



## AN EXPLORATION OF THE HALO EFFECT IN PROFESSIONAL SOCCER

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### **Abstract:**

A halo effect can lead to significantly biased and distorted judgments in numerous situations and settings in daily life. However, its impact has barely been researched in the sporting environment, although it might help a great deal in understanding how sport fans think and behave. This paper provides an empirical study based on two German soccer clubs, VfB Stuttgart and FC Bayern Munich, analyzing the presence of halo effects. The purpose of this study is to answer the question that is interesting for both theory and practice: Does a halo effect exist in professional soccer?

**Keywords:** halo effect, sport marketing, soccer, football

### **1. Introduction**

People make numerous judgments and decisions every day. These might be only small ones like deciding what to wear or which dish to choose, but also more relevant ones like what to study or which business strategy to follow. People usually take it for granted that their judgments and decisions are based on objective and logical thinking. The truth is, however, that human thinking is quite often unconsciously influenced by cognitive biases. Cognitive biases can be seen as errors in thinking that lead to distorted decisions and judgments (Kahneman, 2012). Given the huge amount of information available in our environment and the often restricted time to make a decision, it is impossible to thoroughly process and analyze each and every piece of information. Therefore, people tend to use mental shortcuts, heuristics, that help to make decisions easily and quickly (Tversky & Kahneman, 1975). While heuristics often lead to accurate and valid conclusions, they are also highly susceptible to cognitive biases. As such errors are prevalent in everyday life and can entail serious consequences it becomes obvious why research in this area is of great importance.

This paper focuses on the halo effect, which is a widespread and widely researched cognitive bias. The halo effect occurs when a global impression or

information about a salient characteristic influence how other traits are judged. However, so far only little research has been conducted on halo effects in sports. Fans' emotional involvement in the sporting environment makes them often decide and act more irrationally as compared to less involved individuals (Smith & Steward, 2010). Given these distinctive features, it is interesting to examine how these characteristics interact with halo effects.

## **2. Characterization of the Halo Effect**

Already in 1907, Wells observed an effect where a first impression influenced the evaluation of other characteristics. Thorndike (1920) was the first to come up with the term halo effect. He observed the effect while investigating how army officers were evaluated. He noticed that the ratings of different and non-related traits of an officer were often highly correlated. Therefore, he concluded that these findings suggest an effect that makes raters biased by an overall impression of a person – the halo effect.

After these findings, numerous studies followed where first impressions were manipulated to see whether this manipulation really influences subsequent ratings. Most of these studies came to similar conclusions and thus further supported the existence of the halo effect. With studies, also many different definitions followed, however, most of them can be grouped into two main explanatory approaches.

The halo effect works in two directions, so that positive information results in more positively evaluated traits and similarly negative information leads to more negatively evaluated traits (Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016). Halo effects are particularly encouraged when the characteristics to judge are rather ambiguous or hard to observe, nevertheless they can also be strong enough to influence how well-known and easily observable attributes are rated (Landy & Sigall, 1974). Research on halo effects is conducted in various research fields, particularly in job or educational based settings where truthful and unbiased judgments are significant.

Halo effects are of high relevance in both science and practice. Studies on the halo effect exist in various areas, however most studies can be found in educational-based settings and the business world. Halo effects in sports are a so far rarely researched topic.

## **3. Research on Halo Effects in Sports**

A study conducted by Hickman and Lawrence (2010) examined positive and negative consequences on consumer response to sponsorships based on halo effects. The study offers good insights and explanations on how sport fans reason and behave. Corporate sponsorship of a sports team is a popular marketing tool as it increases brand recognition and influences a company's image (Bruhn, 2018; Kim et al., 2017). Especially sport fans with a high team identification tend to transfer the loyalty to their favorite sports club to its sponsor, resulting in positive brand attitudes and the engagement in commercial activities (Dalakes & Levin, 2005). However, while Hickman and Lawrence

agree on the positive effects sponsoring can imply for a company as found by previous studies, they criticize that no one ever thought the other way around, arguing that sponsorship not only attracts loyal fans of the respective sports club, but at the same time also might repel loyal fans of the rival sports club. That is why the researchers wanted to examine the existence of potentially negative halo effects as well. The study named this effect the "pitchfork effect". Hickman and Lawrence found that for the favorite team's sponsor, the brand and related purchasing intentions were evaluated much better as compared to the rival team's sponsor and vice versa. However, while an increased degree of team identification strengthened the positive attitude for the own team's sponsor, it did not significantly influence the perception of the rival's sponsor.

