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Better than my pride is your misfortune: The impact of *schadenfreude* on
decision-making.

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BRUNO FARIAS MENDES

**BETTER THAN MY PRIDE IS YOUR MISFORTUNE: THE IMPACT OF
SCHADENFREUDE ON DECISION-MAKING**

Dissertação apresentada ao Curso de Mestrado em Administração da Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Administração.

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À minha família e a Deus por todo o apoio físico e espiritual ao longo do mestrado. Ao meu orientador pelo sempre empenho, atenção e companheirismo. Às grandes amizades criadas durante o percurso *stricto sensu* que fizeram parte do dia a dia e da construção do conhecimento.

“Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual's goals, motives, or concerns”

Nico Henri Frijda

Abstract

Previous research related to *schadenfreude* has focused on the factors that elicit one's pleasure in another's misfortune. This present research aims to investigate the impact of *schadenfreude* on decision-making. Two studies (one in the lab and one in the field) address the impact of *schadenfreude* about past and future sport events on people's choices. The first study confronts pride feelings from one's favorite team victory against *schadenfreude* feelings from one's rival team loss. The results showed that people preferred to send news about one's favorite team victory (pride) over one's rival team loss (*schadenfreude*) when the outcome of the game displayed small score differences (e.g., favorite team 1 x other 0 vs. rival team 0 x other 1). However, people were as likely to select the *schadenfreude* option (i.e., choose to send the news about the rival team's loss) when the score differences were large (e.g., favorite team 5 x other 0 vs. rival team 0 x other 5). The second study, conducted in the field, examines how *schadenfreude* influences one's willingness to wage against a rival team. To address this issue the participant's team preference is assessed (i.e., whether the participant cheers for the target team versus for a rival team). A praise manipulation is implemented such that the consumers either see or not a praise to the target team when they are making a bet on the outcome of the game. The results show that supporters of the target team were not influenced by the praise manipulation. However, supporters of a rival team increased their probability of betting against the target team (i.e., to display *schadenfreude* behavior) when the target team was praised prior to the game.

Keywords: *Schadenfreude*, Envy, Social Comparison

Resumo

Investigações anteriores relacionadas ao *schadenfreude* concentraram-se nos fatores que provocam o prazer no infortúnio do outro. A presente pesquisa tem como objetivo investigar o impacto do *schadenfreude* na tomada de decisão. Dois estudos (um em laboratório e uma em campo) abordam o impacto do *schadenfreude* em decisões realizadas no passado e no futuro em eventos desportivos. O primeiro estudo confronta sentimentos de orgulho em uma vitória do time favorito contra os sentimentos de perda *schadenfreude* de uma equipe rival. Os resultados mostraram que as pessoas preferiam enviar notícias sobre a vitória da equipe favorita (orgulho) ao invés da perda do time rival (*schadenfreude*) quando as diferenças de pontuação no jogo eram pequenas (por exemplo: time favorito 1 x 0 outro, contra, o time rival 0 x 1 favorito). No entanto, as pessoas eram mais propensas a fazer a escolha *schadenfreude* (por exemplo, escolher o envio de uma notícia sobre a derrota de um time rival) quando o resultado era alto (por exemplo, time favorito 5 x 0 rival, contra, time rival 0 x 5 favorito). O segundo estudo no campo examina como *schadenfreude* influencia a vontade de apostar contra um time rival. Para responder a esse problema, a preferência da equipe do participante é avaliada (Participantes que apoiam time alvo contra os que apoiam o rival). Uma manipulação de louvor é adicionada, tal que os consumidores vejam ou não um elogio à equipe alvo enquanto eles estão fazendo uma aposta sobre o resultado da partida. Os resultados mostram que os torcedores do time alvo não foram influenciados pela manipulação de louvor. No entanto, torcedores do time rival aumentaram sua probabilidade de aposta contra o time alvo (ou seja, mostraram um comportamento que envolve o *schadenfreude*) quando esta foi elogiada antes do jogo.

