difficult for the audience to reliably discern, claims to high-status affiliation can go unrecognized by the audience. The core contention we tested and found support for in our study of the market for NCAA head coaching jobs was that individuals only benefit (in terms of winning a prestigious job) from a claim to a high-status tie if the audience recognizes the high-status tie. Claims to high-status ties that were unrecognized by the audience provided the claimant with no advantage in the market for jobs.

5.1 | Implications for theory and future research

The extensive prior research on the role of social networks on careers has tended to treat its fundamental unit, the tie, as "real" and grounded in patterns of interaction (for a review, see Hasan, in Press). But social networks lead a double existence in the sense that they are not just patterns of interaction in the world, they are also cognitions that reside in the mind (Krackhardt, 1987). In investigating audience perceptions of high-status network ties, our study responds to calls for further study of the "social capital of cognitive ties" (Brands, 2013, p. S82). Our theory of network-based advantage is consistent with recent conceptualizations of networks as cognitive constructs that can dynamically advance and recede from attention (e.g., Smith, Menon, & Thompson, 2012). The source of network-based advantage in our theory, however, is not the perceptions of the focal individual; it is the perceptions of the audience. Previous research has found support for the idea that connections to high-status others can serve as a signal that facilitates (at least short-term) success in the job market (Kilduff et al., 2016). However, like most research on the signaling effects of social network ties, this research bypasses the possibility that attempts at signaling connections to high-status others can go unrecognized by the audience. Our research underscores the importance of explicitly accounting for audience perceptions in studies of networks and career success.

We urge researchers to avoid the temptation to rely on audience perceptions as a way of determining whether a tie "really" exists. Although some types of high-status ties studied by organizational theorists have a facticity that derives from their formal, contractual nature (e.g., equity alliances between firms; or inter-firm ties in the banking industry), other types of high-status ties are inherently more subjective than objective. What our theory suggests is that

TABLE 3 Results of negative binomial regression models with robust standard errors predicting job advantage as measured by attendance of new employer (N = 515)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Ego claims high-status tie		0.23 (0.12)		
Audience-recognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is recognized by audience			0.36* (0.14)	0.33* (0.13)
Audience-unrecognized claim to high-status tie: ego claims tie that is not recognized by audience			−0.14 (0.16)	−0.14 (0.16)
Audience-recognized unclaimed high-status tie: ego does not claim tie that is recognized by audience			0.13 (0.20)	0.14 (0.20)
Audience-recognized claim to high-status tie × Tenure[a]				−0.001* (0.001)
Control variables				
Played for family leader	0.31* (0.12)	0.19 (0.13)	0.12 (0.13)	0.06 (0.13)
First job with family leader	0.44** (0.13)	0.38** (0.14)	0.35** (0.13)	0.35** (0.13)
Years worked for family leader	−0.04** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.05** (0.01)
Cumulative NCAA appearances	0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.01)
Cumulative winning percentage	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Tenure (total games)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Attendance of prior employer	0.001*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)
Year ("dummy" variable)[b]	...	...	...	...
Constant	7.63*** (0.23)	7.61*** (0.23)	7.61*** (0.23)	7.70*** (0.22)
Log pseudo likelihood	−4764.92	−4763.41	−4761.26	−4759.30

Note. Entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates; robust standard errors are in parentheses.
[a]Variable mean centered before creating the interaction term.
[b]Dummy variables corresponding to year were included as controls in the model; coefficients not reported here.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

TABLE 4 Results of logistic regression model with robust standard errors predicting claimed high-status tie (N = 515)

	Model 1
Cumulative NCAA appearances	−0.09 (0.07)
Cumulative winning percentage	−0.02 (0.01)
Played for family leader	4.40*** (0.64)
First job with family leader	2.35*** (0.64)
Years worked for family leader	0.62*** (0.16)
Tenure (total games)	0.001 (0.001)
Prestige of prior employer	0.01 (0.001)
Constant	−3.71*** (0.67)
Pseudo R^2	0.60

Note. Entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates; robust standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

TABLE 5 Results of logistic regression model with robust standard errors predicting audience recognition of a claimed high-status tie (N = 100)

