Group Emotions: Toward a Synthesized Framework for Fan Experience

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Sport spectatorship is a unique social phenomenon on which to study group emotions. Highly identified fans are likely to share similar emotional reactions with fellow fans when witnessing sport spectaculars (Zillman, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1979). Also, it is likely that people at sporting events will catch and mimic others’ emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Despite the intuitive grasp of emotion in the literature of fan experience, theoretical evidence for emotional experience in the sport context is scattered. Existing literature has yet to establish a theory explaining this central experience of emotion in sport consumption. Furthermore, research on group emotions, an essential aspect in this consumption, seems to be largely overlooked in the sport management literature.

The majority of research involving fan experience has mainly focused on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral consequences (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 2006; Yoshida & James, 2010). Hence, research on fans’ emotion in their sport consumption has been limited. Funk and James (2001) proposed that sport fans’ emotional attachment to a team can enhance their psychological connection with their team. Research on team identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 2006) examined that fans with higher levels of identification expressed positive emotions more frequently. Nonetheless, sport fans’ emotion in fan experience was considered as an antecedent, or consequence, in understanding their attachment to a sports entity. Crisp, Heuston, Farr, and Turner (2007) provided empirical evidence that fans’ emotional and behavioral reactions to a game differed by the level of their identification with the team. They adopted the Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET) to analyze the emotional and behavioral reactions of sport fans. We argue that the IET is useful in synthesizing the existing literature into a unified framework to further develop the understanding of group emotion in the sport context. The purpose of this current study was to develop a conceptual model accounting for the relationships between group emotion and its relevant constructs (e.g. team identification and satisfaction) studied in the sport realm. Relevant research and theories in the following are synthesized for this purpose.

The IET was theorized by E. R. Smith (1993). He conceptualized this alternative theory by combining the socially extended self in the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) with the appraisal theories of emotion (C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). The IET focused on the depersonalization occurring in intergroup situations where social comparisons, competition, or conflict between groups were salient. E. R. Smith and Mackie (2008) noted that, “emotions are often driven by people’s self-identification with important social groups, rather than by their individual selves” (p. 437). The importance of developing the field of intergroup relation, so as to understand the self and its emotions, has been continuously elucidated (Mackie & Smith, 1998). Accordingly, studies in the field have continuously attempted to provide empirical evidence for this theory of intergroup emotions (e.g., Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Miller, Smith, & Mackie, 2004; E. R. Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). Hence, E. R. Smith and Mackie emphasized that people’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are conformed to their activated group, and proposed the four fundamental properties of intergroup emotions: (1) distinction with individual emotions, (2) relation with group identification, (3) must be shared among members, and (4) they must functionally regulate intragroup and intergroup attitudes and behaviors. In the sport context, applying the IET to fan experience was considered to be important because of the following reasons. First, the IET provided a theoretical explanation for group-level emotions experienced in sport consumption (E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2008). Second, it illustrated how positive emotions were influential in forming and enhancing group identity (E. R. Smith, 1993; E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2008). Third, it theoretically contributed in integrating the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of spectators’ sport consumption (E. R. Smith, et al., 2007). Additionally, emotional contagion in fan experience was considered to leverage the intergroup contact and psychological health. As stated earlier, Hatfield, et al. (1994) summarized the evidence supporting emotional contagion and argued that people were likely to catch other people’s emotion in various scales. Considering the enormous scale of spectatorship in sport, we argue that positive group emotion in sport is a significant case of emotional contagion that is uniquely beneficial to society on its large scale. Pettigrew (1998) emphasized that emotion is critical in intergroup contact, and positive emotions...
aroused by optimal contact can mediate the intergroup contact towards a unified group. Also, Wann's (2006) Team Identification–Social Psychological Health Model focused on the psychological benefit of highly identified fans’ experience. Consequently, considering the large scale of emotional contagion, positive emotions in fan experience is expected to amplify social cohesion and psychological health.

In total, the following components are proposed in the framework of the Group Emotion Model (GEM). First, the model specified the existing antecedents of group emotion consisting of personal characteristics, and the contextual/situational state of moods or emotions. The model also proposed the emotional contagion as a moderator on group emotion experienced at the scene of sport fans’ consumption. Next, the model indicated that group emotion is linked to spectator satisfaction. Also, it specified group identification as a reciprocal construct linked between both antecedents and group emotion, and group emotion and satisfaction. Finally, both positive and negative emotional, behavioral, and psychological outcomes are specified. The potential moderation effects of team performance, personal characteristics, and demographics are assumed. The GEM captures the significance of group emotion in intergroup relations and the amplifying effects on a large scale of emotional contagion. In the sport context, the GEM can better explain how both a group's celebration (e.g., championship parades) as a consequence of positive group emotion, and hooligans' activity as a consequence of negative group emotion occurs and how they are accelerated.

Likewise, the GEM can extend the explanation of basking-in reflected-glory (BIRGing) and cutting-off-reflected failure (CORFing) behavior (Wann & Branscombe, 1990) by considering the positive or negative in-group directed emotions and affective feelings, and also the background perceptional, attitudinal, or behavioral context of emotional response targeted at an out-group (E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2008). The reciprocal effect of group identification is outlined because intergroup emotions reward and encourage strong identification, while they are simultaneously stimulated by group identification (E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2008). This ties into Wann's (2006) model by clarifying the reciprocal relationship between his psychological constructs in both antecedent and outcome. Also, the reciprocal mechanism can explain the continuing advancement of the four steps in Funk and James's (2001) Psychological Continuum Model.

The GEM is expected to enhance the overall understanding of sport spectator consumption. Synthesizing the various literature of sport spectatorship into a unified model should assist scholars and practitioners in having a better comprehension of sport spectator consumption. We argue that emotion is the central route in fan experience, which influences emotional, behavioral, and psychological outcomes. In particular, conceptualizing the emotional contagion, which moderates fans’ emotional response, provides implications to practitioners in applying the GEM. That is, fans’ experience as a group can accelerate the emotional responses in a large scale. Also, future studies should analyze empirical evidence of group emotion. From the most convenient retrospective survey, conduction of multiple methods (e.g., sound-image recording, non-verbal emotional and facial expressions suggested by Heise & O'Brien, 1993; neuroscience methodologies) is encouraged. Concurrently, social influence must be considered in aspects of emotional response. In conclusion, investigating this phenomenon through sport can theoretically contribute to Intergroup Emotions Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and the literature of emotional contagion.