

## Beautiful Strangers: Psychological Sense of Community in Sports Crowds

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### Introduction

Hedonic experiences such as sport events are often shared with others and individuals relate to each other during consumption (Arnould & Price, 1993; Holt, 1995). As such, sport crowds are characterized by a feeling of connectedness among spectators who may don't even know each other. A service where spectators of a sport event collectively form a sports crowd can be described as a hedonic mass service from a service management perspective (Ng, Russell-Bennett, & Dagger, 2007). Usually, sport crowds may differ in their size, density and composition (Mann, 1989), but the focal object (sports) serves as a connecting link between individuals. Thus, sports crowds can be seen as temporal geographical communities of interest. The feeling of belonging to a greater group of individuals is an integral part of the psychological sense of community (PSOC) spectators experience during sport event consumption.

### Theoretical Background

Rooted in community research, the psychological sense of community (PSOC) is "associated with the presence or development of a common bond with other people" (Glynn, 1981, p. 790). These common bonds usually build up over time through shared experiences and are relatively stable (McMillan, 1996; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002). In the management literature, the concept of PSOC mostly focuses on long-term communities such as brand communities (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008) or work teams (Boyd & Nowell, 2014). There are few exceptions that put emphasis on the temporal side of PSOC (Jahn, Drengner, Gaus, & Cornwell, 2011; Krohn & Vagias, 2010). As a multidimensional construct, membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection form PSOC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The membership component of PSOC refers to the feeling of being part of a larger collective. Influence as a dimension of PSOC is defined as "a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group, and of the group mattering to its members" (Boyd & Nowell, 2014, p. 108). The influence factor is associated with the need for power to shape the entire service. The third dimension of PSOC is called integration and fulfillment of needs and it describes how the community itself adds to the fulfillment of personal needs. Having a shared emotional connection encompasses individual's perception the quality of the interaction between other members of the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Although PSOC has been found to be relevant in other contexts, it is still very similar to other constructs from the sport management literature. Such a construct might be team cohesion. Sport psychologists often focus on team cohesion to predict performance outcomes of sports teams (Pescosolido & Saavedra, 2012). However, team cohesion focuses more on task-related outcomes the group members (Boyd & Nowell, 2014) than on the collective experience of a hedonic service. There has been a long debate whether PSOC and (group) identification are distinct constructs. Smith & Ryall (1999) found PSOC and identification to be two different constructs although they are highly interconnected (Smith & Ryall, 1999). Still, group identification is an important factor which may foster PSOC in a group consumption context. Especially the membership dimension is strongly associated with the feeling component of PSOC. A feeling is a more subtle psychological state than an emotion which is more intense, shorter in duration and refers to a specific object (Derbaix & Pham, 1991). Discrete emotions are also an integral part of a sport spectator experience (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2012). Thus, feelings of belongingness can be more or less salient in a sports crowd, whereas emotions occur as an individual response towards stimuli such as the game itself or other spectators. As in-group affect may alter across community contexts (Obst & White, 2005), the feeling component might be particularly relevant in sports crowds. In this paper, we ask whether the four components of PSOC described for different service settings can be found in a collective sports service setting.

### Method

Following the suggestions from the extant literature, we used a qualitative approach to investigate whether the four components of PSOC can be found in a sports crowd during consumption. We interviewed sport spectators who

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jointly watched the matches of the German national soccer team during the 2012 UEFA European Championship in front of huge screens. The venues were located in a medium-size town and a medium-sized city in Germany. In total, 97 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted. To ensure heterogeneity in terms of crowd size, density, and composition, we conducted interviews at four different venues which all were open to public. The venues were 1) a large fan fest (approx. 10.000 visitors), 2) a lecture room at the university (approx. 800 visitors), 3) a central public square (approx. 500 visitors) and 4) a cinema (approx. 400 visitors). Furthermore, we interviewed visitors of the events prior to the game, during the halftime and after the game at five games of the German national soccer team. Spectators of these events saw three wins, a draw, and a loss against Italy in the semi-finals.

### Results

In our qualitative study, we found that indeed all four original components of PSOC were salient at a collective soccer experience. The membership dimension is represented by several answers on the question about what the visitors felt at the moment. Apart from individualistic emotions such as joy, pride, optimism, sadness and others, respondents reported to experience feelings of affiliation, belongingness, togetherness, team spirit, cohesion and a sense of community. Some visitors try to shape the collective service with their behaviors. We found visitors that actively want to influence others by emotional expressions and behaviors (Exemplary quote: “I want to infect others with my personal feelings that they tune in to celebrate.”). We also found that the need for affiliation is met when people were enjoying a collective hedonic service. Belonging to the sports crowds and watching a soccer game collectively satisfies the need for affiliation (Exemplary quote: “People celebrate together, cheer, shout the same things, all wear the same jersey”). Furthermore, watching a soccer game together enhances the hedonic value the individuals draw from the experience. The crowd serves as an amplifier of the hedonic experience of watching a soccer match in front of a large screen (Exemplary quote: „It is more fun when you celebrate with many people than watching the game at home with friends”). There is also a shared emotional connection among the visitors, because they felt that they all experienced the same emotions (Exemplary quote: “The good thing is that there are like-minded people around you and that these people feel the same”).

### Implications & Future Research

We found the four PSOC components to be prevalent in a hedonic mass service in the sports context. Such a feeling of connectedness enhances the hedonic value of a mass service when the need for affiliation is salient. We propose that experiencing the feeling of connectedness may serve as a starting point for a long-term relationship towards a team, the sport itself, or brands associated with the sport. Further research is needed to identify the antecedents of PSOC as well as potential dependent variables.