

## **TEAM SPIRIT IN FOOTBALL**

**An analysis of players' symbolic communication in a match between Argentina and  
Iceland at the men's 2018 World Cup.**

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### **Abstract**

The creation of team spirit is one of the most important and difficult challenges of contemporary sports. Team spirit is on one hand important for team efficiency and team success and on the other difficult to account for due to its emergent and impervious nature. Team spirit is especially important in the midst of the dynamic on-the-field game action where sport teams rely on active communication between team members in order to meet the many challenges of sporting contests. Verbal communication is however often problematic during games and members of a team need to make use of symbolic gestures to communicate. The literature has however been inattentive to the role of symbolic gestures in sports, especially in regard to team spirit and team performance. This paper is a case study of a single football match. It makes use of micro-sociological theory and perspective to account for players' use of symbolic communication and gestures in regard to team spirit. The findings from the analysed match reveal players' use of various forms of symbolic communication and gestures, which could be recognized as positive, negative or neutral for on-the-field team spirit.

Keywords: Symbolic communication, gestures, team spirit, football, agency, micro-sociology

## Introduction

I often say that when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind (William Thomson [a.k.a. Lord Kelvin]), 1889, 73).

The creation of team spirit and team cooperation is one of the most important and difficult challenges of contemporary sports (Cashmore, 2003, 59; Pescosolido and Saavedra, 2012; Sumpter, 2016, 164). Its importance lies in the potential it has to add to the pool of individual talent and skills of a team. Its challenges are due to its mystique as an emergent (and invisible-to-the-naked-eye) phenomenon. Effective team spirit can be influential in producing teams that become something more than the mere sum of their parts (Halldorsson, 2017; Maymin et al., 2013; Mead, [1934]/1972, 198,329), which in turn makes team spirit “something of a Holy Grail for coaches and team managers” (Cashmore, 2003, 59). But can team spirit be identified, measured and linked to team performance?

One way of identifying team spirit is to watch how teams’ play. Team spirit relies on active communication between team members (Losada, 1999; Snow and Davis, 1995) and is therefore most evident to observers in the game action (See Halldorsson, 2017, 68-70). Team sports are *open skilled* sports—in contrast with *closed skills* in individual sports—since they take place in a collective, dynamic and changeable environment. They rely less on individual talents and more on situational awareness and social interaction than do individual sports (Allard and Burnett, 1985; Poulton, 1957). Thus, communication within teams, in the heat of the on-the-field action, can be noted as mark their strength, bolstering team bonds between players and helping teams face adversity. It is in the midst of the game action—what Goffman identified as “fateful situations” ([1967]/2005, 260)—where both individual and team character is revealed and where team spirit matters the most. On-the-field team spirit is further important because it is dynamic in nature where the spirit of one team can directly affect the spirit of the other team as well. A team which boasts lively and coherent on-the-field communication and team spirit can gain momentum and throw the other

team off balance; the opponents may feel overwhelmed and lose faith and/or focus on the task in hand, leading to collective and emergent downward trajectories of the team attitude and performance within the game. All of this makes team spirit such an important topic in team sports.

However, due to the fast action on the pitch, the physical distances between players and the noise levels at professional sport matches, verbal communication is often problematic, so normal communication between players is restricted. Players therefore have to rely on other means of communicating during the action in the field of play. Sport teams are in this respect dependent on the on-the-field symbolic communication of its members towards one another. However, how members of a team make use of symbolic communication during on-the-field action and, more specifically, how symbolic gestures influence team spirit in sport, has not been addressed to any extent in the current literature (see Ishak, 2017).

This paper is a case study, which sets out to approach team spirit in sport from a micro-sociological perspective. More precisely, this paper sets out to establish a framework for the analysis of team spirit in football by measuring forms of symbolic communication between players during a football match. Special attention will be given to players' agency in this respect, that is, how they use positive or negative gestures towards their teammates in the heat of the game action. Thus, the main aims of this paper are: 1) to establish a framework for the analysis of symbolic communication in football matches through a micro-sociological approach; 2) to identify the main forms of symbolic communication in football games; 3) to account for the use of symbolic gestures by members of two teams (Argentina and Iceland) in a particular game; 4) to raise important issues for further studies on team spirit in sport. The football match analysed in this paper (the case) was between Argentina and Iceland. It was the first match of the two teams at the 2018 Men's FIFA Football World Cup.