Palavras-chave: *Schadenfreude*, Inveja, Comparação Social

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1 Introduction

Ireland was out of the World Cup because of a hand goal scored by France striker Thierry Henry. The Irish now seemed to have a lot of reasons to root against France during the World Cup and expected to feel happy to see them eliminated. Aware of this possibility, two companies developed rather unique promotional tactics. One famous pizzeria offered all the Irish consumers free pizzas for each goal that France suffered in the World Cup using the slogan "Pizzas 1, France 0". The other company gave a discount on their TV sets when France was knocked out of the World Cup with the phrase: "When the French lose, the Irish win".

It is not of today that we feel pleased when someone suffers, especially when this emotion is activated by resentment - wish to correct a perceived injustice (Feather & Sherman, 2002) or envy (Smith et al., 1996); both of which commonly experienced in sports context (Leach et al., 2003). Such emotion known as *schadenfreude*, a German term which denotes a feeling of malicious joy about the misfortunes of others, has been exhaustively discussed in the literature (Heider, 1958; Smith et al. 1996; Brigham et al. 1997; Feather and Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach et al., 2003; van Dijk et al., 2005; Takahashi et al., 2009; Sundie et al., 2009; van Dijk et al, 2011). Most research has focused on the potential contextual factors and feelings that lead people to experience *schadenfreude*. However, to the best of our knowledge, no one has studied how this emotion can impact decision-making. The purpose of the current studies is to extend current research by assessing how the experience and anticipation of *schadenfreude* can impact decision making in sports related contexts. In two studies, the current research enterprise investigates (a) which sports news about past game outcomes people are more willing to share with their friends (study 1) and (b) which bets people are more willing to wage prior to a game. As it will become clearer, the results show that *schadenfreude*-eliciting options have a significant impact on people's decisions in both scenarios.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Comparison Theory: where the rivalry arises.

It would not be so nice to root for another team (different team from the one we usually support) if there was not any friend to gloat over. Thus, the theory which bases

this behavior, called Social Comparison, was proposed by Festinger (1954) and was defined by two natures of comparisons, concerning self and others: invidious or upward comparisons when another individual is perceived to be better than the self, and downward comparisons when the other person is perceived to be worse than the self.

Since the theory was developed, an extensive discussion has been established, postulating that individuals routinely evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and possession to others' (e.g. Festinger 1954; Wheeler, 1991). When individuals engage in these comparisons, their perceived relative standing has implications for their self-esteem, and thus emotional consequences (Gilbert et al. 1995; Smith, 2000; Tesser, 2000). In addition, these social comparisons are more likely to have greater impact when they include someone similar than when they involve someone less similar (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, 1991). For instance, Wood and Taylor (1991) suggested that comparisons with dissimilar others are preferred only when the dimensions under evaluations are unfamiliar, and that people prefer to compare with similar others once the parameters are familiar and clearly defined. Along the same lines, van Dijk et al. (2006) stated that envy predicts *schadenfreude* when participants learned about a misfortune of a same gender target, whereas envy did not predict *schadenfreude* when participants learned about a misfortune of a different gender. In other words, what the literature has concluded is that comparisons with those who are better or worse off are sometimes unavoidable, and both advantages and disadvantages happen for upward and downward comparisons (Festinger, 1954).

2.2 Pleasure in another's misfortune: *Schadenfreude*

We generally feel happy when good things happen to others and unhappy when misfortunes befall them. However, sometimes we can also feel good when a bad luck occurs with others (Heider, 1958) and it might happen because every emotion hides a concern (Frijda, 1988).

Since Socrates, who over two thousand and a half years ago (Smith et al., 1996) wondered: "Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortune of friends was caused by envy?"¹, the *schadenfreude* feelings are known and faced by humans every day. It is

¹ Plato (427-348 B.C./1925, p. 339) – Plato. 1(1925). Plato (H.N. Fowler & W.R.M. Lamb, Trans.) New York: Putnam. (Original work published 427-348 B.C.)

