

**National sport success and the emergent social atmosphere:  
The case of Iceland**

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# **National sport success and the emergent social atmosphere: The case of Iceland**

## **Abstract**

Iceland attracted international attention when its national football team qualified for the 2018 Men's World Cup. This surprise qualification made Iceland the smallest nation to qualify in the 88-year history of the prestigious competition. During the World Cup, life in Iceland seemed to center on the Icelandic team and attract interest and attention from every Icelander. But how widespread was the national interest in Iceland's participation and did the inclusion of Iceland in the competition have any positive social/psychological impact on individuals and/or Icelandic society? Questionnaire data from a sample of the Icelandic population show that there was general interest among Icelanders in the participation of the Icelandic team in the World Cup. The findings further show that Iceland's participation positively affected the mood of Icelanders and created a positive atmosphere among the Icelandic nation, at least for the short term.

**Key words:** Sport achievement, social atmosphere, national pride, Icelandic national teams, football World Cup.

## Introduction

*The imagined community of millions seem more real as a team of eleven*

Eric Hobsbawm (1992, 143).

Sports play an important role in most modern societies. Figures of sport participation are historically higher than ever before, sports are a popular entertainment and in many societies sports have been associated with substantial economic impact and public health benefits (Coakley, 2006; Guttman, 2007; Þórlindsson et al., 2015). Sports also have an important role in the integration of individuals into society where, through sport team identification, individuals develop a heightened sense of belonging, as being part of something larger than themselves. It can be argued that the importance of this integrative function of sports is particularly important nowadays due to increased individualism in modern society, the decay of traditional institutions (such as religion and the nuclear family), and the emergence of non-linear media, which is in most cases based on solitary experiences (Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Livingstone, 2007). Sport can, in this respect, be seen to help communities to counteract the increased alienation of contemporary society by its ability of strengthening citizens' perception of "imagined communities" (see Anderson, 1983). Sporting contests can, in this sense, provide citizens with a mutual focus, establish shared pasts and identities and increase opportunities for communication (see: Farberman, 2019, 9-14; Giulianotti, 2005, 1-5; Halldorsson, 2017; Katovich and Couch, 1992; Kuper, 2006).

In the summer of 2018, the Icelandic men's national football team wrote its name in the sports history books by becoming the smallest nation to qualify for the football World Cup. Two years earlier, the team had emerged at highest international level in sports by qualifying for the European Championship finals by reaching the quarter finals of the competition. This achievement stunned the football world. The Icelandic supporters further caught the world's attention when they performed the synchronized and powerful Viking Clap (or *the Húh!*) at games — the Viking Clap has since become a popular fad all over the world, from the U.S. to Iran. Thus, the on-the-field success of the Icelandic football team and the captivating atmosphere of the Icelandic supporters, suddenly put tiny Iceland—with a population of 340,000—in the news headlines all over the world (Júlíusson, 2015; Mbl.is, 2016c).

The appearance of Iceland at the major football competitions did not only attract attention abroad but consumed Icelandic society. Some figures estimate that over 70% of the Icelandic population

watched Icelandic games at the World Cup live on television, with 99.6% of Icelanders, who had their televisions turned on when the games were aired, watching the games (ruv.is, 2018a); the main traffic streets in Reykjavik (the capital) were almost vacant while Iceland played at the World Cup (Hilmarsdóttir, 2018); shops and institutions closed prematurely on game days so staff could go home and watch the games (ruv.is, 2018b); numerous Icelanders followed the team to France and/or Russia to support them during games (mbl.is, 2016a); sales of the Icelandic team jersey and other team merchandise multiplied (mbl.is, 2016b); and more than the 20 first minutes of the state news broadcast were devoted to Iceland's first game against Argentina on the eve of the game (ruv.is, 2018c). Thus, it can be argued that Iceland's participation in major football competitions in recent years has captivated the Icelandic nation.

But how does a national sport achievement influence the mood of its citizens and the social atmosphere? And have such achievements any impact on the integration of its citizens into society? This paper focuses on the short-term psycho-social effects of the qualification and participation of the men's national football team of Iceland at the 2018 World Cup Finals. On behalf of the author, The Social Science Institute at the University of Iceland conducted a questionnaire survey among the Icelandic population in order to answer the following research questions: 1) How strong was the interest among Icelanders in the men's national football team's participation in the 2018 World Cup?; 2) Did Iceland's participation in the 2018 World Cup affect the individual mood of the Icelanders?; 3) Did Iceland's participation in the 2018 World Cup affect the collective atmosphere in Iceland? The findings from this study can shed important light on the potential role and function of sports in modern societies, as well as on the effects of a particular sport success on the culture of a tiny island nation.

## **Sport and Community**

### *Sport, individual well-being and social integration*

Humans can be identified as a cultural species (Henrich, 2016, 3). It is through culture and the interaction of people, as well as the embeddedness of people within cultures, that the collective brains of humans have gained an evolutionary advantage over other species and made humans rule the world (Henrich, 2016). In turn, as humans we are dependent on belonging to something larger than we are as individuals and therefore we seek to identify ourselves with the collective community. Thus, humans have, in this sense, evolved an addiction to culture (Henrich, 2016, 3).

In his classic account of the role of religion in society Emilé Durkheim (1915/[1965]) argued that religion was ideal for creating a shared base of the traditional society. Religion helps individuals to

gain a sense of common identity and thus build social and moral bonds between citizens, which in turn strengthen *the conscience collective* of a given society (Durkheim, 1915/[1965]). It was through religion that strangers could build and share a similar vision, purpose, understanding and identity. In this respect, religion has historically served an important function of holding societies together (Pescosolido, 1990).

