

# Understanding sport-related emotions in sponsorship

Analysing the different emotions felt by sports fans, and their intensity, can give rise to fresh and effective sponsorship initiatives, says **Charles Bal**, brandRapport

**N**O MATTER WHAT the level of 'mediatisation' and marketing exploitation, sport remains an indelible cement in most modern societies. Even the recent raft of cheating and doping scandals are not strong enough to seriously damage the public's devotion to sporting events.

Despite their omnipresence in sport in general and their key role in attracting spectators to sporting events, sport-related emotions, and the part they play in marketing, have not come under much scrutiny.

This is surprising, considering that sports events have, for a long time, been the place for brands to be - between 68% and 85% of current sponsored properties, according to different studies - to address consumers outside the traditional, unidirectional and impersonal advertising context.

Most brands keep investing in sport properties essentially to benefit from the visibility they offer, while emotional content is often ignored by brands, in both their decision-making process and their sponsorship measurements. These emotions are nonetheless crucial in the sponsorship persuasion, as they constitute the major currency in use in the transactions occurring between consumers and sponsored properties.

By comparing emotions felt by spectators during the French and Australian Open tennis tournaments, we can address this gap and assess how emotions shape the preliminary step of sponsorship effectiveness - the appreciation of the event.

Whether it is based on collective performances or individual achievements, a sporting event always offers a wide array of emotions, with variable degrees of intensity and valence. Indeed, the perpetual renewal of sporting stakes and talented athletes continuously feeds people's interest in sporting events, making sport-related emotions both the reason to go to and to stay at sporting events.

Zillmann and Paulus articulated this idea when they stated that: "Sport generates fanship that is more intense, more obtrusive, and more enduring than it is for other forms of entertainment and

## '90 minutes, 90 emotions': football emotions in Australia

Research commissioned by the Australian football premiership - the A-League - revealed that both fans and non-fans were particularly sensitive to the continuously evolving, chanting and colourful atmosphere that characterises football matches in Australia.

To market its distinctive place in the Australian sporting landscape, the A-League launched a TV ad campaign in 2008-09 celebrating the infectious atmosphere that comes from the emotional extremes happening throughout the 90 minutes of a football game.

Taglined '90 minutes, 90 emotions', the commercial depicts spectators'

experiences, from the emotional craziness of a goal celebration to the dismay of a red card, ending with the vibrating energy of a crowded stadium.

The campaign was also brought to the streets of Sydney and Brisbane with an interactive street marketing activation, where football emotions were brought to life by actors.

Actors dressed as supporters were placed on pedestals with several pedals, each of them representing a specific 'football emotion'. By pressing one of these pedals, passers-by could choose which emotion they wanted the actor to enact.



In the '90 minutes, 90 emotions' TV commercial, actors played out a variety of football-related feelings and reactions, decided by passers-by

social activities without direct participation in the spectated events."

Despite this evidence, brands keep ignoring the emotional content of the properties they sponsor, preferring notions of visibility, mediatisation and PR potential. Reasons for this lack of consideration for the emotional phenomenon can be found in the perceived elusiveness and volatility of sport emotions, as opposed to hard facts, such as attendance profile and event media coverage.

However, in sponsorship, more than in any other marketing communication channel, being visible does not mean that you will be seen, any more than being seen means your target will adequately process your message. Hence, paradoxically, limiting sponsorship measurements to square inches on TV screens or media outcomes may well lead to a fragmented and incomplete assessment of the effectiveness of a sponsorship campaign.

Furthermore, considering the global appeal of major sporting events and the universal nature of emotions, one could

expect that the emotional responses elicited by a sporting event may well be the common factor among sports enthusiasts from all over the world, regardless of their cultural background. And the emotional variable should be at the centre of an appropriate measurement of sponsorship marketing effectiveness.

## Representing emotions

Previous research on emotional measurements in advertising emphasise the existence of two main approaches to address the emotional phenomenon: the discrete and the continuous approach to emotions. These two representations have their own pros and cons, which need to be clarified to explain our methodological choices.