	Model 1
Cumulative NCAA appearances	0.29* (0.12)
Cumulative winning percentage	−0.01 (0.02)
Played for family leader	1.49* (0.70)
First job with family leader	0.24 (0.94)
Years worked for family leader	0.11 (0.12)
Tenure (total games)	−0.001 (0.001)
Prestige of prior employer	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	0.48 (1.42)
Pseudo R^2	0.20

Note. Entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates; robust standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

researchers seeking to understand how high-status ties confer advantage should look for matches and mismatches between claims to high-status ties and audience perceptions of the ties. There are at least three ways this could be accomplished: reliance on expert audience members (as we have done; also see Alba & Kadushin, 1976); use of a full-blown cognitive social structure (CSS) design (Krackhardt, 1987); or use of a partial/hybrid CSS design, which would use the perceptions of a subset of audience members to make inferences about what the audience, taken as a whole, perceives (for an illustration of this method, see, e.g., Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006). Each approach has advantages and disadvantages that the researcher will need to carefully weigh in light of the research question at hand.

The claims that a person makes to a high-status tie are also claims that a person makes to being a certain kind of person, to possessing a certain social identity. The self is both individual and social in character (Cooley, 1902/2011). The ties we claim, and the ties that are attributed to us, help define who we are and how we should behave (Stryker, 1980/2002). Such ties, and the social identities they imply, are, however, precarious and subject to support or denial (Goffman, 1959, p. 135). High-status ties may be exceptionally useful for studying the differences that can emerge between the ties that an actor claims and the subset of such ties that an audience recognizes. These differences in perceptions, however, are hardly confined to the special case of high-status ties. Even a prosaic friendship tie between two coworkers can be claimed by an actor but not recognized by the audience. Any two parties in a relationship can characterize their relationship differently, as can third-party observers. When one of the parties in the relationship is not an individual but an informal group (e.g., the elite coaching families we studied), the possibility for divergent perceptions may be accentuated. Our theory and findings suggest that rather than viewing competing claims around social ties as methodological error (e.g., Newman, 2001) or as symptoms of mental bias in social perception (e.g., Heider, 1958), we could interpret them as the meaningful consequence of individuals attempting, and sometimes failing, to benefit from their connections. This perspective highlights the importance to social network theory of research on how people use and misuse social ties to forge identities to accomplish their pragmatic goals (e.g., McLean, 2007; for a discussion of different strategies that individuals can use to manage the identity implications of their social ties, see Cialdini, 1989, pp. 49–52).

Our study has shown that although it can be advantageous to claim high-status affiliation in the competition for prestigious jobs, some individuals are more likely than others to claim such affiliations; and some claims are more likely than others to be recognized by the audience. We found that coaches were more likely to claim a high-status tie to the leader of a prestigious coaching family if it occurred early in the claimant's career, either when the claimant was a player on a team coached by the high-status coach or when the claimant had worked alongside the high-status coach. The audience, too, was more likely to recognize a claimed high-status tie if it occurred early in the claimant's career. However, what mattered for audience recognition of a high-status tie was whether the claimant had played under the legendary coach rather than merely worked on the same team as the legendary head coach. The experience of working alongside a high-status other appears to have been formative enough to lead coaches to later claim the high-status tie. But audiences appear to view working as a player under a legendary coach as a more credible basis for the existence of the high-status tie than merely working on the same team as the legendary coach. What these findings suggest is that the contact that is considered sufficiently formative to precipitate claims to a high-status tie may not be considered sufficiently formative by the audience, which may therefore fail to recognize the claimed tie. We can only speculate as to why this is the case. A strong possibility is that playing under a head coach better fits the mental model that audience members use to decide if an interaction rises to the level of a bonafide relationship to a high-status coach (cf. Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 272, on how such ties fit the classic conception of mentoring). But it is also possible that information about who a coach once played for is more readily circulated in this field, and therefore more readily available to audiences, than information about who the coach once worked alongside. Future work in more a more controlled setting would be needed to sort out these issues of network encoding and recall (cf. Brashears & Quintane, 2014). The broader implication is that network research should forego the temptation to engage in what Granovetter called "temporal reductionism," that is, treating ties as if "they had no history that shapes the present situation" (Granovetter, 1992, p. 34). The history of a tie (e.g., when and under what circumstances it was forged) can influence the value that individuals are later able to derive from it. This means that processes of memory and recall, whereby different parties come to perceive the "same" ties differently, need to become more central to future network theory (see Levin & Walter, 2018).