However, in a more secular modern society— characterized by impersonal relationships and the decay of religion and other traditional institutions of society—sports can be seen to serve this integrative function in society to a greater extent (see Farberman, 2019, 9-14). Durkheim even stated that “It is a well known fact that games...seem to have been born of religion” (1915/[1965], 425). Sports both serve a pedagogical role for children and adolescents as a gateway into society (Þórólfur Þórlindsson et al., 1994) and sports are often compared to religion, serving a wider integration role in modern societies where they form shared identities, especially through sport fandom (see: Farberman, 2019, 9-14; Giulianotti, 2005, 1-5; Kuper, 2006). Thus, sports provide citizens with the opportunity to identify themselves with certain teams and belong to something more than they do on a day-to-day basis. Sports, in this context, help people connect with others and temporarily escape from their mundane everyday lives (see Farberman, 2019).

These strong collective sentiments of the masses towards their shared sport teams build on feelings of a shared identity and establish a common vision of what is important in the eyes of the group (Goffman, 1974). Such sentiments kindle a positive and energetic social atmosphere which spreads through social networks by behavioral contagion (see Brekhus, 2015; Christakis and Fowler, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; McLean, 2017). This emergent and energetic atmosphere provides a common platform for the citizens, through ranks and classes, and builds social capital around sporting events (Halldorsson, 2017; see also: Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) which serves both individuals and groups. Research has shown how such identification to sport teams can: increase individual and collective well-being (Berument and Yucel, 2005; Meannig, 2008; Wann and Weaver, 2009; Wann, et al., 2011); enhance collective sentiments and feelings of togetherness (Halldorsson, 2017; Sullivan, 2018; Wann, 2006; Wann and Weaver, 2009); and exercise a positive impact on self-identity and pride (Elling, Hilvoorde and Vad Den Dool, 2014; Halldorsson, 2017; Hirt, et al., 1992; Sullivan, 2018; Wann 2006). These findings have support in neurology where through such collective stimuli the brain produces the neuropeptide *oxytocin* which enhances trust, cooperation and feelings of togetherness (De Dreu, 2012; Ma, et al., 2014).

The largest global sport events, such as the football World Cup, are in this sense ideal means to enhance individual well-being and boost community togetherness and national pride. Such events build on competition against opponents (*us versus them*) and take place at a particular time, in a particular historical and cultural context which facilitates the cohesion of citizens to worship what Durkheim would identify as common *totems* (Durkheim, 1915/[1965]; see also: Giulianotti, 2005, 5). Totemism in this sense forms a collective energy of *the clan* (the group) which fosters identity, community and feelings of belonging. National sport teams thus come to represent the sacred, where the team jersey, the logo, the flag and the national anthem unite the masses (as a clan) around a specific team (see Birrell, 1981). Such sport team support further builds on the application of common rituals and symbols which provide collective framing and boost shared sentiments among citizens (Cottingham, 2012; Goffman, 1974). Individuals are, therefore, transported through a collective energy, from their profane and mundane realities to a more sacred existence in social gatherings. As Durkheim argued: “Since neither men nor nature have of themselves a sacred character, they must get it from another source” (1915/[1965], 107). Under such circumstances, citizens can easily unite behind “their team”. Sport contests can in this respect come to resemble an emotional rollercoaster where people engage in the on-the-field game action, hold their breath, curse the referee and hug a complete stranger supporting the same team (Sullivan, 2018). The clan, in such cases, is composed of individuals who feel united by bonds of kinship, almost as if they belonged to a single family (Durkheim, 1915/[1965], 122).

In other words, a positive and constructive collective atmosphere can develop through sports fandom which transports enthusiasm, increases individual well-being, unites citizens and enhances their level of communication and collective sentiments — as is common in religion (Birrell, 1981; Durkheim, 1915/[1965]). The team thus becomes a symbol of the collective representation of a particular community, where such collective team identification forms a kind of *social electricity* which ignites sparks in everyone associated within that particular community (Durkheim, 1915/[1965], 247).

### *Sport and National Identity*

National sport team success can affect national identity in various ways. At the macro level, national sport successes can provide nations with a positive and favorable image, resulting in strengthened belief and trust in the nation, increased tourism, business opportunities and various other financial, cultural and ideological gains (Maguire, 1999). Many nations thus devote huge resources and effort to helping establish national sport success, often with a favorable outcome (De Bosscher, et al., 2008). International sport success can thus create and/or strengthen shared

ideas which suggest that a particular society is healthy and effective (Coakley, 2006, 474-481; Guttmann, 2006). For instance, China recently started to build the infrastructure of football with the intention of staging successful national teams in the near future (Sullivan, Chadwick and Gow, 2019). According to this ideology a global superpower like China has to have a good national football team, rising to its expectations (Delgado and Villar, 2018).

The potential benefits of sport success at the international sports scene does not only apply to the world's superpowers who compete for the gold medals, it also applies to the small nations—the underdogs. For a tiny nation like Iceland qualifying for a major international sport competition can enhance the nation's prestige and self-worth. Small nations can show the bigger nations that they can as well do well in sports, besides limited resources. They can in this context show that they are nations among nations, which can be trusted and should be taken seriously. Such successes of small nations can increase their respect and provide attention on those small communities, which generally are not prominent in international discussions. Such attention can in turn foster national pride and strengthen the conscience collective (Durkheim, 1915/[1965]; Shih, et al., 1990; Walton et al., 2003).