Team spirit has been defined as "an enthusiastic attitude towards working productively with a team or work group" (Dictionary of Sport and Exercise Science, 2006, 206) highlighting the role of individual agency in interactional settings. Team spirit further has a more structural and emergent component to it where a teams' spirit is transferred between members of a group through social interaction, and social networks, and therefore takes the form of a contagious and invisible force which emphasizes and highlights the specific teams' spirit (Christakis and Fowler, 2009; Halldorsson, 2017; Mead, [1932]/2002; Snow and Davis, 1995; Walton et al., 2012). Thus, team spirit differs from one team to the next where all teams develop their own specific team character, what Fine (2012) defined as its "ideoculture." A team's ideoculture is embedded within the team's interaction and revealed in the behaviour of its members, influencing the choices they make as a team (Fine, 2012, 34-36). Members of a team act in accordance with the norms of behaviour or particular moods of other team members (Christakis and Fowler, 2009; Smith et al., 2018). There is further evidence that perceived team affiliation through team spirit takes place through neural mechanisms rather than rational decision-making (Molenberghs et al., 2012). In other words, we instinctively act in accordance with the team spirit which encompasses us.

Cooperative action of members of a team is based on reciprocal-acknowledged attention, which constitutes a form of interconnectedness between team members. Such interconnectedness is characterized by a fluid, shared, collective consciousness on the part of team members and mutual respect between them (Couch, 2017b). Research findings have indicated how team spirit can build bonds between team players and positively affect team mood (Fine, 2012; Fine and Corte, 2017; Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson and Katovich, 2017; Kraus et al., 2010; Ronglan, 2011, Walton et al., 2012). Team spirit has in this sense been associated with making sports more meaningful and enjoyable (Fine, 2012; Kraus et al., 2010), enabling players to trust each other (Halldorsson, 2017; Ronglan, 2011), boosting team motivation (Halldorsson, 2017; Walton et al., 2012) and helping players through adversity in the action of play (Morgan et al., 2013). Much of this takes place through the symbolic communication of players within a team

setting. However, the semiotics of sport teams has not been addressed to any extent in the current literature.

Symbolic communication in sports is generated by interaction rituals in which players provide their teammates with indications of, for example: support, encouragement, anger, disappointment, concern and apathy. Members of a team both provide symbolic cues to their teammates as well as receive such symbolic cues from their teammates, both explicitly and tacitly (see: Polanyi, 2009) which can, for instance, help teams to forge ahead at crucial times or, alternatively, lead to a collective loss of belief among team members. Some research on this indicates, however, that teams are highly vulnerable to negative gestures of individuals, and one “bad apple” can, through an individual apathy, significantly undermine the mood of entire teams (Felps et al., 2006). Nevertheless, by sharing extensive pasts, members of a team can further read such symbolic cues more thoroughly and efficiently than strangers and thus activate important team spirit elements more appropriately (Couch, 2017b, 122-127; Katovich and Couch, 1992).

According to Birrell (2001), meanings, such as of cooperative action, are conveyed through symbolic communication, i.e., through rituals, gestures, body language, poise and facework people interact with each other, and negotiate the norms of how to do things, within a specific social context (see Goffman, [1959]/1990; [1967]/2005; 1981). Communication within teams, including, e.g., positive gestures, can be recognised as a measure of team spirit and team cooperation (see Couch, 2017b; Faulkner and Becker, 2009; Goffman, [1959]/1990; [1967]/2005; Losada, 1999; Molenberghs et al., 2012). Symbolic communication plays an important role in the signs we use to clarify bonds with others and imbue an activity with meaning for the participants (Verhoeven, 1985, 74). Social actors understand, both through language and from reading tacit expressions in each other’s behaviour, the shared meanings of their actions within a particular social context (Becker, 2007; Goffman, [1959]/1990; [1967]/2005; Wilson, 2003)

In this context, Goffman notes: “Everyone knows that when individuals in the presence of others respond to events, their glances, looks, and postural shifts carry all kinds of implication and meaning” (1981, 1). Thus, symbolic interactionists would, in the case of cooperative action,

turn our attention to the subtle nuances of human behaviour. As Buban (2017, 66) states, in connection with people going out the door: “it’s not *if* they go out the door or not, it’s *how* they go out the door.” Such phenomena are mundane and are therefore most often taken-for-granted in daily life, and also in sports (Chambliss, 1988). However, those simple forms of symbolic communication are of the utmost importance in sporting contexts, especially in terms of establishing team spirit in the field of play (Halldorsson, 2017, 68-70). Examples from sports for instance exemplify how players use positive symbolic gestures to show support towards their teammates (Pirlo, 2013, 131) and how players seek positive symbolic gestures from their teammates when faced in fateful situations (Pirlo, 2013, 33-34). Likewise, football coach Pep Guardiola notes the symbolic gestures of his players where he, for instance, looks at the reaction of the players on the substitute bench, to see if they are expressing the right symbolic signals when his team scores goals, as to evaluate whether his substitutes are good team players or not (Hughes, 2018, 1). Athletes also perform symbolic acts, such as feigning fatigue, in order to generate a false sense of security among their opponents which provides them with an important edge in competition (see Armstrong 2003, 107). Such taken-for-granted gestures most often go unnoticed but as Zerubavel (2018) has argued; they have remarkable power.