The discrete approach establishes a parallel between colours and emotions, as it considers every emotion as a subtle combination of several basic emotions. This view is particularly relevant when trying to assess the consequences of a group of particular emotions (joy, sadness, disgust) on a dependant variable. How-

FIGURE 1



ever, recent neurological developments question the idea that specific emotions rely on individual neuronal substrates, which severely compromises the assumption of basic human emotions.

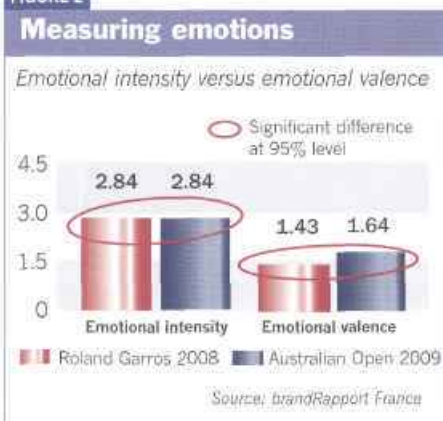
As an alternative, the continuous approach of emotions suggests that every emotional response can be represented on a three-dimensional plan, made up of valence (positive versus negative emotions), intensity (strong versus weak emotions) and dominance (a feeling of control over the emotional reaction).

The continuous approach is relevant when investigating the consequences of an overall emotional response, instead of a particular emotion. However, several academic studies have established that the two dimensions of intensity and valence were sufficient to represent a broad spectrum of emotional responses in most situations.

Given the limitation of the discrete view of emotions and the potential of the continuous approach to assess emotional intensity and valence, the latter approach was deemed the most appropriate. As a consequence, we addressed the emotional reactions felt by spectators during sporting events through a bi-dimensional view of emotions, based on valence and intensity.

As a social phenomenon, every sponsored property has its own symbolic and affective content that links it with a defined social group, and which distin-

FIGURE 2



guishes it from others; a symbolic and affective content that can be used, for example, for brand positioning purposes.

In the tennis universe, Grand Slam tournaments share a number of similarities in terms of their organisation and marketing, but there are differences. Consider, for example, the hushed and glamorous Roland Garros (Paris) and Wimbledon settings, compared with the more marketed and easy-going Australian and American Open tournaments.

To secure a minimum of variance in our measurement of emotional reactions, in addition to the one provoked by players' performances, we chose to focus our analysis on the French and Australian Opens. While there is no doubt that these two events are marketed differently and attended by different people, the univer-

sality of the emotional phenomenon should elicit similar emotional responses at both events.

Furthermore, given that emotions constitute the main reason to attend live sporting events, we can expect spectators' emotional responses to shape their overall appreciation of the event, with no apparent reason for different influences between French and Australian spectators.

To test our hypotheses and allow for comparisons, two identical data collections were held during Roland Garros (French) 2008 (N1 = 437) and the Australian Open 2009 (N2 = 375). Data was collected during the first five days of each event, using a mall-intercept technique. Each construct was measured using previously validated multi-item scales after three independent judges had translated them from English to French.

What did we learn by comparing French and Australian tennis fans? Figure 1 represents a comparison of the emotional responses we measured during Roland Garros 2008 and the Australian Open 2009.

Not surprisingly, data revealed that positive emotions were felt twice as intensely as negative emotions, meaning that spectators' emotional experience was globally positive at both events. Hence, one of the first lessons of this study might be the confirmation that sport sponsorship allows brands to address consumers in a moment they are enjoying - that is, in a context that favours consumers' reception and acceptance of sponsors' messages.

Having said that, a closer analysis of individual emotions would help us to better understand the emotional experiences spectators felt. To that aim, we ran a series of statistical tests to identify significant differences between both events' attendees. As illustrated by the red circles in Figure 1, these tests revealed that seven out of the 10 considered emotions registered significant differences between our two samples. A globally higher experience of all negative emotions was reported for French spectators, while Australian spectators described higher levels of enjoyment and happiness. However,

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## 'This shirt is not mine': recreating a link with French supporters

In its recent search for a communication agency, the French Football Federation (FFF) called for a bond to be created between the national team and its base of supporters.