It can, furthermore, have different meanings for different nations to participate in big sporting events (see Goffman, 1967, 237-270; 1974). While the big nations aim to win medals at the top international scene, what matters most for small nations is to belong and to show a good performance (Halldorsson, 2017, 65-77). The smallness of Icelandic society, its close kinship relations and the tight social networks of Icelanders, make the performance of the national sport team players particularly important for the Icelandic national spirit and national identity (see Halldorsson, 2017; Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 2019b). In globalized live games, where much is at stake — in what Goffman identified as *fateful situations* (1967, 260) — the culture and values of the Icelanders are reflected in the behavior and character of Icelandic players and teams on the field (Birrell, 1981; - see also Archetti, 1999; Halldorsson, 2017; 2018b; Lever, 1983). The national team players are, in this respect, the representatives of the worth of their nations and under such circumstances it is not the results of the sporting contest — whether they win or lose — that matters the most (Fink, Galen and Anderson, 2002) but whether the nation's representatives (the players) behave appropriately and make the folks back home proud by demonstrating bravery and good character (Birrell, 1981; Goffman, 1967, 237-270; Halldorsson, 2017, 65-77; 2018). If the teams succeed in making the nation proud, those teams — and the Icelanders in general — can identify themselves as winners, despite a negative result on the scoreboard. Such representations of collective ideas and values can, in such cases, fuel national sentiment, regardless of whether the

team wins or loses (Halldorsson, 2017, 65-77; see also Goffman, 1967, 237-270). In this context, the players are the products of their communities and representatives of their nations. This particularly applies to tiny nations like Iceland (Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 2019a; 2019b).

The aforementioned research on the positive effects of sport team support, however, provides mixed findings on the long-term effects of positive feelings associated with sport team success (see; Elling, Hilvoorde and Vad Den Dool, 2014; Hallmann, Breuer and Kuhnreich, 2013; Pawlowski, Downard and Rasciute, 2014). Most researchers argue that sport success leads to positive feelings and collective sentiments while the competition lasts but that those effects deteriorate shortly after the competition ends (Elling, Hilvoorde and Vad Den Dool, 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that the participation of nations in major international sporting contests can have detrimental effects on individuals and groups. Kirby, Francis and O’Falherty (2014), for instance, showed how domestic violence increases in England when the men’s football teams participate in top global competitions, whether or not the team is doing well. Thus, sport mega-events can have various effects on nations, both positive and negative.

This paper focuses on the international success of Icelandic men’s football. It is of particular interest to analyze the impact of a major sport achievement such as the Icelandic men’s national team participation in the 2018 Football World Cup. First, because of the historical significance of Iceland’s achievement, becoming the smallest nation to qualify for the World Cup Finals — and the massive global attention that followed this achievement; second, because sports are cultural productions which need to be accounted for in a specific socio-historical context. Therefore the case of a tiny population such as that of Iceland, consisting of only 340,000 people, could result in a different reactions and sentiments than among other/larger nations (Benedict, 1967; Halldorsson, 2017); third, because of the great general interest of the Icelanders in sports (Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson, 2018a; Kuper and Szymanski, 2014, 256-259); fourth, because the Icelanders are rather homogenous in terms of race, class and are not religiously active, which should arguably create stronger collective sentiments in relation to sport achievement than found in some other nations (Halldorsson, 2017); and fifth, because such analysis of the achievement of a tiny nation is somewhat missing in the literature. Thus, the following analysis of the impact on the Icelanders of their country’s participation in the 2018 football World Cup, has the potential to expand our knowledge on the effects of a national team’s sport success, given the level of achievement and attention this particular case evoked.

## Methods

The Social Science Institute at the University of Iceland conducted a probability-based netpanel questionnaire survey, based on the authors' questionnaire, representing the Icelandic population (the netpanel was adjusted to reflect the population of Iceland in terms of gender, age, residence, education and family income)<sup>1</sup>. The survey focused on whether the respondents had followed the Icelandic games at the 2018 World Cup and whether there were some individual and/or collective psycho-sociological effects associated with the competition. The data was collected from 2 July to 16 August 2018. The survey pool was 1900 members of a netpanel of the Social Science Institute who represent the Icelandic population. 934 responded to the survey, or a participation rate of 49.2%.

### *Variables and analysis*

First. The interest of the Icelanders in the 2018 World Cup was measured with two variables: A) the question: *How much or little did you follow the Icelandic national football team at the 2018 World Cup in Russia?* The variable was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from *very much* to *very little or nothing*; B) The question: *Did you make the trip to any of the following international football competitions?* B1) *Did you make the trip to Russia to watch the Icelandic men's national team play in the 2018 World Cup finals?* B2) *Did you make the trip to Holland to watch the Icelandic women's national team play at the 2017 European Championship?* B3) *Did you make the trip to France to watch the Icelandic men's national team play at the 2016 European Championship?* Binary answer options for each question consisted of *no* or *yes*. The computed variable from the three questions was coded =0 for those that did not attend any of the competitions, and =1 for those that attended some of the aforementioned competitions.

A further question concerning the main reasons why respondents attended games with the national teams in the competitions was a multiple response question with the following answer options: *I have a strong interest in football; Because of national pride; I wanted to experience the social atmosphere; Friends or family members were going; A relative or friend was playing, I received an invitation; Other reasons, which?* The respondents could select up to three answer options.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was implemented using a random sample from the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) Online Panel administered by the SSRI at the University of Iceland. The SSRI Online Panel is a probability based panel based on simple random samples drawn from the National Population Register provided by Registers Iceland. The sample was stratified by gender, age and residence to reflect the composition of the Icelandic population in the best possible way (population information was acquired from Statistics Iceland). The target population is the general population aged 18 and above. Numerous studies have shown that data from probability-based online panels — as conducted in this study — are on par with probability-based studies via telephone- and face-to-face surveys (see: Yeager, et al., 2011; Revilla and Saris, 2012; Blom, Gathmann and Krieger, 2015).

In addition, the survey further attempted to test for the respondent's associations with the Icelandic football scene with two questions: a) *How many players do you know personally in the men's football national team?* The question was measured on a 5-point ordinal scale with answer options from *none* to *6 players or more*. B) *How many games have you attended in either of the top two divisions in the Icelandic men's or women's league this summer (2018)?* The question was measured on a 5-point ordinal scale with answer options from *none* to *10 games or more*.