hardly observed in others species. That prior hostile feeling could originate from multiple sources. Emerging research in the field of *schadenfreude* supported relations with envy (Feather, 1989, Brigham et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk et al., 2006; Sundie et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2009), anger/hate (Hareli and Weiner, 2002), disliked person (van Dijk et al, 2005), resentment (Feather and Sherman, 2002), and even included importance to the self (Ortony et al., 1988; Leach et al., 2003). The literature has most often focused on the antecedents of *schadenfreude* rather than the consequences of *schadenfreude*-eliciting events. For instance, Smith et al. (1996) conducted a between subjects experiment showing in a videotape a bright student (vs. an average) who was arrested on a drug-related criminal charge and subsequently banned from entering medical school. The authors found that participants felt significantly more *schadenfreude* when an academically superior versus average student suffered the misfortune. Sundie et al. (2009) ran a study in a consumption context finding that *schadenfreude* can be precipitated by factors such as degree of target advantage and flaunting of the status product. Finally, van Dijk and his colleagues (2011) found that people who experience an acute (situational) self-evaluation threat, and therefore have a greater need to protect their self-view, feel more *schadenfreude* than those who do not experience it.

In face of what has been researched, the present study aims to go deep not on the factors antecede *schadenfreude*, but on how current and anticipated *schadenfreude*-eliciting events can affect decision-making.

2.3 The present research

This present research suggests that the experience of *schadenfreude* will influence how people behave in a sports-related decision making scenario. In experiment one, participants are exposed to a situation in which they make a decision between sharing news with their friends about the outcome of a past soccer game. In experiment two, participants are asked to bet on the outcome of future soccer game. In both cases, the possibility of experiencing *schadenfreude* is higher in one condition than in the other. The studies assess the extent to which the possibility of experiencing *schadenfreude* changes people's choices.

3 Experiment 1 – *Schadenfreude* from a past event

3.1 Method

Participants and design. One hundred fifty three individuals (58 women) participated voluntarily in an internet-based survey about soccer. The mean age of the sample was 26.85 years (SD = 6.93). The experiment was a single factor within-subjects design with five treatments (outcome of the game: 1x0 vs. 2x0 vs. 3x0 vs. 4x0 vs. 5x0).

Procedure. The cover story stated that the study was about Rio de Janeiro's soccer teams and that we were interested in knowing how people choose to share news about soccer with their friends in social networks. First, participants informed their interest in soccer in series of questions and indicated their favorite team. They were then asked five questions with two options each. See below a sample of the first question:

"Which of these news articles from an online newspaper are you more inclined to share on a social network?"

___ Fluminense [Participant's Favorite Team] 1 x 0 Bahia [Neutral Team]

___ Flamengo [Rival Team] 0 x 1 Bahia [Neutral Team].

That is, the participant had to choose to share either the news of his/her favorite team victory or that of his/her rival team loss. The same question was repeated four more times, with the increment of 1 score for the winner after each question (i.e., Participant's Favorite Team 2 [3, 4, 5] x 0 Neutral Team vs. Rival Team 0 x 2 [3, 4, 5] Neutral Team).

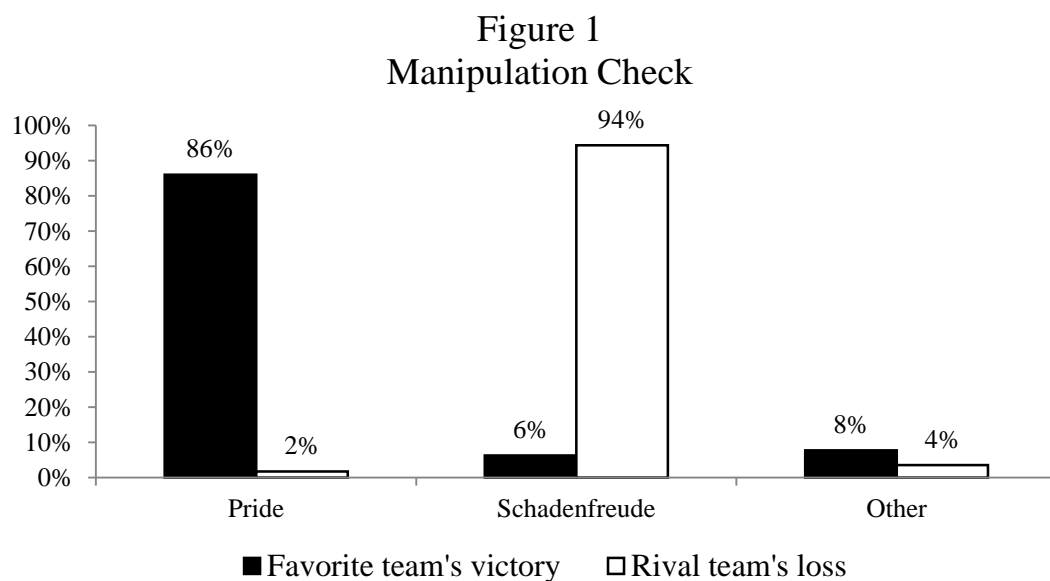
We expected that a rival team's big loss would be more likely to elicit *schadenfreude*, than a rival team's small loss. As a result, people's propensity to choose to send news about a rival team's loss over a favorite team win should increase along with the score differences in the outcome of the games.

