Crowd management implications of emotional fan involvement: the case of football and rugby

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Introduction

The importance of sport and entertainment events in our global society has caused public and media attention to be focused on many diverse events around the world. This increased scrutiny has not only augmented public awareness of the various host facilities, but has also illuminated various issues pertaining to proper crowd management strategies used at sport facilities. The main question this study aimed to answer was whether violence surrounding sporting events could be related to the violent nature of the sport itself? Two particular sports, European football and rugby, provided an excellent outlet to investigate the question. Although football and rugby originated from the same activity, they both developed their distinct features and now being labelled as "gentleman's game" and "rough play".

Methods

While violence between fans of rival football teams has occurred since the early 1900s (Dunning, Williams & Murphy, 1992), violence proximate to rugby matches may not have such a long and bloody history. Quite contrary to the frequency of incidents around the "gentleman's" game of football, very rarely are acts of hooliganism witnessed at the "Ruffians" game of rugby union nor is violent behaviour a common occurrence within the game. To gain insight into fans behaviour, their emotionality, and attitude toward positive and negative behaviour were tested. The Fan Behaviour Questionnaire (Capella, 2002) was administered to football fans affiliated with the Brentford Football Club ($N = 65$) and rugby union fans with NEC Harlequins Rugby Football Club ($N = 80$). Both clubs are located in England and are similar in terms of stadium capacity and season ticket holders.

Results

After the preliminary data analysis, questions of the original Fan Behaviour Questionnaire were regrouped using principal component analysis with Promax rotation. The need for such adjustment was necessary, as the scale seemed to possess unacceptably low reliability in its original form. (The scale was originally developed using students and employees of an American university, whereas the present sample consisted of real football and rugby fans.) The reliability coefficients for the new subscales were above the minimum 0.7 level: emotionality ($\alpha = .899$), positive behaviour ($\alpha = 0.702$) and negative behaviour ($\alpha = 0.879$). It must be noted that emotionality subscale predominantly measures negative emotions. Capella (2002) hypothesized that the higher the emotional involvement (represented by high score on the emotionality subscale) the person has with the team, the more likely the individual will cause or participate in incidents. Of the usable completed questionnaires, 119 were completed by males and only 26 respondents were female. The ratio is close to the gender distribution among football and rugby fans. Because the three subscales were not strongly correlated, series of ANOVA test was used to test for gender and sport differences.

ANOVA test results revealed differences between football and rugby fans in their emotionality ($F = 604.62$, $df = 141,1$, $p < .001$); and positive behaviour attitude ($F = 7.839$, $df = 141,1$, $p = .006$). There was no difference in fans' negative behaviour attitude ($F = 1.142$, $df = 141,1$, $p = .287$). Gender difference was found only in positive behaviour ($F = 113.15$, $df = 141,1$, $p = .001$). Gender difference, due to the unequal sample size, was confirmed by two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = .743$, .002, and .123 for emotionality, positive and negative behaviour attitude, respectively). No interaction between gender and sport in positive and negative behaviour was found and emotionality interaction was only significant at $\alpha = .05$ ($F = 4.51$, $df = 141,1$, $p = .035$).

Discussion

The difference between football fans' and rugby fans'; emotional involvement with their teams/clubs was striking. Mean emotionality score for football fans (M = 59.2, SD = 5.9) was almost double that of the same score for the rugby fans (M = 33.8, SD = 3.6). The distribution of emotionality scores displayed in Figure 1, where the left hand (taller) curve shows the distribution of the emotionality scores among football fans and the right hand (lower) curve shows the same for rugby fans.