To gauge audience perceptions, we focused on the views of expert third-party observers—that is, the professional sports media. These influential observers both reflect and help shape opinions in the broader field. In our study, there was substantial consensus in the sports media about coaches' high-status ties. However, it is easy to imagine scenarios where different segments of an audience hold different beliefs about the existence of a high-status tie. In some fields, the audience may even be highly segregated into clique-like structures, each hold opposing views about the status of a tie. To the extent that perceptions regarding a tie vary among audience members, the manner in which the distribution of these perceptions influences the ability of the tie to confer advantage is a fruitful topic for future research.

In our study, ties to high-status others that were recognized by the audience helped coaches secure more prestigious jobs. However, over time, the status of these high-status others can itself wax and wane. Connections to high-status others, for example, could turn from assets to liabilities should the high-status individual to whom one is tied lose status. In this paper, we have sought to highlight the conditions under which people making claims to high-status ties benefit from them. A fruitful question for future research is as follows: How do people attempt to avoid being harmed by their association to once high-status others whose star power has been severely diminished or tarnished? In such circumstances, the relative effects of what individuals claim and what a skeptical audience believes may be especially instructive for theory.

In recent years, a growing number of studies have drawn on the idea of imprinting to describe how early experiences in a career can have a lasting effect on individual's behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Higgins, 2005; Dobrev & Merluzzi, 2018; for a review, see Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). However, there has been little research on the imprinting effects of network ties; and research on the performance implications of network imprints in particular is limited to a handful of studies (e.g., McEvily et al., 2012; Tilcsik, 2012). The conventional emphasis in network research has been on the short-term

benefits (e.g., timely information) that result from network structures that are themselves subject to decay (Burt, 2004). Our study supports the alternative idea that the performance effects of network ties can endure, especially if the network ties were formed and "imprinted" during a foundational, "sensitive period," in the individual's career (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 199).

It is commonly assumed that people who work with high-status leaders in the field tend to acquire valuable insider knowledge. For example, organizations seem to have hired individuals who worked under Jamie Dimon, the much-admired CEO of JPMorgan Chase, because of "the skills he teaches" (Armstrong, 2019). Researchers, too, have tended to focus on the learning and redeployment of knowledge acquired through the tie as the mechanism responsible for the lasting performance benefits of network-based imprinting (McEvily et al., 2012). In contrast to this pipe-like conception of network ties, our study has emphasized the role of audience beliefs and perceptions as the mechanism responsible for the performance benefits of network-based imprinting. To understand how network ties forged during formative periods (i.e., imprinted ties) can shape individual's success over time, it is important to recognize that network imprinting may occur not just in the minds of the individual but also in the minds of the audience. As our study shows, it is the match between what job candidates claim and what audiences perceive that explain how ties acquired during the formative stages of an individual's career (i.e., imprinted ties) can produce downstream benefits for the individual in the job market. Our results suggest that studies of how social network connections influence outcomes in job markets should pay greater attention to the networking process whereby individuals seek to translate potentially beneficial social connections into material advantage in the competition for jobs (cf. Obukhova & Lan, 2013).

The primary goal of our study is to contribute to theory and research on the role played by third-party perceptions in explaining why some individuals but not others benefit from claims to high-status ties. Nonetheless, there are some tentative practical implications of our study that are worth considering. First, our results are a reminder to those who wish to leverage their ties to high-status others that such attempts at leverage are contingent on audience recognition of the ties. Guides to social networking tend to stress the need to leverage one's social connections to others for personal success (e.g., Gaskell, 2017). Our study suggests that it would be well advised to first take the pulse of how key third-party actors see the high-status connection—claims to high-status ties that are not recognized by the audience may backfire. Second, our findings suggest that an individual's claims to high-status connections are more likely to be recognized by third-parties if the individual had worked with the high-status other during a formative stage in their career. The practical implication is that individuals seeking to benefit from their accumulated stocks of social capital should pay especially close attention to recalling high-status contacts from their formative past. Such "dormant" connections may no longer be current, yet, if prudently leveraged, they can continue to deliver lasting benefits (see Levin, Walter, & Murnighan, 2011).