After completing this task, participants were presented with each choice made and asked to indicate which emotion best represented what they would feel after sharing the chosen news (Pride vs. Pleasure at another's misfortune vs. Indicate Other). This

measure served as a manipulation check. They then described the intensity of the selected emotion on a numerical rating scale (1=not at all; 5=very much). Age and gender were recorded and participants were thanked for their participation. See exact procedure in Portuguese in the Appendix A.

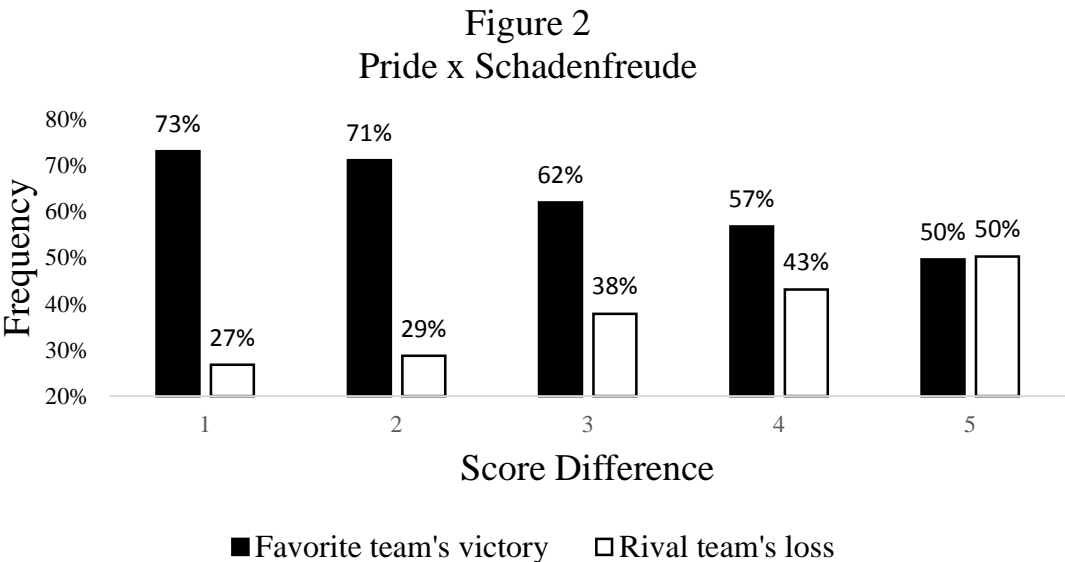
3.2 Results

Manipulation check. To assess the validity of pride and *schadenfreude* dichotomy, we asked participants which emotion best represented the news they chose to share with their friend (pride vs. *schadenfreude* [“prazer de zoar”] vs. other: indicate____). As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of participants who chose to send the favorite team’s victory to a friend, indicated they would experience pride as a result (86%). In the same vein, the vast of participants who chose to send the rival team’s loss to a friend, indicated feeling *schadenfreude* as a result (94%; $\chi^2 (2) = 594.883, p < .0001$).