In order to illustrate this core dynamic in sports teams, this paper sets out to apply a micro-theoretical analysis of team spirit in sport. The theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism highlights how meanings are built up and negotiated through interactions—symbolic communication—with others, and how meanings are assembled in symbols, codes and discourse which leads to the establishment of collective representation, i.e., specific team norms and a specific team mood (see Carter and Fuller, 2016; Snow and Davis, 1995). How players of a team act towards each other, on the field, can therefore be regarded a representative of the *symbolic closeness* or *symbolic distance* of the team members towards each other (Couch, 2017a, 17). In this respect, showing good character and team spirit is a sign of “healthy” teams, while showing bad character and weak team spirit is a sign of “unhealthy” teams. This I believe is noticeable when a football game is analysed in the way described in the following pages.

Despite the importance of a positive and supportive team spirit for team performance game statistics have highlighted the physical aspects of games rather than team spirit to any extent. The absence of measures of team spirit and team communication in prominent game analysing tools is particularly noticeable (see, e.g.; Instat, 2018; Passos et al., 2017; Poli et al., 2018; Sarmiento et al., 2014). This absence can partly be explained by the fact that team spirit tends to be an emergent phenomenon which is difficult to plan and account for, and partly because a holistic account of the nuts and bolts of team spirit is missing in the literature. Thus, it is one of the main arguments of this paper that team spirit needs to be accounted for, and systematically measured, just like any other element of individual and team performance in sports, in order to provide practitioners with “thicker data” of how to build team spirit and improve team cooperation in sports (Lames and McGarry, 2002; Sennett, 2012, 6).

## **Methods**

This paper is qualitative in its essence. It builds on a case study of a single football match which is analysed through a micro-sociological lens with the aims of identifying key elements of team spirit in game action. However, the paper further makes use of content analysis of this particular match—promoting a link between micro and macro level analysis (see Carter and Fuller, 2016). Content analysis is an objective empirical research method which studies, gathers and analyses the context of “social texts”, i.e., anything that is written, visual or spoken and serves the medium of communication (Bell, 2001). Some research has been done via content analysis on nonverbal behaviors in relation to physical touch in close-contact sports such as basketball (Kraus et al., 2010; Pellicier, 2013) and handball (Moesch et al., 2015). However, I have not come across any research that applies content analysis to study symbolic communication between team members as it is utilized in this study or specifically in football.

The use of audio-visual recordings to study behaviour and social interaction is of course not something new to symbolic interactionists. In the late 1970s, the Iowa School of Symbolic Interaction, led by Carl J. Couch, pioneered the use of audio-visual technology to study face-to-



face interaction in small groups (see in Katovich, 2017). The CRIB (The Center for Research on Interpersonal Behavior) helped researchers to study the second-by-second nature of social interaction processes, which daily-life observers usually see once only (Katovich, 2017; Miller et al., 1975). Video recordings of social acts and interactions in small groups allowed researchers to go beyond witnessing social encounters in real time only: to rewind, replay and freeze-frame sequences of social and symbolic communication through audio-visual technology and thus analyse such communication in greater detail and with more precision than before.

This paper builds on micro-sociological theory of symbolic social interaction (see Carter and Fuller, 2016; Snow and Davis, 1995). Its methods are based on the same principles as the Iowa School of Symbolic Interaction used in analysing symbolic communication and cooperation in groups: studying symbolic social acts through the use of audio-video technology. This analysis, however, was not conducted in an experimental environment: instead it makes use of content analysis to account for individual agency and team spirit in a live television broadcast of a football match. The match, Argentina – Iceland, was played in the first round at the group stage level the 2018 Men’s FIFA World Cup on June 16 and ended in a 1:1 draw<sup>1</sup>. The result of the match came as a surprise to most football fans since Argentina was considered the strong favourites to win the match. This paper sets forward one explanation of this surprising result.