Unlike German, English or Dutch supporters, the French do not naturally support their national team unless it reaches the last rounds of major competitions.

As the kit supplier of the French national team, Adidas knows better than anyone the extent to which - in terms of the quantity of jerseys (not) sold - the honeymoon was over between the team and its supporters. So the three-stripes brand launched an advertising campaign before the UEFA Euro 2008 tournament that aimed to bridge this gap.

In the 'Ce maillot n'est pas à moi' ('This shirt is not mine') campaign, several players



**Left: Adidas' 'Ce maillot n'est pas à moi' campaign sought to engender support for the French national team**

from the national team were shown claiming their love for the tricolored jersey, and paying tribute to those who really own it - those who support it, whatever the circumstances.

Adidas wanted to recreate a feeling of pride for both players and supporters: the pride of playing for the French national team, and the pride of supporting this team, no matter what happens on the field.

Supported by a €6m multimedia plan, the campaign led to a 40% increase in kit sales and achieved an 89% agreement score. It was a marketing success that did not, however, lead to a sport success.

despite significant differences, deltas between the means of the French and Australians' emotions are moderate enough for us to believe those differences to be contextual, rather than cultural. The French data collection took place during days that were rainy enough to lead to the postponement of several matches, causing a general feeling of frustration among spectators that could explain an over-rating of negative emotions.

This weather-related explanation is supported by the lack of significant difference in terms of overall emotional intensity between French and Australian spectators, as shown in Figure 2. If the emotional responses were essentially explained by cultural factors - meaning that one population would fully live their affective experience, while the other population would control and/or hide it - one would expect to find different intensity scores; which does not appear here.

A third point of our analysis concerned the extent to which sport-related emotions actually have an impact on spec-

tators' appreciation of the event. Structural equations revealed that emotional valence (explanatory power: 0.373, on a 0 to 1 basis) and intensity (0.348) contributed similarly to attitudes toward the Australian Open, while emotional intensity (0.435) had twice as strong an influence than valence (0.209) on attitudes toward Roland Garros. The prevalent role of intensity in explaining spectators' appreciation of Roland Garros leads us to the conclusion that, as long as French spectators experience intense emotions, they will like the event better, regardless of their emotional valence. Hence, it does not matter what the final result is for French spectators, provided the game is thrilling.

### Conclusions

No-one doubts that sporting events convey a broad range of emotions, with varying degrees of intensity and valence. However, most brands evolving in the sports universe have not shown much concern for this variable, either in their decision-making or in their measurement tools.

Although, from a sponsorship persuasion perspective, few studies have actually tried to assess the effects of sport-related emotions, this lack of consideration of the emotional responses is surprising, since sport sponsorship is often described as an indirect form of persuasion, relying on the fundamentally affective relationship that exists between the consumer and the sponsored property - and exerting an emotive, rather than cognitive, influence on consumer behaviour.

Taken together, our results tend to confirm the universality of emotions in a sports context. This study suggests that people from two different countries attending two similar events in comparable weather conditions will feel equivalent emotional experiences. If every sport conveys its own range of emotions, our findings suggest that brands - particularly sponsors' brands - could expect comparable emotions during two similar events in the same sport. Brands can thus use sport-related emotions as a variable to consider when selecting the best property to sponsor.

From a measurement perspective, the simultaneous acknowledgement of the universality of the emotional phenomenon, and of the different influences they can have, should convince sponsors to consider these emotions in their measurement of sponsorship effectiveness. Our results show that emotions are not as elusive as practitioners usually think and, as a matter of fact, they can, and should, be considered to assess sponsorship effectiveness.

Finally, considering both the universality and the measurability of sport-related emotions, we encourage practitioners to understand that assessing the influences emotions have on their brand's KPIs is probably, and paradoxically, the most rational way of measuring sponsorship marketing effectiveness. At least, it is more rational than measuring square inches and the number of times the sponsors were cited in the press.