Second. With regard to measuring the psycho-social effects associated with the 2018 World Cup the respondents were asked both about the individual effect of the competition and the perceived effect the competition had on others. How the 2018 World Cup affected the respondents at individual level, was measured on a 5-point statement scale from *I strongly agree* to *I strongly disagree*. Eight statements accompanied the introduction: When the Icelandic men's football team plays at major international competitions: a) *I have a better social relationship with others*; b) *it increases my well-being*; c) *I experience more stress*, d) *I forget daily worries*, e) *I feel more self-confident*, f) *life is better*, g) *I feel I belong to the same team as the people around me*, h) *I am filled with national pride*. The questions appeared in random order. The eight questions were computed into a scale termed *Positive Mood* ( $\alpha=.83$ ) (the answer option for *c* was inverted). The scale was recoded as a three-item variable as 1= high, 2= medium, 3= low.

How the 2018 World Cup were perceived to affect people around the respondents, at a collective level, was measured on a 5-point statement scale from *I strongly agree* to *I strongly disagree*. Eight statements accompanied the introduction: When the Icelandic men's football team plays at major international competitions: a) *Icelanders show more compassion*; b) *Icelanders act more friendly* c) *Icelanders are happier*, d) *Icelanders are more helpful*, e) *Icelanders become filled with nationalistic sentiments* f) *Icelandic society becomes too focused on football*. The questions appeared in random order. Questions *a - d* were computed into a scale termed *Positive Atmosphere* ( $\alpha=.87$ ). The scale was recoded as a three-item variable as 1= high, 2= medium, 3= low. Questions *e* and *f* represent *Critical Atmosphere* and were used individually to measure the downside of the social atmosphere around the competition.

The background questions used in the analysis were: gender (1=men, 2=women); age (1=18-29 years, 2=30-44 years, 3=45-59 years, 4=60 year old or older); *residence* (1=capital area, 2=other); children in the household (0=no children, 1=children); *education* (1=primary level; 2=secondary level, 3=university degree); and *family income* (1=400,000 ISK or less, 2=401-600,000 ISK, 3=601-900,000 ISK, 4=901-1100,000 ISK., 5=1101-1500,000 ISK, 6= 1,5 million ISK or more).

**Table 1.** Descriptions of key variables.

	Mean	Std.Deviation	Range	N
<i>Background variables</i>				
Sex	1.5	0.5	1-2	934
Age	2.59	1.072	1-4	934
Residence	1.37	.482	1-2	932
Children in family household	0.41	.493	0-1	909
Education	2.04	.781	1-3	894
Family income	3.10	1.584	1-6	733
<i>Interest in national teams</i>				
How much or little did you follow the games of the Icelandic men's national football team at the 2018 World Cup in Russia?	2.14	1.303	1-5	932
Did you attend any of the following football competitions?				
Men's World Cup in Russia in 2018	.02	.147	0-1	929
Women's European Championship Finals in Holland in 2017	.01	.100	0-1	923
Men's European Championship Finals in France in 2016	.06	.243	0-1	926
What are your main reasons for attending some of those competitions?				
I wanted to experience the atmosphere	.76	.430	0-1	70
I take a strong interest in football	.59	.495	0-1	70
Friends/family members were going	.36	.483	0-1	70
Because of national pride	.29	.455	0-1	70
I was invited to the tournament	.16	.371	0-1	70
Relative/friend plays for the team	.04	.186	0-1	70
Other	.07	.263	0-1	70
How many players do you personally know in the men's national team?	1.22	.664	1-5	932
How many football games have you attended in the top two divisions (men's or women's) this summer (2018)?	1.36	.913	1-5	931
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? When the Icelandic Men's Football team plays in football competitions:				
<i>(Positive Mood)</i>				
I am filled with national pride	2.17	1.106	1-5	896
I feel like I belong to the community	2.46	1.191	1-5	890
It increases my well-being	2.77	1.169	1-5	889
Life gets better	2.82	1.194	1-5	892
I have better relationships with others	3.02	1.084	1-5	889
I forget everyday worries	3.20	1.208	1-5	890
I feel increased self-confidence	3.27	1.062	1-5	889
I feel more stress	3.61	1.168	1-5	888
<i>(Positive Atmosphere)</i>				
Icelanders are generally happier	2.08	.856	1-5	894
Icelanders show more compassion	2.25	.907	1-5	897
Icelanders act more friendly	2.43	.858	1-5	886
Icelanders are more helpful	2.71	.875	1-5	894
<i>(Critical Atmosphere)</i>				
Society is too focused on football	2.78	1.295	1-5	897
Icelanders become filled with national arrogance	2.47	1.183	1-5	879

The statistical analysis is, on the one hand, based on descriptive statistics and, on the other hand, on statistical correlations and regression analysis.

## Results

### *How interested were the Icelanders in the team's participation in the 2018 World Cup?*

The findings confirm strong interest in the Icelandic team's participation, as indicated above (see page 1). Over 91% of the Icelandic population followed Iceland's games on television, where around 71% followed the team's games extensively, 20% somewhat, and around 9% did not follow the team's games at the competition.

