

# Having an emotional group feeling boosts multiday sports events, study says

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Sponsors and organizers of large multiday events, take note: Pulling fans into an emotionally connected group atmosphere can enhance brand recall and may secure repeat attendance.

That's the key message of a University of Oregon study that analyzed the feelings of 232 fans at a six-day, biannual international track-and-field event on the U.S. West Coast. The study will appear in the *Journal of Sport Management*.

"Event organizers should think about the extent to which they can develop this sense of fans' feeling to be part of a group," said the study's lead author T. Bettina Cornwell, head of the UO Department of Marketing and academic director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in the UO's Lundquist College of Business. "This can happen spontaneously, and organizers should know that."

Events such as baseball, basketball and football games naturally attract loyal fan groups such as those rooting for the home team or alumni and students of an event's hosting organization.

Multiday events, however, attract people from many locations. The event that Cornwell's team examined drew athletes from 175 countries competing in 44 athletic events in front of more than 50,000 fans.

At such events, fans arrive with interest in the event but without a psychological connection to other attendees. In marketing terminology,

the strength of a group feeling is called entitativity. Emotions are considered as powerful to sport events but previous studies have not considered their role in depth, Cornwell said.

Cornwell, coauthor Steffen Jahn from the University of Goettingen and a team of students surveyed fans—mean age of 45 and almost equal gender representation—regarding emotions and behaviors on the third-through-sixth days of the event. Two of the UO student researchers, Jeffrey Xie, now an assistant professor at Western Michigan University, and Wang Suk Suh, a doctoral student in the Lundquist College, are also co-authors.

"People at the event were engaged in various things, but also swept up in what others were doing" Cornwell said. "Inside the stadium, a group begins to cheer for The Netherlands. You may know nothing about the athletes, but you get this feeling of being part of that."

The things people experience in and around the venue, she said, end up being part of the overall event experience.

"Even the ambush marketers—those non-sponsors with related sales booths in the surrounding area—may not be a bad thing if their presence adds to the overall atmosphere," Cornwell said.

As group connection increased, the researchers found, specific sponsor recall also increased. For instance, a major shoe and apparel company was an event sponsor, but separate shoe and apparel companies whose products are relatable to the sport were selling their products outside the venue.

Fans who did not feel part of a group were less likely to differentiate what company was a true sponsor. True sponsor brand awareness, however, was recognized by fans who had developed an emotional bond

with other fans.

"The more you feel part of a group, the more you do common things such as pay attention, be involved and want to come back," Jahn said.

Specifically, excitement, joy, boredom and overall group atmosphere were emotions that had more positive outcomes for both the event and sponsor when entitativity was high, the researchers found. When fans did not feel the in-group feeling, getting bored sometimes impaired their memories of true sponsors. Emotions related to pride and discontent were not big factors when tied to a long-running event.

Event organizers need to be aware of these factors, Jahn said, and consider working more broadly with off-site venues that might help foster a group atmosphere.

"If surrounding activities such as restaurants and other nearby businesses are open and welcoming and doing things that connect them with the event, that can be part building the feeling," Cornwell said.

To be determined, she added, is whether that in-[group](#) feeling lasts well after people go home and whether it actually results in their following through on their intent to attend a similar event in the future.

**More information:** [Feeling that Ingroup Feeling Post-Proof](#), *Journal of Sport Management*, [DOI: 10.1123/jsm.2017-0248](#)

Provided by University of Oregon

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