To explain these halo and pitchfork effects, Hickman and Lawrence made use of the social identity theory, first explained by Tajfel and Turner (1986). According to this theory, people define themselves and others in terms of group memberships. These groups can either be personal identities based on specific personality traits such as being intelligent or being honest, but can also be social identities that determine a person's membership within a social category such as nationality, political affiliation or team identification with a specific sports team. These groups are either groups of belonging, so called in-groups, where the person itself is part of, or groups of not belonging which are denominated as out-groups. This grouping facilitates an easier evaluation of other individuals and their behaviors and attitudes within these groups. Through corporate sponsorship of a person's favorite team, the company shows a connection to the same social category. As a result, positive evaluations about other members of the group spill over to the sponsor brand as well. Similarly, sponsoring a rival's team and thus belonging to the rival's social category (out-group) leads to a worse perception of the brand. Thus, halo effects cause overall impressions of a social group to spill over to other evaluations as soon as the person or object in question is seen as belonging to the respective group. For judgments made within an in-group, these effects become even stronger the more an individual identifies him- or herself with this group (Hickman & Lawrence, 2010).

Literature examining the psychology of sport fans makes use of the social identity theory to explain behaviors and attitudes within these groups. Fandom is often seen as an escape from everyday life and sport fans particularly enjoy the communal spirit among other fans as well as the emotions and the rush of adrenalin coming with it (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). What differentiates sport fans from common sport spectators is the personal importance fans assign to the respective sport. While common spectators are usually only involved while they watch a match, real sport fans are continuously involved and their fandom is seen as an inherent part of their daily life. That is, they are also emotionally involved to a much greater extent and think and talk about their team on a regular basis (Jones, 1997; Shank & Beasley; 1998; Spinrad, 1981). Apart from above mentioned reasons for being a sport fan, motivation often stems from the desire to be part of a successful environment. Therefore, social identity theory often goes hand in hand with the concepts of "BIRGing" (Cialdini et al., 1976) and "CORFing" (Snyder et al., 1986), which describe an interesting feature of sport fans. BIRGing stands

for "basking in reflected glory" and explains how sport fans publicly relate themselves to successful others in order to also position themselves as successful. In contrast, especially fans with lower team identification tend to distance themselves from others as soon as they are unsuccessful. This behavior is called CORFing which stands for "cutting of reflective failure".

#### **4. Empirical Study**

Research on halo effects is conducted in several research fields. The purpose of this study is to answer the question: Does a halo effect also exist in professional soccer? The following analysis is looking at two German soccer clubs, VfB Stuttgart and FC Bayern Munich.

##### **4.1 Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1: If a fan's favorite sports team is successful, he or she will rate other aspects within this environment better, and vice versa an unsuccessful team will trigger worse evaluations of these aspects.

Hypothesis 2: The influence of halo effects on ratings increases with a higher level of team identification.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the level of team identification, the higher is the influence of team success or failure on a fan's affective state.

Hypothesis 4: Sport fans generally rate aspects of their favorite sports team better as compared to common sport spectators.

##### **4.2 Method**

Data was collected from soccer fans of the two German sports clubs FC Bayern Munich and VfB Stuttgart playing in premier and second league respectively in the season 2016/17. Participants who were no fans of one of these two clubs served as control group.

The survey was created and shared with the online tool Soscisurvey among German soccer fans. To reach as many potential participants as possible, the questionnaire was distributed online in social media networks such as Facebook in December 2016.