A regression analysis of Icelanders' interest in the team's games at the World Cup suggests that the interest was general. In other words, it can be argued that the Icelandic population as a whole was interested in Iceland's participation. There was no statistical difference according to tradition or background variables, such as gender, age, residence or levels of education (Table 2). It must be noted, however, that the regression model only explains 10% of the variance in the dependent variable; it is of particular interest, however, that no significant difference was noted on key variables. In other words, interest in the games was widespread among women and men, younger and older, among people in urban and rural areas and among people with different levels of education. It was, however — unsurprisingly — those who took most interest in the sport of football, those who had attended football games in Iceland ( $b=-.227$ ) and those who personally knew a player on the team ( $b=-.112$ ), who were most likely to watch TV broadcasts featuring the Icelandic team. Besides, a weak correlation was found between interest in the competition and family income; those with lower incomes were somewhat more likely to watch than those with higher family incomes ( $b=-.093$ ).

**Table 2.** Regression analysis of interest in Iceland's participation at the 2018 World Cup.\*

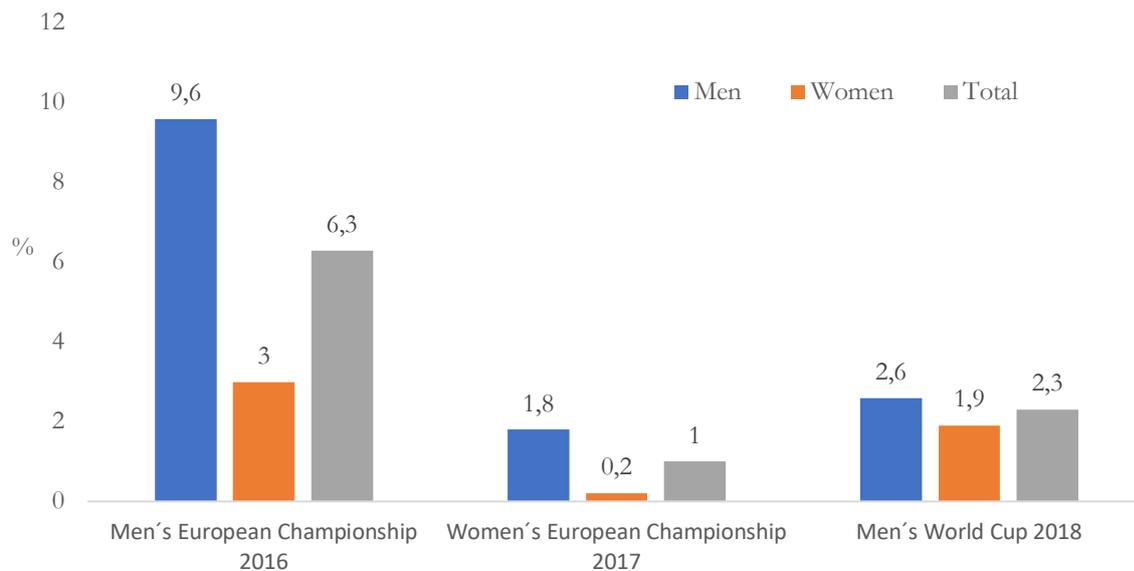
	Followed Iceland at World Cup*					
	B*	St.Error	t	P.	Lower	Upper
Constant		.240	11.711	.000	2.339	3.281
Gender	-.035	.061	-.926	.355	-.175	.063
Age	-.076	.031	-1.816	.070	-.116	.005
Residence	.018	.060	.481	.631	-.089	.146
Children in the family household	-.063	.038	-1.641	.101	-.138	.012
Education	-0.59	.067	-1.407	.160	-.226	.037
Family income	-.093	.020	-2.316	.021*	-.087	-.007
Knows players in team	-.112	.083	-3.050	.002**	-.416	-.090
Attended football games in Iceland	-.227	.076	-6.122	.000**	-.614	-.316

Explanation: \*  $R^2 = .104$ , VIF: 1.059-1.380, Tol. <0.1.

In terms of interest in Iceland's participation at the 2018 World Cup the the data further shows that around 2.6% of the adult population of Iceland followed their team to Russia where they attended games with the Icelandic team (Figure 1). This figure is, however, much lower than at the European Championship in 2016 where over 6% of the Icelanders followed the team to France.

By comparison, around 1% of the adult population followed the women’s team when it played in the European Championship in Holland in 2017.

**Figure 2.** The percentage of respondents who attended games with the Icelandic teams at any of the following competitions: 2018 Men’s World Cup; 2017 Women’s European Championship; 2016 Men’s European Championship – by gender.



Further analysis (not in the figure) showed that those who had attended a football match in Iceland were more likely to attend a national team game abroad than those who had not attended a football match in Iceland ( $r=0.35^{**}$ ). Likewise, those who knew players on the teams were more likely to attend games than those who did not ( $r=0.14^{**}$ ). Those who had a higher family income were also more likely to follow the team abroad than those with a lower family income ( $r=0.19^{**}$ ) as did those with higher education ( $r=0.15^{**}$ ). Finally, men were more likely to follow the teams abroad than did women ( $r=0.13^{**}$ )<sup>2</sup>. In comparison the results further show that Icelandic men were somewhat more likely to have had attended a football match in Iceland in the summer of 2018 than did women ( $r=-.11^{**}$ ).

In addition, the survey participants were asked — via multiple response questions where they could select up to three options — which were the main reasons why they had attended Iceland’s games at international competitions. Three out of every four participants (76%) indicated that they wanted to live the atmosphere of the competition. Around 60% took a strong interest in football,

<sup>2</sup> Due to lack of distribution in the dependent variable a regression analysis was not conducted.

over one third because their friends or families were going, around 29% because of national pride, around 16% because they were invited to the competitions and around 3.5% because they had friends or family members who were playing for Iceland. Approximately 7% stated some other reason.

Interestingly, only 60% of those who followed Icelandic national teams to play in major competitions abroad indicated that they were highly interested in football (as one of the three main reasons for attending the games). Thus, it can be argued that four out of every ten Icelanders who followed the team had no a specific interest in football but attended those games for other reasons; mainly that they wanted to experience the atmosphere and/or be with family and friends.