This paper makes use of the official live FIFA broadcast, which should not be biased towards one team or the other. However, a content analysis of a football game only grasps a small

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<sup>1</sup> Slater et al. (2018) analysis of games in the 2016 Men’s European Football Championship showed that teams that showed more passion during the playing of their national anthems were more successful than those that did not show passion during the playing of their national anthem. More specifically, the passionate teams were less likely to concede goals than their opponent teams because of better teamwork on the pitch. This particular match between Argentina and Iceland was selected as an example of opposing teams which at first glance seemed to represent different levels of team spirit. During the national anthems of the two teams it was apparent that the body language and gestures of the Argentinian and Icelandic teams differed remarkably. While most of the Icelandic players (and coaches) sang with the national anthem as they stood with their arms around their teammates, none of the Argentinian players or coaches sang their national anthem. The Argentinian players furthermore stood far from each other and the goalkeeper even faced in a different direction than his teammates. Viewing the conduct of the players (and coaches) of the two teams during their national anthems, as well as their physical posture and closeness, pointed to high levels of *symbolic closeness* in the Icelandic team but to *symbolic distances* in the Argentinian team. The decision to select this match for analysis for this paper was in part to test whether those first impressions held true by examining the symbolic communication of members of both teams during the match itself.

portion of the symbolic communication that takes place between the players during a whole match and therefore does not provide a holistic account of all action in the game. The analysis however can be regarded as being based on a sample (what is aired in the live television broadcast) from a data population (everything that happens during a whole game) where the sample is believed to be representative of the population.

Since the tools for analysing symbolic communication in football teams are practically non-existent, I had to develop the tools I used as units of analysis. First, I watched the match between Argentina and Iceland twice, trying to note key forms of symbolic communication in the field of play. Along the way I took notes. I further identified and coded key themes from which I constructed a frame of analysis to enable me to analyse the game more systematically. Second, I made my analysis, based on three viewings of the game. In the first, I noted only acts of symbolic communication by the Argentinian players. In the second I noted only acts of symbolic communication by the Icelandic players. All acts of symbolic communication for the two teams were marked minute-by-minute. In the third viewing I checked and revised my previous notes for both teams. In all the five screenings of the match I frequently stopped the game, re-wound and replayed and/or freeze-framed certain moments of the broadcast game to account for what was really happening in the heat of the action.

The Findings section identifies the key forms of symbolic communication coded in the analysis. It also presents the descriptive statistics of the number of times those symbolic communications were noticeable in the television broadcast for the two teams<sup>2</sup>. Finally, in order to account for the role of the symbolic communication noted in the match—and derived from the theoretical stance of Durkheim (see ‘the collective conscience’, [1915]/1965) and Goffman ([1959]/1990; [1967]/2005) (see above)—I identified them as positive, negative or neutral/unknown for the formation of a healthy team spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> All accounts of players’ agency in terms of positive and negative gestures were counted. For instance, if three players clapped their hands because the goalkeeper made a save it was counted as three positive gestures (one by each of the three players).

## Findings

The analysis of the 2018 Football World Cup match between Argentina and Iceland revealed various kinds of symbolic communications and gestures from players of both teams. In all, 252 gestures were recorded in the televised broadcast of the 90-minute football match; 95 by Argentina and 157 by Iceland. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for both teams in the categories which emerged from the content analysis.

Firstly, obvious deliberate physical and symbolic gestures, which can be identified as positive for team spirit, could be seen being used between players and their teammates during the match (Table 1, sections 1-4). The players sent “thumbs up” gestures, clapped their hands, clapped on a player’s back or shoulder or gave a teammate a hug in acknowledgment of their efforts (see Picture 1). They also made fists with their hands, signalling a fighting spirit, and gave each other “high-fives”, which is a form of ritual in team sports.