216 usable questionnaires were taken for analysis. This sample consists of 104 VfB fans (48%), 77 FCB fans (36%) and 35 common sport spectators (16%). With 81%, male participation dominated significantly. Most respondents (62%) were between 20 and 29 years old, while 19% were between 10 and 19 years and the other 19% were distributed between 30 and 59 years of age (14% = 30 – 39 years; 2% = 40 – 49 years; 3% = 50-59). Common sport spectators served as control group. A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit showed that there were no significant difference in the distribution of gender and age.

### 4.3 Research Design

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, participants were informed about the reasons for the questionnaire and their anonymity was ensured. The first question then divided participants into fans of the VfB, fans of the FCB or the control group (= no fans of VfB or FCB).

Participants identified as VfB or FCB fans subsequently answered four questions to determine their level of team identification on five-point Likert scales. These questions were adapted from Wann and Branscombe (1993) who defined the "Sport Spectator Identification Scale".

Soccer fans were divided into four experimental groups. VfB fans were randomly distributed into equally sized groups of "VfB Success" or "VfB Failure" and similarly, FCB fans were distributed among "FCB Success" and "FCB Failure" conditions. Each group had to read a short paragraph recalling either successful or unsuccessful games of their favorite sports team. Subsequently, they rated sporting and non-sporting aspects on five-point Likert scales, such as the competency of the coach or liking of the team's jerseys, to assess whether the initial information influenced their judgments. To further determine whether feelings from a team's success or failure are also carried over to everyday life, respondents additionally stated to which degree the team's performance influences their mood (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007).

The control group only evaluated sporting and non-sporting aspects for both teams without getting initial information about their performance (Hickman & Lawrence, 2010). In total, the research design comprised five partial samples: "VfB Success", "VfB Failure", "FCB Success", "FCB Failure" and the control group.

### 4.4 Data Analysis and Results

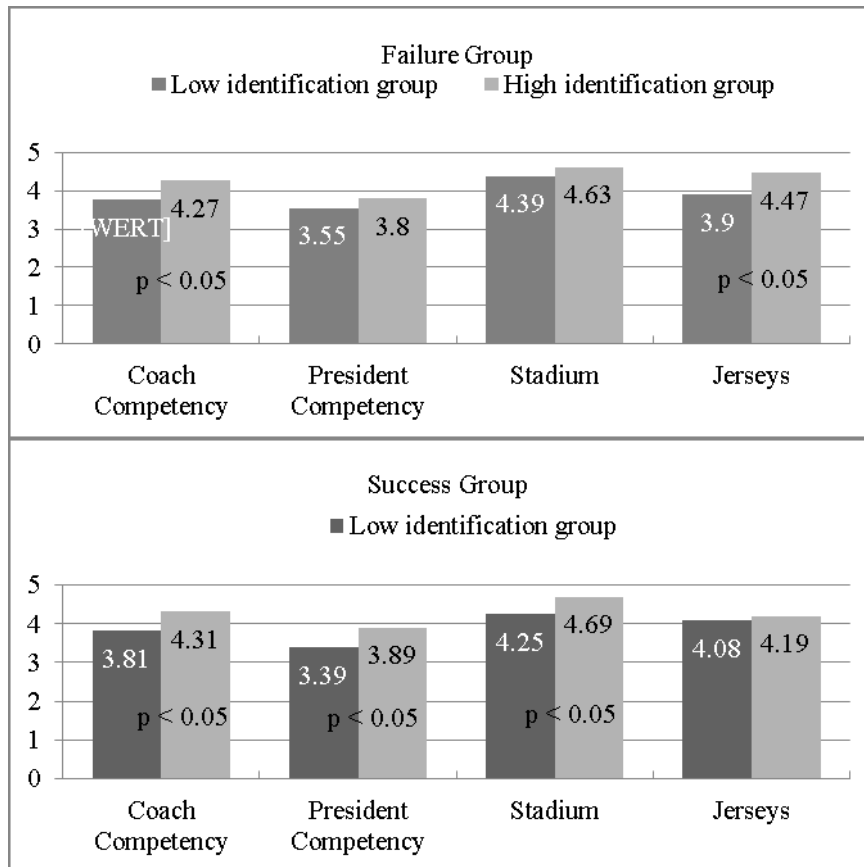
Collected data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2013 and SPSS 20.0.