#### *The Effect of Iceland's Participation at the 2018 World Cup on Individual Moods and the Social Atmosphere in Iceland*

As stated above, most of the Icelanders who attended games with the Icelandic teams at major international competitions did so to experience the atmosphere. But how did the Icelanders in general perceive the atmosphere around the 2018 World Cup? Participants in the survey were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with various statements regarding their personal experience of the competition and how they experienced the behavior of others.

First, at the individual level, around 70% of the respondents confirmed that they were filled with national pride when watching the Icelandic team play at the World Cup (Table 3). Just over 61% further confirmed that they perceived a feeling of belonging to the community. Around 44% felt increased well-being and around 40% regarded life as better during the championship than normally. Around 30% sensed that they were better connected to the people around them, 28% forgot their daily worries, and 18% felt more self-confident during the competition than normally do. However around 17% on the other hand felt more stress during the competition than normally. The respondents who indicated that they disagreed the most with the aforementioned statements were those who did not suffer more stress (50.6%), forget daily worries (35.3%) or experience more self-confidence (35.3%).

Second, the results further suggest that Iceland's participation in the World Cup was experienced positively at the collective level, as the respondents felt a more positive attitude from others during the competition than they would normally experience. Three out of every four respondents (76%) felt that Icelanders were more joyful during the World Cup and 65% felt that Icelanders showed more compassion during the competition than normally (Table 3). Over half of the respondents

further experienced a more positive attitude from others who were more friendly (55%) and furthermore helpful (35.8%) during the competition than normally. However, the results also suggest that a majority of the respondents was also critical of the collective atmosphere around the competition where around two thirds of the respondents (66%) felt that Icelandic society was too focused on football during the competition and well over half of the respondents (56%) felt that the Icelanders had become filled with national arrogance. The respondents who indicated the strongest disagreement with the aforementioned statements of the social atmosphere were those who did not think the Icelandic society was too focused on football (32%) and that Icelanders were filled with nationalistic arrogance (around 21%). Furthermore, only 5-12% of the respondents disagreed with statements that the Icelanders were more joyful, compassionate and helpful when attending important sports events.

**Table 3.** The perceived Individual Mood and Collective Atmosphere in Iceland around the 2018 World Cup.

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
<i>Positive Mood</i>		
I am filled with national pride	70,1	11,5
I feel like I belong to the community	60,8	15,7
It increases my well-being	43,6	19,7
Life gets better	39,0	20,9
I have better relationships with others	29,9	23,1
I forget everyday worries	27,9	35,3
I feel increased self-confidence	17,6	30,0
I feel more stress	17,4	50,6
<i>Positive Atmosphere</i>		
Icelanders are generally happier	75,4	5,2
Icelanders show more compassion	65,0	6,8
Icelanders act more friendly	55,1	7,4
Icelanders are more helpful	35,8	12,0
<i>Critical Atmosphere</i>		
Icelanders become filled with national arrogance	56,3	20,8
Society is too focused on football	65,7	31,7

A regression analysis (see Table 4) showed that the perceived positive individual experience of the World Cup was mainly confined to those who took interest in Iceland's participation and followed the competition rather than those who did not ( $b=.526$ ). People who live outside of the capital area were also somewhat more likely than people in the capital area to experience positive individual effects of the competition ( $b=-.070$ ). On the other hand, those who stated that society was too focused on football were less likely to experience the positive mood of the competition ( $b=-.196$ ). Table 4 further shows that those who followed the competition were more likely to experience a positive atmosphere from the competition than those who did not follow the

competition. ( $b=.413$ ). Women were also more likely to experience a positive atmosphere than did men ( $b=-.168$ ).

**Table 4.** Regression analysis on the *Positive Mood* and *Positive Atmosphere* of Iceland's participation at the 2018 World Cup\*

<i>Positive Mood*</i>	B*	Std.Error	t	P.	Lower	Upper
Constant		1.822	22.888	.000	38.133	45.290
Gender	-.044	.451	-1.399	.162	-1.515	.255
Age	.034	.231	.995	.320	-.223	.682
Residence	-.070	.446	-2.307	.021*	-1.907	-.153
Children in the family household	.010	.488	.281	.779	-.821	1.096
Education	-.025	.286	-.787	.432	-.787	.337
Family income	-.022	.152	-.647	.518	-.398	.201
Knows players in the national team	-.048	.631	-1.558	.120	-2.222	.256
Attended football games in Iceland	.021	.603	.634	.526	-.902	1.568
Attended games in int.competitions	-.038	.845	-1.192	.234	-2.668	.652
Followed the World Cup	.526	.184	15.631	.000**	2.510	3.232
Ice. showed nationalistic arrogance	-.049	.202	-1.513	.131	-.702	.091
Society is too much about football	-.196	.196	-5.667	.000**	-1.499	-.728
<i>Positive atmosphere**</i>						
Constant		.853	17.605	.000	13.345	16.696
Gender	-.168	.212	-4.575	.000**	-1.388	-.555
Age	-.077	.108	-1.928	.054	-.420	.004
Residence	.060	.209	1.708	.088	-.053	.768
Children in the family household	-.033	.230	-.848	.397	-.648	.257
Education	0.35	.134	.261	.795	-.228	.298
Family income	-.051	.071	-.721	.471	-.191	.089
Knows players in the national team	-.049	.296	-1.356	.176	-.983	.180
Attended football games in Iceland	.004	.284	.094	.925	-.530	.585
Attended games in int.competitions	-.039	.397	-1.065	.287	-1.203	.357
Followed the World Cup	.413	.085	10.622	.000**	.740	1.076
Ice. showed nationalistic arrogance	.064	.092	-1.730	.084	-.021	.339
Society is too much about football	-.053	.090	-1.335	.182	-.296	.056

Explanation:\*  $R^2= .392$ , VIF: 1.060-1.399, Tol. <0.1.