**Table 1.** Symbolic communication in Argentina versus Iceland at the 2018 Men´s Football World Cup.

	<b>Argentina N (%)</b>	<b>Iceland N (%)</b>	<b>Total</b>
1. Showing of acknowledgement towards teammates	18 (26,5)	50 (73,5)	68
Clapping of hands	3	31	34
Making fist	0	6	6
Showing thumbs up	2	1	3
Other hand gesture	3	2	5
Goal celebration	10	10	20
2. Physical acknowledgement of teammates through touch	6 (25)	18 (75)	24
Clap on the back/shoulder of teammate	0	8	8
Give teammate high 5/10	4	5	9
Give teammate a hug	2	5	7
3. Provide symbolic motivation to teammates	0 (0)	6 (100)	6
Clapping of hands	0	2	2
Making fist	0	4	4
4. Show signs of joy	1 (12,5)	7 (87,5)	8
Smile	1	5	6
Smile and showing thumbs up	0	2	2
5. Telling teammates off	5 (62,5)	3 (37,5)	8
Verbal reprimand	2	1	3
Reprimand with hand gesture	3	2	5
6. Showing of frustration	11 (55)	9 (45)	20
Facial expression/body language	5	2	7
Hand gesture	4	7	11
Bury head in hands	2	0	2
7. Play organization with hand gesture	24 (45,3)	29 (54,7)	53
8. Gestures towards referees*	22 (46,8)	25 (53,2)	47
Complain	10	12	22
Show disbelief	1	2	3
Recognition	0	4	4
Tactical	11	12	23
9. Unknown gestures	6 (40)	9 (60)	15
10. Other gestures	2 (66,7)	1(33,3)	3
<b>Total:</b>	<b>95 (37,7)</b>	<b>157(62,3)</b>	<b>252</b>
Total positive	<b>25 (23,6)</b>	<b>81 (76,4)</b>	<b>106</b>
Total negative	<b>16 (57,1)</b>	<b>12 (42,9)</b>	<b>28</b>
Total neutral/other	<b>54 (45,8)</b>	<b>64 (54,2)</b>	<b>118</b>

\* Gestures towards referees were counted collectively - not individually



**Picture 1.** An Icelandic player acknowledging the effort of his teammate with a thumbs-up gesture (screenshot from [www.ruv.is](http://www.ruv.is). Retrieved August 10, 2018 from: <http://www.ruv.is/sjonvarp/spila/hm-2018-i-fotbolta/18198>).

The players could also be observed celebrating successful actions in the game, such as scoring goals. When the teams scored, which is a major element in a football match, the players celebrated emotionally by huddling together and hugging each other, which was accompanied by the expression of joy (or relief) in the form of screams or shouts. All players of both teams except the goalkeepers were seen taking part in celebrating goals. The players were also seen celebrating lesser achievements in the game, such as winning free kicks or goal kicks and even making a clearance which resulted in a corner kick for the other team. This they did by clapping their hands, making fists and/or shouting. These actions have been used to celebrate “the small wins”, providing team members with confidence and short-term momentum (Halldorsson, 2017, 74-75; Moesch, et al., 2014; Mortimer and Burt, 2014).

All the above-mentioned gestures can be defined as positive gestures (see Durkheim, [1915]/1965; Goffman, [1959]/1990; [1967]/2005; Halldorsson, 2017, 68-70). They were mostly deliberate and function as an expression of recognition and/or encouragement from a player to his teammates. As Table 1 shows, the Icelandic players were much more likely to use positive gestures during the match than the Argentinians. The Icelandic players were far more likely to show acknowledgement to their teammates; both symbolically and/or through physical touching

and closeness. They were also more likely to provide their teammates with symbolic motivation and to enjoy themselves on the pitch, this being observable in the form of smiles and/or making jokes than the players from Argentina. Positive gestures by the Icelandic players were noted on 81 occasions, against 25 occurrences among the Argentinian players.



**Picture 2.** An Argentinian player showing his frustration while the Icelandic goalkeeper is celebrating “a small win” (not conceding a goal) by screaming and making a fist with his hand (screenshot from [www.ruv.is](http://www.ruv.is). Retrieved August 10, 2018 from: <http://www.ruv.is/sjonvarp/spila/hm-2018-i-fotbolta/18198>).

Second, as regards negative gestures (Table 1, sections 5-6), the content analysis reveals that the players were occasionally observed telling each other off. This involved other examples of deliberate gestures, consisting mainly of shouting and/or making hand gestures towards teammates. Showing frustration on the pitch can also be termed as a negative gesture because it sends out signals of disappointment and anger to other players<sup>3</sup>. Such gestures made by players involved shouting, looking up to the sky, punching the air and/or forcefully clapping their hands. These gestures seemed spontaneous (see Picture 2). The Argentinian players were noted to express negative gestures 16 times, the Icelandic players 12 times.

<sup>3</sup> Showing frustration is however an emotional release which illustrates that players care. In other words, the showing of frustration can be seen as a positive gesture when contrasted with players showing apathy.

However, as Fredrickson and Losada (2005) have argued, negative gestures are also important for teams to reach their maximum effectiveness. Teams do not succeed by only providing positive feedback. There needs to be some balance between keeping everyone happy and keeping everyone on their toes. In other words, in small teams, there has to be the right balance of fun and discipline, or as in this case between positive and negative gestures. According to Fredrickson and Losada (2005) however, the positive gestures need to significantly outweigh the negative ones.