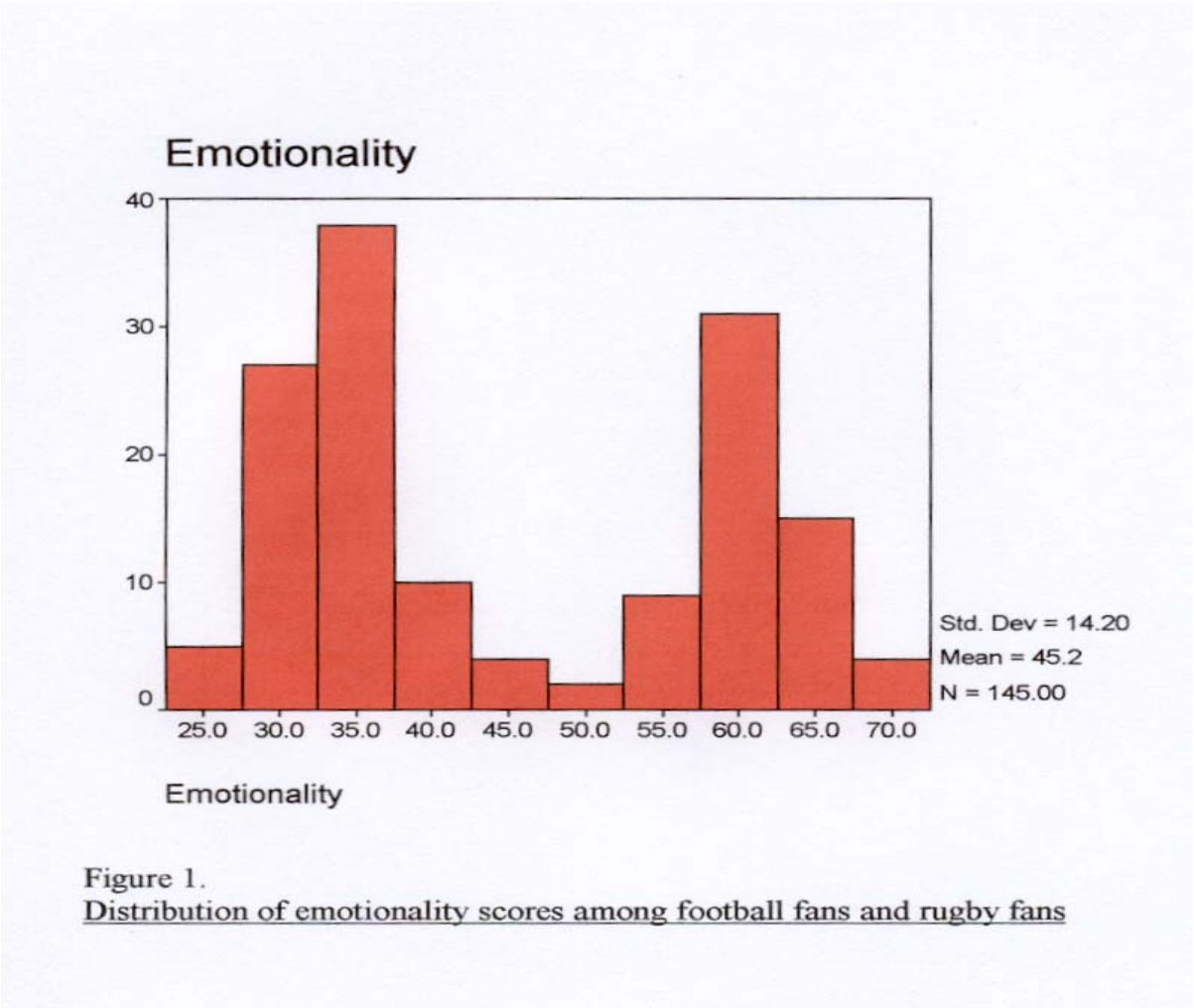

Figure 1.
Distribution of emotionality scores among football fans and rugby fans

Crowd problems at athletic events are by no means a modern dilemma. Violence at sporting events dates back centuries. Over 30,000 Romans died in riots at the chariot races in 532 BC, during the reign of Emperor Justinian. Violence between fans forced Edward II of England in 1314 to ban "that dreadful game, football" (Gilbert & Twyman, 1983, p. 64).

For soccer fans, the year 2001 was deadly: The tragedies began during April in South Africa when 43 people were killed and over 100 injured at a match between the Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. Eighteen days later, at a match in the Congo, fans began throwing bottles after the score was tied. The local law enforcement responded by firing tear gas, which caused a stampede as the crowd rushed to escape the gas, resulting in eight dead. Finally, on May 11 at a soccer stadium in Ghana, the supporters of one team began to throw objects on the field with five minutes left in the match. Police again fired tear gas, which sent the panicked crowd stampeding to the main stadium gates, which were locked. It was estimated that over 70,000 spectators were crammed into a stadium designed to hold 45,000. The ensuing riot resulted in the deaths of 126 fans (Selzer, 2001).

Hence, the game's history has never been as violent free as most people's memories would lead them to believe. The reaction of society and the media to this violence however, has been the difference. Since the 1970s, hooliganism has grown in England and on the continent of Europe. This rise can be traced to extended long-term social problems (Williams, Dunning, & Murphy, 1988). What causes these violent actions by seemingly normal spectators? There are several theories, but most sociologists maintain that the social background and psychological make-up of the fans are critical factors regarding their deviant behaviour (DeBenedette, 1989). The present study provided evidence that fans' negative emotions and behaviour cannot be linked to the violent nature of sport. However, the relationship between the frequency and severity of incidents and high emotionality is apparent from the present study. While social background and psychological characteristics of various fan groups might offer a sound explanation for their behaviour, such attributes cannot be changed by the event organisers and facility managers. Rather, crowd management techniques should focus on finding new and positive channels for such high emotional involvement of sport fans.

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