5.2 | Limitations

Our study is limited in several ways. First, a question our study raises—but cannot conclusively address—has to do with the motivation that leads some individuals to make risky claims to high-status affiliation, claims that run a high risk of failing to win recognition from the audience. If ties to high-status others can help ameliorate uncertainty about the future promise of an individual, then we can expect people who are suffering from a deficit of legitimacy to be most tempted to make risky claims to high-status affiliation. We found tentative support for this conjecture: Coaches with a relatively poor history of prior performance (in the form of NCAA tournament appearances) were more likely to make claims to high-status ties that were unrecognized by the audience ($b = 0.29$, $p < .05$). However, our data do not allow us to draw any definitive conclusions about the motivations underlying this pattern of results. Future research will need creative methods to distinguish claims to high-status ties that were benign errors of recall or overstatement from deliberate attempts to mislead an audience for personal gain.

Second, our data do not allow us to distinguish between claims to high-status ties that an audience actively disputed from claims to high-status ties that an audience simply failed to notice and/or recall. It seems reasonable to expect that the consequences for disputed ties may be more negative than the consequences of ties that the audience failed to notice and/or recall. Future research should attempt to disentangle these two possibilities and see if they have different consequences for the accrual of individual advantage. Third, although it is possible that individuals can claim multiple high-status affiliations, we were unable to explore this scenario as only seven coaches in our sample made such claims. But this might well be an artifact of our empirical setting. To understand the effects of claiming multiple high-status on the job attainment process, researchers will need to strategically select new samples where the theory can be extended and tested. Fourth, we have argued that claims to high-status ties that are recognized by the audience serve a credentialing, uncertainty reducing function in the market for jobs. However, at least some high-status individuals, despite their success, are disliked by at least some audience members. Our study lacked fine-grained data on the content of audience beliefs to understand the implications of such ties for personnel selection. The consequences of signaling connections to high-status but disliked others for personnel selection is a topic for future research. Last, our study has focused on a single, potentially idiosyncratic setting: the market for head coaching jobs in the NCAA. The phenomenon we have examined, however, is hardly confined to college sports (on the relevance, more broadly, of studies from the setting of sports for organizational theory, see Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012). People claim high-status connections to gain advantage in a number of competitive job settings, including, of course, the market for corporate jobs. In the market for tech-related jobs, for example, applicants might emphasize their ties to the so-called "Paypal Mafia," an amorphous group of people who were affiliated with the company

PayPal before it was bought out by Ebay, in 2002 (Helft, 2006). And as previously mentioned, in the world of finance and investment banking, much is made of connections to Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase (Currie, 2015). Prior work has tended to treat such high-status connections as objective (e.g., Lin, 2001), but, as our theory has emphasized, they can be subjective and potentially contested. We call for research on the role of audience perceptions in how individuals attempt to benefit from claims to high-status affiliation in the market for corporate jobs.

6 | CONCLUSION

High-status connections can be seen differently by the actors who claim them and the audience that observes them. Our study suggests that these divergent perceptions should be interpreted not as noise but as the meaningful consequence of individuals attempting, and sometimes failing, to benefit from connections in competitive settings. A social tie to a high-status other has been likened to a prism that induces differentiation, in the eyes of observers, among individuals jockeying for success (Podolny, 2005, p. 5). The distinctive idea our study emphasizes is that if a high-status tie is like a prism, it is a prism that can be "messy and refractory, a shambles rather than a crystal" (White, 1992, p. 18). Actors can claim high-status ties, but the ties may or may not be recognized by the audience, with verifiable implications for the achievement of advantage.

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