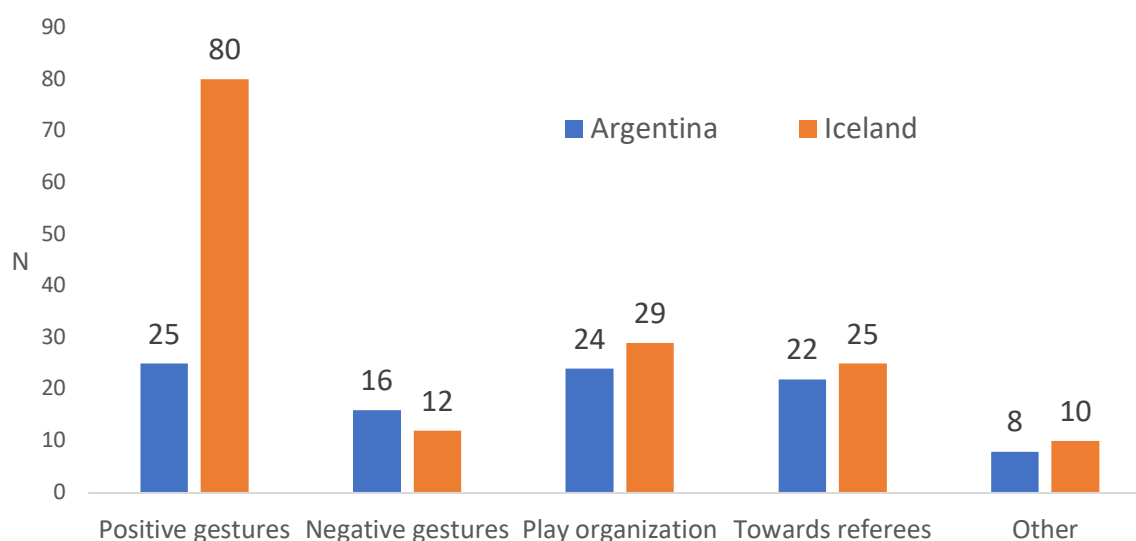
Third, players frequently used hand gestures as communication for team tactics and the structure of their game (Table 1, section 7). Those hand gestures signalled other players where to position themselves or where to send the ball and represent the tactical teamwork in the field of play. The gestures were strategic and intentional. Structural gestures could be defined as positive since they increase in-team communication and lead to team harmony. However, they could also be defined as neutral, since they are a part of a pre-organised and agreed game strategy, initiated by the coach; they are therefore defined as neutral here as is it questionable whether they derive from the players' agency or from instructions from the coach. The Argentinian players were observed using structural gestures 24 times and the Icelandic players 29 times.

Fourth, some of the symbolic communication in the match was directed at the referee (Table 1, section 8), this is also defined as neutral here. Players of both teams complained to the referee or his assistants, expressing sheer disappointment or disbelief (spontaneous) and/or tactical purpose (intentional) in order to try to influence and/or turn the referee's decisions. The players of the two teams did this in similar measure; however, the Icelandic players were further seen to show appreciation for the referee's decisions where on four occasions they clapped the hands for the referee, showed thumbs up and even smiled in communicating with the referees. This was not the case with members of the Argentinian team.

Finally, there were some gestures made in the match to which I could not attribute meaning (Table 1, sections 9-10), i.e., whether the gesture was towards a teammate, opponent or referee, or

whether it was positive or negative. They included various hand gestures, facial expressions or other social acts during the game.

To sum up, both teams made use of various forms of symbolic communication in the match (see further in Figure 1). Some of them can be seen as positive for team spirit; others as negative. Some were deliberate, others spontaneous. And finally some of those gestures of communication were directed towards teammates, others at the referees or opponents. All in all, the 90-minute broadcast football match provided rich data on the symbolic communication of the players and teams.



**Figure 1.** Comparison of symbolic (physical) gestures of both teams, Argentina and Iceland, from the 2018 World Cup match.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this case study reveal that in this particular match the Icelandic players used symbolic communication, and especially positive gestures, to a far greater extent on the field than did the Argentinian players. Thus, it can be claimed that the Icelandic team had better team spirit and more enthusiastic, engaged and positive teamwork than the Argentinian team did in the match. It can further be claimed, in line with former research (Halldorsson, 2017; Kraus et al., 2010), that the team spirit of the Icelandic players was an important factor which helped the Icelandic team



(the weaker team) to secure a favourable result in the match, while the lack of team spirit resulted in a disappointing result for Argentina (the favourites). Finally, it can be claimed that players' agency, especially in terms of directing positive symbolic gestures towards their teammates, is important for raising team spirit and building team momentum in the heat of the on-field action, while on the other hand the absence of such player agency results in less communication and team momentum and ineffective teamwork.