Pride vs. Schadenfreude. The outcome of the game impacted whether people chose to share with their friend a favorite team’s victory (i.e., pride-eliciting news) or rival team’s loss (i.e., *schadenfreude*-eliciting news). The single factor within subject design with five treatments experiment (outcome of the game: 1x0 vs. 2x0 vs. 3x0 vs. 4x0 vs. 5x0) was analyzed using related-samples Cochran’s Q Test modeling. The results of the analysis showed that the omnibus test was statistically significant ($Q(4, 153) = 54,627, p > .001$). As shown in Figure 2, participants are more likely to send pride-eliciting

news when the score differences in outcome were small (e.g., when the [favorite team won/rival team lost] by one goal). However, participants were as likely to send *schadenfreude*-eliciting news when the score differences in outcome of the games were large (e.g., when the favorite team won/rival team lost by 5 goals).



3.3 Discussion

Study 1 confronted the dichotomy pride and *schadenfreude* leading participants to make conscious decision and changing their willingness to share pride content going straight to malicious pleasure when the *schadenfreude* became more appealing (e.g., rival team's big loss). These results contribute to the enrichment of the literature considering what has been researched, since no one has yet studied how *schadenfreude* changes decision-making.

4 Experiment 2 – *Schadenfreude* from a future event

The second study, conducted in the field, examines how *schadenfreude* influences one's willingness to wage against a rival team. Contrary to experiment 1, in

which the impact of *schadenfreude* was tied to a past event, experiment 2 assesses how *schadenfreude* impacts decision-making tied to a future event. To address this issue, the participant's team preference is assessed (i.e. whether the participant cheers for the target team versus for a rival team) and a praise manipulation is implemented so that the consumers either see or do not a praise to the target team when they are making a bet. The praise manipulation results from the empirical evidence that envy represents one of the potential antecedents of *schadenfreude* (Feather, 1989, Brigham et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk et al., 2006; Sundie et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2009). Thus, praising a rival team is more likely to trigger *schandenfreude* and impact decision making as a result. Precisely, as a result of envy, we expect supporters of rival teams to more frequently bet against the target team when a praise manipulation precedes the wagering decision. For supporters of the target team, the praise manipulation should have no impact, given that supporters should dominantly bet on the target team, independently.

4.1 Method

Participants and design. One hundred twenty four adults (42 women) participated in this experiment. The experiment employed a 2 (target team: fan vs. foe) by 2 (target team praise: yes vs. no) between subjects design.

Procedure. The experiment was conducted in a sports bar in Rio de Janeiro right before an important soccer game in which one of the city's main soccer teams (Fluminense) attempted to advance to the semi-finals of the *Copa Libertadores da America* against Olimpia (from Paraguay). The competition is equivalent to the UEFA Champions League in Europe. None of the other teams from Rio were in the competition. Also, there were no Olimpia fans in the bar. Therefore, those in the sample were either cheering for or against Fluminense, or were indifferent to the outcome.

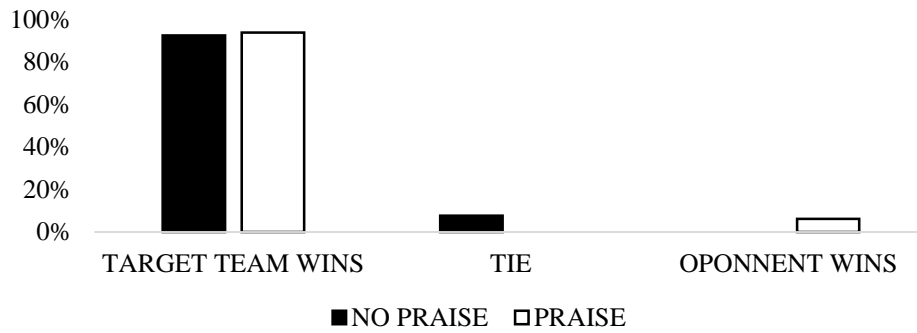
Participants were approached by an interviewer and asked to participate in a short "ipad survey" about soccer as part of a promotion campaign launched by the bar. Participants were informed that their task was simply to fill out a few questions on the main touch screen and to estimate the exact outcome of the upcoming game. The