Explanation:\*\*  $R^2= .204$ , VIF: 1.055-1.369, Tol. <0.1

Finally, analysis of the critical attitudes around the competition in Iceland, that Icelandic society was too focused on football and the Icelanders were filled with national arrogance, showed that there was a strong positive relationship between the two variables ( $r=0.34**$ ). A regression analysis (Table 5) further shows that it were mainly those who did not follow the World Cup ( $b=.363$ ), nor had attended football games in Iceland ( $b=.146$ ), as well as those who personally know national team players ( $b=.340$ ), that felt that Icelandic society was too focused on football. Similarly, it were those who did not attend games at international competitions ( $b=.395$ ), nor football games in Iceland ( $b=.118$ ), or the World Cup ( $b=.080$ ), as well as those who personally know national team players ( $b=.163$ ) who felt that Icelanders showed national arrogance. Men were also more likely to

be critical of national arrogance than did women ( $b=.205$ ) as did those with lower levels of education ( $b=.122$ ) (the regression model for national arrogance however only explains 7% in the independent variable).

**Table 5.** Regression analysis on the *Critical Atmosphere* of Iceland's participation at the 2018 World Cup\*

<i>Too much football*</i>	B*	Std.Error	t	P.	Lower	Upper
Constant		.315	11.239	.000	2.926	4.165
Gender	.028	.094	.297	.767	-.157	.213
Age	-.013	.028	-.454	.650	-.068	.043
Residence	-.021	.027	-.805	.421	-.073	.031
Children in the family household	.141	.103	1.367	.172	-.061	.343
Education	.039	.060	.645	.519	-.079	.157
Family income	.050	.031	1.579	.115	-.012	.111
Knows player/s in the national team	-.340	.064	-5.292	.000**	-.466	-.214
Attended football games in Iceland	.146	.049	2.956	.000**	.049	.242
Attended games in int.competitions	.142	.172	.827	.409	-.196	-.481
Followed the World Cup	-.363	.035	10.291	.000**	-.432	-.294
<i>National arrogance**</i>						
Constant		.312	7.149	.000	1.619	2.845
Gender	.205	.093	2.202	.028*	.022	.388
Age	-.046	.028	-1.629	.104	-.101	.009
Residence	-.024	.026	-.913	.361	-.076	.028
Children in the family household	-.028	.101	-.279	.780	-.227	.171
Education	.122	.059	2.066	.039*	.006	.238
Family income	-.032	.031	1.044	.297	-.029	.093
Knows player/s in the national team	-.163	.066	-2.460	.014*	-.294	-.033
Attended football games in Iceland	.118	.049	2.402	.017*	.021	.214
Attended games in int.competitions	.395	.172	2.291	.022*	-.149	-.012
Followed the World Cup	-.080	.035	-2.298	.022*	-.149	-.012

Explanation:\*  $R^2= .202$ , VIF: 1.069-1.399, Tol. <0.1.

Explanation:\*\*  $R^2= .070$ , VIF: 1.060-1.384, Tol. <0.1

## Discussion

The results show that the Icelanders placed great interest in the participation of it's men's national team at the 2018 World Cup (research question 1). The results further show that — even though the Icelandic team did not do particularly well at the World Cup, with one draw and two defeats — considerable positive individual and collective psycho/social effects were associated with Iceland's participation at the competition (research questions 2 and 3 respectively), at least for the short term, as well as some critical attitudes on the atmosphere around the World Cup. These findings correspond with former research which has showed that sport achievement can be associated with positive social atmosphere, benefitting both individuals and society (see: Elling, Hilvoorde & Vad Den Dool, 2014; Farberman, 2019; Hirt, o.fl., 1992; Ma, o.fl., 2014; Meannig, 2008; Sullivan, 2018; Wann 2006; Wann & Weaver, 2009; Wann, o.fl., 2011).

Interestingly the results from this study, firstly show that the interest in Iceland's participation at the FIFA World Cup was not confined to football fans, but it was common among the general population of Icelanders, across genders, age, residence and levels of education. Women were, for instance, as interested in following the competition as did men. The interest of women in the competition is particularly noteworthy since football fandom is predominantly considered as a male domain (Pfister, Lenneis & Mintert, 2013). However, as Meier and Leinwather (2012) have for instance noted when the German national team play live football on television, German women tend to follow the men in watching. This also seems to be the case in Iceland. According to the results Icelandic men show somewhat a more general interest in football as a sport than women, and men were further more likely to follow the national teams playing abroad, however Icelandic women were as interested as men in following the games of the Icelandic team at the World Cup and women were even more likely to experience a positive attitude from others, and less likely to experience national arrogance, than did men during the World Cup. It is important to bear in mind that Iceland has regularly topped the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index in recent years, which further shows in terms of gender equality in Icelandic sports (World Economic Forum, 2018). Thus, sports are not only a male domain in Iceland and women's participation in sport —such as in football — has been steadily increasing in recent years, closing the gap on men (Halldorsson, 2018). Thus, Icelandic women seem to be as interested in sports as Icelandic men to some level, they are however less likely to attend games as the results show.