Naturally, findings from a single match do not necessarily hold for other matches of the two teams. In other words, we cannot argue from these findings that they are representative of how the two teams act in general. Many socio-cultural and situational factors may also be at play here (Halldorsson, Thorlindsson and Katovich, 2017; Pescosolido and Saavedra, 2012). Such factors will need to be taken into consideration when such findings are analysed further.

First, sports are cultural constructs and are played differently from one cultural context to the next (Archetti, 1999; Halldorsson, 2017; Lever, 1983). This shows, for instance, in how teams from different nations play. Argentina and Iceland have different traditions of footballing styles. Archetti (1999, 190) has argued that Argentinian football players demonstrate a romantic notion of playing aesthetically which is based on “technical ability and individualism”—much like Brazilian football players. Researchers have, on the other hand, argued that Icelandic football players tend to favour a disciplined and collective style of playing (Telseth and Halldorsson, 2017). Thus, the individualistic playing styles of the Argentinian and Brazilian players contrasts with the collectively orientated European style of playing football (Archetti, 1999, 190-193; Telseth and Halldorsson, 2017; Wieting, 2015). Argentina has been seen as playing *positive* and attacking football, while Iceland's style has been described as *negative* and defensive (see Archetti, 1999; Halldorsson, 2017; Telseth and Halldorsson, 2017). Those cultural differences show in the results of the content analysis (see Table 1). Thus, different cultures and playing philosophies can influence how players act on the field.

Second, the difference in the symbolic communication styles of the two teams can also be attributed to the fact that the players are the products of ideologically different sports systems.

While most—if not all—of the Argentinian players are professional in the fullest sense of the term and have been schooled in professional football academies all around the world, most of the Icelandic players have their origins in an amateur sport system in Iceland. The amateur ideology of Icelandic sports nurtures different elements of playing sports than is customary in the professional world of elite football. Thus, the Argentinian players are more inclined to adhere to the professional style of the individual elite sport, which Billing, Franzén and Peterson have described as having “dehumanized” sport (2004), while the Icelandic players are more inclined to adhere to a more amateur approach to sport which can be characterized by passion, friendships and seeing sports as play rather than work (see Halldorsson, 2017; Wieting, 2015).

Third, small societies have the advantage over big societies that it is easier for them to build and foster feelings of belongingness and coherence (Benedict, 1967). Katovich and Couch (1992), for instance, have argued that people who share extended pasts tend to construct more effective team chemistry and feelings of togetherness than those lacking shared pasts (see also Couch, 2017b). For Argentina, with a population of 44 million, it can be a more challenging task to build strong teamwork and team spirit among its players than for a tiny nation like Iceland, with a population of only 340,000, where the players have often known each other since early childhood (see Halldorsson, 2017).

The fourth factor relates to the players’ motivation. On one hand the state of the sociocultural wellness of the two nations differs considerably, which could impact the national sentiments of the two teams. While Iceland is an affluent society characterized by a strong sense of national pride and national identity (Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson, 2019) Argentina is facing economic<sup>4</sup> and anomic social problems, which result in social disruption and fractured national identity (Perus, 2003; Quenza, 2009; Tedesco, 2000). Thus, the different sociocultural contexts of the two nations could impact the players sentiments toward playing with each other as well as the levels of sacrifice and the fighting spirit which the players show playing for their nation. On the

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>

other hand the match analysed in this paper was Iceland's first match ever at the World Cup finals. The historic significance of the match could have provided the Icelandic team with extra motivation and pride to play for their country, leading to a stronger sense of the importance of the occasion and of doing well for the Icelandic nation. Argentina, on the other hand, is a regular player in the World Cup finals, and most often a contender for the World Cup trophy. Higher expectations and pressures on the Argentinians could more easily lead to frustration and disappointment than for the Icelanders which had less to lose<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the historical significance of this particular match was different for each of the two teams, and this could have influenced their collective sentiments.

Finally, the results from the content analysis reflect how the match itself developed (see Moesch et al., 2015), driven on by what Fine would note as “triggering events” which incite action (2012, 48-49). Argentina were the favourites to win the match while Iceland were in the role of the “underdogs.” Thus, going into the match as the underdogs placed the Icelandic team in a advantageous position, especially when the match started to progress favourably for the Icelanders. The Argentinians were in a position to control the match, keep the ball and go in for a win. The Icelanders, on the other hand, were trying to get something out of the match. They were happy with a draw. Thus, they had more chances to celebrate the “small wins” in the match, i.e. to frame each defence (of not conceding a goal from the famous Argentinian attack led by one of the world's best players, Lionel Messi) as a win that could be celebrated. The Argentinians were frustrated at not being able to break the Icelandic defence, as shown in the analysis. It can be argued in this context that the Icelanders used more efficient framing (see Goffman, [1974]/1976) of the development of the match than the Argentinians, celebrating their “small wins”, while the Argentinians were frustrated at their failed attempts.