Hypothesis 1 predicted halo effects in evaluations of sporting and non-sporting aspects based on initial information about team success or failure. Firstly, means and standard deviations for each item were calculated and independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare evaluations on all aspects in success and failure groups. The results are consolidated in Table 1. There was no significant difference for evaluations made by the success and the failure group concerning the different aspects.

		<i>t</i> -Test for Equality of Means					
	Experimental Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
VfB Coach Competency	VfB Success	51	4.22	0.757	-0.484	102	0.630
	VfB Failure	53	4.28	0.662			
VfB President Competency	VfB Success	51	3.10	0.700	-1.115	102	0.267
	VfB Failure	53	3.26	0.812			
VfB Stadium	VfB Success	51	4.45	0.702	-0.435	102	0.664
	VfB Failure	53	4.51	0.669			
VfB Jerseys	VfB Success	51	4.18	0.817	-0.079	102	0.937
	VfB Failure	53	4.19	0.761			
FCB Coach Competency	FCB Success	39	3.97	0.843	0.671	75	0.504
	FCB Failure	38	3.84	0.886			
FCB President Competency	FCB Success	39	4.46	0.854	0.585	75	0.561
	FCB Failure	38	4.34	0.938			
FCB Stadium	FCB Success	39	4.59	0.637	-0.107	75	0.915
	FCB Failure	38	4.61	0.638			
FCB Jerseys	FCB Success	39	4.10	0.680	-1.833	75	0.071
	FCB Failure	38	4.39	0.718			

**Table 1:** Means and t-tests comparing success and failure groups

For further analyses, success groups and failure groups of both sport teams were consolidated. The scores for the four questions on team identification were averaged, resulting in one variable that represents a fan's level of team identification. Overall, VfB and FCB fans scored rather high on this dimension. To test whether the level of team identification influenced ratings as predicted in hypothesis 2, success and failure groups were further divided into low identification ( $\leq 3.5$  on a Likert scale from 1 to 5) and high identification groups ( $> 3.5$ ) based on respondents' level of team identification. For each group, means and standard deviations were calculated and independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare evaluations on sporting and non-sporting aspects in the high identification and the low identification group.



**Figure 1:** Comparison of means between high and low identification groups

A comparison of the means showed that in success and failure groups, respondents with a higher level of team identification rated aspects better than people with a lower level of team identification. These differences were statistically significant for success group's ratings on coach, president and stadium, and failure group's ratings on coach and jerseys, all showing p-values below the 0.05 significance level (see Figure 1).

To detect possible halo effects dependent on team identification (hypothesis 3), further t-tests were conducted to compare evaluations of the high and low identification group in the success and failure conditions. However, none of the differences detected could be deemed as significant (see Table 2).