winners would receive a ticket for a beer at the Bar (~US\$3.00). Participants were asked to provide their answers as privately as possible and not to share it with others even though they were sitting next to each other. The survey asked participants to indicate (a) favorite team, (b) outcome of the game, (c) interest in soccer, (d) how happy they would feel about winning, and (e) gender (see appendix B). Before the survey started, participants were randomly assigned to either a control or to the target team praise condition. Participants in the former were shown the Coup's main logo prior to the survey and listened to a sports vignette from a national broadcaster during the survey. In the praise condition, participants were shown the target team's logo (i.e., Fluminense's) next to a picture of their most important player, and listened to the team's anthem during the survey (see appendix B). The other independent variable represented the participants' favorite team (target team vs. other). Participants were thanked after the survey and winners were paid accordingly after the game. To decide on who would qualify for the semi-finals, two games were played between these two teams (one in each country). Thus, data collection happened twice, one week apart from one another, at the exact same place using the exact same procedure. No participant was interviewed twice.

4.2 Results

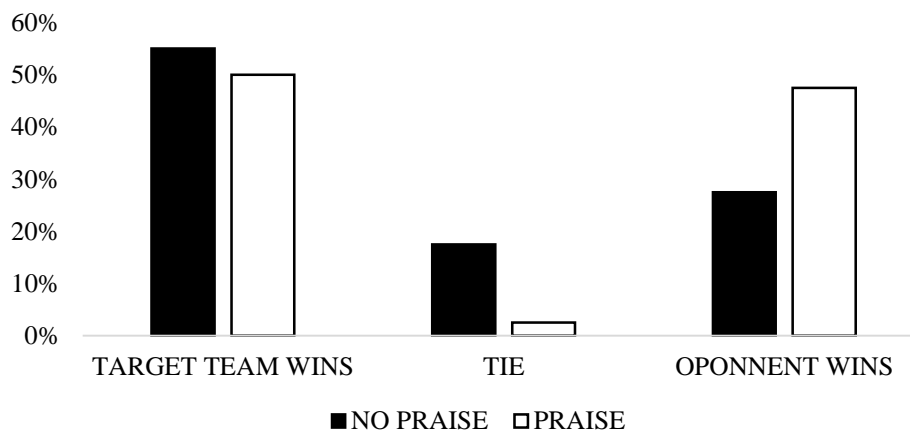
We conducted a Chi-Square Test analysis to see whether participants' type of betting behavior (who would win) varied by praise condition and team preference. A significant interaction is observed such that the praise manipulation had no impact among those who cheered for the target team ($\chi^2(2) = 2.04, p > .10$) but a significant impact among those who did not cheer for the target team ($\chi^2(2) = 6.73, p < .05$). As expected, among those who cheered for the target team, the vast majority (> 90%) bet on the target team's victory independent of praise manipulation (see figure 3).

Figure 3
Target Team Supporter



Also as we had predicted, among those who did not cheer for the target team, the number of participants betting on the rival teams' victory increased significantly in the condition where the target team was praised prior to the betting decision (see figure 4).

Figure 4
Rival Team Supporter



5 Conclusion

The literature on *schadenfreude* has thus far focused on the shaping the factors that elicit this strange emotion of feeling pleasure at the misfortune of another. Several factors, which include envy, resentment, other-directed negative emotions, and perceived deservingness of the other's misfortune, have been found to play a role in creating the necessary state of affairs for *schadenfreude* to be experienced. However, the majority of the research *Schadenfreude* has not considered how this feeling can influence our decision making process. In a series of two experiments, we show that *schadenfreude*-eliciting events can impact people's decisions on (a) what sports news to share with friends and (b) how to wage on future sport outcomes.

The study of this feeling is important as it finds applications in our day-to-day decisions. Companies around the world have been using this malicious pleasure in their advertising campaigns when there is rivalry between brands (e.g. Coca Cola and Pepsi), magazines and newspapers, or even when people feel resentment for something that was unfair (e.g. Pizza Hut and Ireland disqualify). Whatever the applicability, the study of *schadenfreude* is quite significant to better understand human behavior and psychological influence on our daily lives.

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Appendix A


First page of the experiment 1 – Cover story



Prezado(a), esta pesquisa acadêmica que você está prestes a responder é sobre partidas de futebol com os principais times do Rio de Janeiro. Ela terá duração de aproximadamente 5 minutos. Os dados são para fins exclusivamente científicos mantendo o anonimato do participante.