Accordingly, it can also be argued that it is more difficult for players to provide support for their teammates while the team is failing than when the team is achieving (see Pirlo, 2013, 33-

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<sup>5</sup> See remarks from Argentinian coach Jorge Sampaoli after the tournament:  
<http://mundoalbicelste.com/2018/10/09/argentina-jorge-sampaoli-world-cup-lionel-messi/>

34). However, despite the different situations of the two teams in the match, the Argentinian players failed to make the choice to act as a team to try to turn the downward trajectory which the match imposed on them (see Blumer, 1937). Despite many opportunities, after failed attempts, the Argentinian players did not support or encourage each other, which they desperately needed in relation to how the match developed (see Picture 3). In other words, the opportunities which the Argentinians had of supporting and encouraging each other, but left unused, tell the opposite story of those that the Icelanders had of celebrating the “small wins.” In part, this difference lies in individual agency and different team cultures.



**Picture 3.** Missed opportunities. An Argentinian player looks down to the ground after failed attempt but there are no reactions from his teammate, illustrating the social distances within the team (screenshot from [www.ruv.is](http://www.ruv.is). Retrieved August 10, 2018 from: <http://www.ruv.is/sjonvarp/spila/hm-2018-i-fotbolta/18198>).

Thus, a football match is dynamic in nature. There are triggering events in any sports match which have the potential to turn on the constructive/destructive trajectory of a team in the field of play (positive or negative). Whether, and how, the team responds to these events will depend on the teams’ spirit and the players’ agency. I argue that in healthy teams, players show character, leadership and agency in order to turn on the forces that will help them to pull through adversity,

for instance, in contrast to unhealthy teams where players act by themselves, inattentive to such actions. Such team spirit makes a team something more than the mere sum of its parts and in turn more successful.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper set out to establish a theoretical framework for the analysis of team spirit in sport. More specifically the paper set out to account for how symbolic communication between players on the field of action both characterizes a teams' spirit and also how it builds momentum in the game action, by using a single football match as an example. This particular match, Argentina versus Iceland, is not the main concern of this paper: it only serves as an example of the proposed themes. The topic of the paper is rather how common forms of symbolic communication are utilized for enhancing team spirit during a football match and further how they can be analysed (linking micro with macro-level analysis).

The findings reveal that in this particular match the Icelandic players used symbolic communication, and especially positive gestures, to a greater extent on the field than did the Argentinian players. Thus, one of the main arguments that can be drawn from the findings is that a key factor in why Iceland gained a better result from the game is because the Icelandic team consisted of more productive and emergent team spirit (see Mead, [1934]/2002, 198,329) during the match than did the Argentinian team. The team spirit was exemplified in the Icelandic players' shared use of positive on-the-field symbolic gestures and communication which provided the players with support and encouragement and created recurrent momentum for the Icelandic team in the heat of the game action. By contrast, the Argentinian team lacked such team spirit in the match where the Argentinian players' did not show such player agency; symbolizing the social distance within the team which led to a disappointing result.

Since the topic of symbolic communication in regard to team spirit has not been analysed to any extent in the current literature this paper is considered a starting point, intended to open up a new field of inquiry of taken-for-granted gestures by analysing on-the-field team sport

performance. It is neither a holistic account of symbolic communication in football nor a fully developed analysis of the elements noted (team spirit and symbolic communication in sport). For instance this paper first and foremost accounts for the use of physical gestures in a sporting match but does not account for the use of facial or postural expressions to any extent. This paper further does not account for team spirit outside the game action, such as in training, meetings or at social gatherings of the teams' players. This paper further only analysed one match of the teams and did not account for how those teams act in general. Hopefully, however, the paper has raised important issues for further research along these lines. There are many possible routes for further examination of symbolic communication in sports to follow. Further research into this area should analyse more games, from different nations and cultures, and correlate findings with performance—as shown in winning and losing records—and addresses the influence of the different socio-cultural contexts of teams and situational aspects of sporting contests. Further research should further account for the use of facial and postural expressions in sporting contests. There are some fine recent examples of such analysis by Kraus et al., (2010), Moesch et al. (2015) and Pellicier (2013), and it is to be hoped that more scholars will follow and provide sport practitioners with a more thorough understanding of the role of symbolic communication and on-the-field team spirit in sport.

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