

# Shared Identity In Sport Spectator Crowds Helps To Cope With Negative Game Outcomes

**Stieler, Maximilian; Germelmann, Claas Christian**

University of Bayreuth, Germany

E-mail: maximilian.stieler@uni-bayreuth.de

## **Aim of paper/research question**

A key characteristic of sporting events is outcome uncertainty. For club officials, outcome uncertainty is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, suspenseful games and uncertain outcomes make sporting events unique experiences for spectators. On the other hand, sport managers are increasingly looking for opportunities to impede the strong influence of outcome uncertainty (Calabuig, Prado-Gascó, Crespo, Núñez-Pomar, & Añó, 2016). Although managers try to establish routinized service processes, every sporting event has its unique characteristics that are hard to control for managers. One opportunity to enhance the experiential value for spectators is to stimulate the social experience of events.

In this paper, we focus on the social dimension of sport spectators' experiences. Building on contemporary crowd psychology (Reicher, 1984), we investigate in this paper whether a shared identity among participants in crowds at sporting events can help to build a social experience. Consumer research highlights the importance of shared social experiences, although crowd experiences (including sporting events) have been relatively neglected (cf. Stieler & Germelmann, 2016).

In this paper, we investigate the following research questions:

1. Do participants of sport spectator crowds experience a shared identity with co-present others?
2. What are the psychological consequences of shared identity among crowd members and game outcome in spectator sports?
3. Can shared identity among crowd members help to mitigate the negative emotional consequences of a lost game?

## **Theoretical background**

Reicher's social identity model of crowds (Reicher, 1984) which builds on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) argues that when crowd members identify as members of a common group there is a shift from personal to collective social identification, and thus a shift from merely a physical crowd (e.g. individualized shoppers on a busy street) to a psychological crowd (e.g. football supporters all cheering for the same team). Group members' behaviour is then guided by the social norms of this group identity. As crowd members come to recognise co-present others as members of their same social category they are no longer regarded as 'other' but part of the 'self'. In this way the self-other boundaries between individuals breaks down, leading to a positive transformation of social relations between strangers (Neville & Reicher, 2011). Research shows that shared identity among individuals at mass gatherings can then have various positive consequences, such as increased health and well-being (e.g. Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan, & Reicher, 2012) or an increased positive experience (Neville & Reicher, 2011; Stieler & Germelmann, 2016). In this paper, we asked whether shared identity among crowd members in the sports setting can help to mitigate the negative emotional consequences of negative game outcomes.

## **Methodology, research design and data analysis**

In three studies, we investigate how sport spectators experience shared identity in crowds. Study 1 was conducted in Germany during the 2012 UEFA European Championship. We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants of four different public screening events on five game-days of the German national football team (N = 356, > 15 hours of recorded audio). In Study 2, we further investigated the relevance of post-game emotions and shared identity on satisfaction. Our qualitative data suggests that shared identity is still a valuable component of the experience for crowd members, whereas joy and sadness depend very much on the outcome of the game. We employed a field study at a 1<sup>st</sup> league basketball arena in Germany (N = 375) on four consecutive game-days. The aim of Study 3 was to experimentally investigate the influence a shared identity among crowd members and game outcome on satisfaction. We conducted a 2 (shared identity salient vs. not salient) x 2 (game outcome win vs. defeat) between subjects design and used the setting of a public screening event (scenario-based online experiment).

## **Results, discussion and implications**

Across three studies, we show that shared identity in the sports context has positive consequences. We add to the knowledge about shared identities in crowds in so far as sport crowds are important crowd settings

where outcome uncertainty influences the spectators' emotional states. We show that a shared identity helps crowd members to mitigate the negative emotional consequences of a defeat. Shared identity is relatively immune to the game outcome and can add to the overall satisfaction of crowd members. This highlights the importance of the social experience in spectator sports. Our results are also in line with other research from the field of crowd psychology that underlines the positive consequences of a shared identity among crowd members.

## References

- Calabuig, F., Prado-Gascó, V., Crespo, J., Núñez-Pomar, J., & Añó, V. (2016). Predicting future intentions of basketball spectators using SEM and fsQCA. *Journal of Business Research*, *69*, 1396–1400. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.10.114
- Neville, F., & Reicher, S. D. (2011). The experience of collective participation: shared identity, relatedness and emotionality. *Contemporary Social Science*, *6*, 377–396. doi: 10.1080/21582041.2012.627277
- Reicher, S. D. (1984). The St. Pauls' riot: An explanation of the limits of crowd action in terms of a social identity model. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *14*, 1–21.
- Stieler, M., & Germelmann, C. C. (2016). The ties that bind us: feelings of social connectedness in socio-emotional experiences. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *33*, 397–407. doi: 10.1108/JCM-03-2016-1749
- Tewari, S., Khan, S., Hopkins, N., Srinivasan, N., & Reicher, S. D. (2012). Participation in mass gatherings can benefit well-being: Longitudinal and control data from a North Indian Hindu pilgrimage event. *PloS one*, *7*(10), e47291. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0047291.