>>

Second page of the experiment 1 – Asking the target team



Para qual time de futebol você torce?

- ☐ Flamengo
- ☐ Vasco
- ☐ Botafogo
- ☐ Fluminense

>>

Third page of the experiment 1 – Assessing their interest in soccer



Aproximadamente quantas vezes você assistiu na TV a um jogo inteiro do seu time em 2012?

Aproximadamente quantas vezes você foi ao estádio de futebol assistir a um jogo do seu time?

O quanto você gosta de futebol em geral?

Não tenho qualquer
interesse

1

☐

2

☐

3

☐

4

☐

Sou apaixonado

5

☐

Em geral, o quanto você sofre quando seu time perde?

Nem um pouco

1

☐

2

☐

3

☐

4

☐

Muito

5

☐

Em geral, o quão feliz você fica quando seu time ganha?

Nem um pouco

1

☐

2

☐

3

☐

4

☐

Muito

5

☐

Com qual frequência você fala de futebol com seus amigos?

Nunca

1

☐

2

☐

De vez em quando

3

☐

4

☐

Sempre

5

☐

>>

Fourth page of the experiment 1 - Single factor within subject design with five treatments



Cada vez mais as pessoas partilham notícias com os amigos nas redes sociais. Estamos interessados no conteúdo de notícias preferidas das pessoas no que diz respeito ao futebol. Portanto, considere as seguintes situações hipotéticas como verdadeiras e indique a sua preferência.

Qual dessas notícias de um jornal de notícias online você está mais propenso a compartilhar em uma rede social?

- ☐ Flamengo vence o Bahia por 1 a 0
- ☐ Vasco perde para o Bahia por 1 a 0

Qual dessas notícias de um jornal de notícias online você está mais propenso a compartilhar em uma rede social?

- ☐ Flamengo vence o Bahia por 2 a 0
- ☐ Vasco perde para o Bahia por 2 a 0

Qual dessas notícias de um jornal de notícias online você está mais propenso a compartilhar em uma rede social?

- ☐ Flamengo vence o Bahia por 3 a 0
- ☐ Vasco perde para o Bahia por 3 a 0

Qual dessas notícias de um jornal de notícias online você está mais propenso a compartilhar em uma rede social?

- ☐ Flamengo vence o Bahia por 4 a 0
- ☐ Vasco perde para o Bahia por 4 a 0

Qual dessas notícias de um jornal de notícias online você está mais propenso a compartilhar em uma rede social?

- ☐ Flamengo vence o Bahia por 5 a 0
- ☐ Vasco perde para o Bahia por 5 a 0



Fifth page of the experiment 1 – Manipulation Check

Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 1 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☒ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Com qual intensidade você sentiria esta emoção ao compartilhar **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 1 a 0** nas redes sociais?

Nenhuma 1 2 3 4 Muita 5

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒

Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 2 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☒ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Com qual intensidade você sentiria esta emoção ao compartilhar **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 2 a 0** nas redes sociais?

Nenhuma 1 2 3 4 Muita 5

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒

Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 3 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☒ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 3 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☒ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Com qual intensidade você sentiria esta emoção ao compartilhar **Flamengo vence o Bahia por 3 a 0** nas redes sociais?

Nenhuma 1 2 3 4 Muita 5

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒

Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Vasco perde para o Bahia por 4 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☐ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Com qual intensidade você sentiria esta emoção ao compartilhar **Vasco perde para o Bahia por 4 a 0** nas redes sociais?



Você escolheu compartilhar a notícia **Vasco perde para o Bahia por 5 a 0** nas redes sociais. Que sentimento melhor expressa o que você sentiria ao compartilhar esta notícia?

- ☐ Orgulho
- ☐ Prazer de zoar
- ☐ Outro

Com qual intensidade você sentiria esta emoção ao compartilhar **Vasco perde para o Bahia por 5 a 0** nas redes sociais?



Appendix B

Field experiment 2 – Praise and Control tablet screens

Figure 1
Experiment 2: Praise and No Praise Stimuli



Figure 2
Experiment 2: Betting with and without anthem
(Exactly same)