Second, the results further indicate that despite the general interest of Icelanders in the World Cup, and the positive individual and collective sentiments associated with the competition, majority of the respondents, on the one hand, felt life in Iceland was too focused on football during the

competition and, on the other hand, that Icelanders had been filled with too much nationalistic arrogance during the competition. These findings may appear contradictory to the main finding of the paper, where the Icelanders seem to have shown general interest and pride in Iceland's participation. However, as the results suggest, it were mainly those who do not have substantive interest in football who were critical of the atmosphere around the competition – a group that is sometimes labelled *'the anti-sportist'* in the Icelandic discourse. These results can, however, further be interpreted as a warning of the dangerous nationalistic arrogance which can accompany such sporting successes (see Reich, 2019; Thórisdóttir and Karólínudóttir, 2014) as the majority of the respondents were critical of some of the elements in the atmosphere around the World Cup, such as in terms of national arrogance associated with Iceland's football success. It is relevant, in this respect, to place Iceland's participation in the 2018 World Cup in a socio-historical context where it can be argued that the scepticism of the Icelanders of those nationalistic sentiments, which arose during the competition, were due to the national embarrassment the nation faced in its infamous 2008 economic meltdown. The international economic expansion of Iceland in the mid 2000's was considered a great success, led by the adventurous Icelandic *Business Vikings*. This "success" was interpreted in highly nationalistic terms in Iceland, which got manifested in the social discourse as result of a special characteristic of the Icelanders (Loftsdóttir, 2015, 9, see also Durrenberger & Pálsson, 2015; Pálsson & Guðbjörnsson, 2011, 138; Thórisdóttir & Karólínudóttir, 2014). However, as was eventually revealed in aftermath of the 2008 economic meltdown in Iceland, the causes of the meltdown were predominantly due to the nationalistic arrogance and recklessness of the nation's representatives (and former heroes), *the Business Vikings*. The recent collective memory of the nation's embarrassment of having attributed the economic "success" to Icelandic superiority leading to the economic meltdown, may have restrained many Icelanders somewhat to produce similar narrative in regard to its football success. Halbwachs has in this respect noted that an important part of a national identity is how societies remember past events (1992). Such instances of collective memories are particularly strong among small and homogenous groups, such as among the Icelanders (see Wieting, 2001). At least some Icelanders (represented by over half of the respondents) may have been aware of not making the same mistake twice. It has indeed been argued that Iceland's football success is not the result of some genetic superiority of the Icelandic race, but rather that due to increased opportunities at international level and the social organization of sport in Iceland, their teams have been able to pull through to the top levels (Halldorsson, 2017). Although the Icelanders can rightly be proud of the nation's sport success in recent years, they should realize that those developments do not make them a superior breed. The past failures of the Icelandic team — in which Iceland was ranked number 131 in the FIFA ranking

in 2012—and the sudden decline of other “small” nations from the international sports scene, should prove the point (see: Telseth and Halldorsson, 2019).

However, as stated above, the experienced individual and collective feelings and sentiments in which the Icelandic experience associated with the football success, are usually short lived. Most research shows that those sentiments vanish as time goes by (Berument & Yucel, 2005; Hallmann, Breuer & Kuhnreich, 2013; Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010; Pawlowski, Downard & Rasciute, 2014). If, however, these positive and collective feelings are reinforced on a regular basis they can manifest in the social consciousness. In the case of Iceland, we can bear in mind that the Icelandic sport teams—in football, team handball and basketball—have been regular contenders at major international sporting competition in the recent decade and thus have regularly made the Icelanders proud (Halldorsson, 2017). The men’s handball team has been most successful through the years, and the team won an Olympic silver medal in 2008 and a European Championship medal in 2010 (Thorlindsson & Halldorsson, 2019a). The major handball competitions are also held in the beginning of January each year and probably have had great impact on the national psyche of the Icelanders in the dark and cold winter months through the years. It can therefore be argued that these positive and collective sentiments are regularly reinforced through the Icelandic sport national teams, which makes sports particularly important for the social atmosphere and the national consciousness of the Icelandic nation.

To sum up, it can be argued from the results of this paper that sports are much more than a game. The results, which confirm the general interest of the Icelanders in the football World Cup, seem to highlight the social and integrative function of such a sport competition for Icelandic society. Moreover, around 40% of those who followed Icelandic national teams to play in major competitions abroad seem not to have a specific interest in football but attended those games for other reasons, mainly because they wanted to experience the positive social and nationalistic atmosphere and/or to be with family and friends. It can, in this context, be argued that sports can now provide some similar functions for society as religion has done in the past; that is to strengthen the social ties of its citizens, across social groups (*the conscience collective*), through national team sports (see Durkheim, 1915/[1965], Giulianotti, 2005, 1-14) — this is especially relevant in a somewhat secular society like Iceland. The results show, in this sense, how a national sport success is associated with its citizens’ sentiments of national identity, national pride and of a sense of belonging to something more meaningful than they usually experience in their mundane everyday lives. Big events like the World Cup foster national identity and national pride and they can remind citizens that they are part of a community, which they do not necessarily sense on a day-to-day

basis (Moffet, 2019). It can further be argued that many of the customary and potential integration moments of collective happenings and experiences of people in any given society are dwindling (Livingstone, 2007) which makes sporting events, such as national team competitions, where people collectively watch and consume live games of their teams, even more important for the collective social life and social integration in society than ever before.

Finally, this research has some limitations in terms of its data and interpretation of the results. First, although the survey was administered to represent the population of Iceland (over the age of 17) it was just short of 1.000 participants. Thus, the results from the survey need to be interpreted cautiously and do not necessarily represent the whole population of Iceland. Second, the survey did not reach those Icelanders aged 17 or younger, who are the most active sport participants in Iceland (Halldorsson, 2018a) and does therefore not account for all Icelanders. Third, the survey was conducted at a single point in time, so it cannot be argued that the positive mood and atmosphere associated with the World Cup is a norm when Icelandic teams play because there are no other measures of this kind available for Icelandic sport. And consequently, the long-term psycho-social effects of Iceland's participation at the World Cup can not be drawn from this analysis, only that Iceland's participation at the 2018 World Cup was associated with a short time positive individual mood and social atmosphere, which were important for individuals and Icelandic society.

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