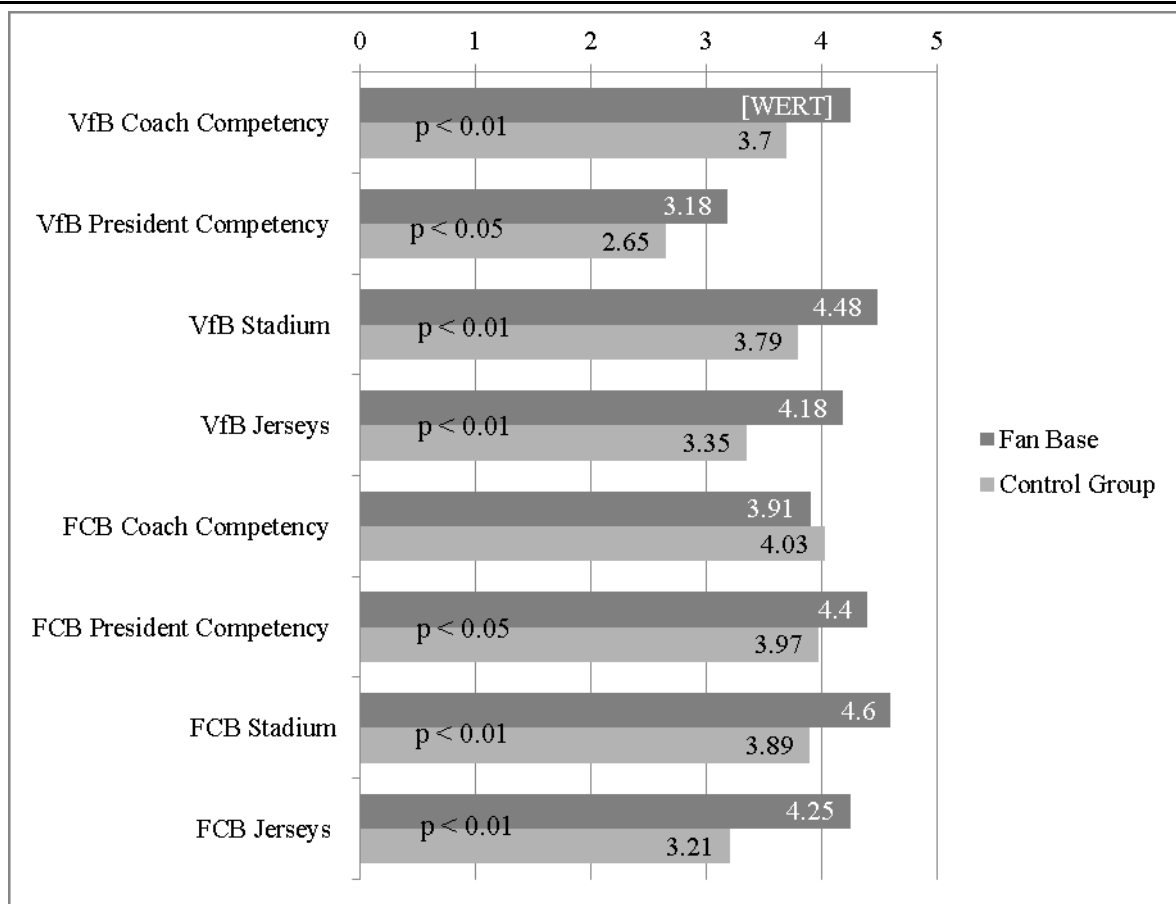
		Experimental Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Test for Equality of Means		Sig. (2-tailed)
						t	df	
Low team identification	Coach	Success Group	36	3.81	0.856	0.157	65	0.876
	Competency	Failure Group	31	3.77	0.762			
	President	Success Group	36	3.39	0.964	-0.665	65	0.508
	Competency	Failure Group	31	3.55	0.995			
	Stadium	Success Group	36	4.25	0.732	-0.796	65	0.429
		Failure Group	31	4.39	0.667			
Jerseys	Success Group	36	4.08	0.806	0.879	65	0.383	
	Failure Group	31	3.90	0.870				
High team identification	Coach	Success Group	54	4.31	0.696	0.353	112	0.725
	Competency	Failure Group	60	4.27	0.756			
	President	Success Group	54	3.89	1.022	0.464	112	0.644
	Competency	Failure Group	60	3.80	1.022			
	Stadium	Success Group	54	4.69	0.577	0.454	112	0.651
		Failure Group	60	4.63	0.637			
Jerseys	Success Group	54	4.19	0.729	-2.267	112	0.089	
	Failure Group	60	4.47	0.596				

**Table 2:** Means and t-tests comparing aspects in high and low identification groups

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the level of team identification and the influence on a person's mood caused by success or failure. There was a positive correlation between the two variables team identification and mood ( $r = 0.508$ ). Furthermore, a t-test was conducted to compare evaluations of mood influences in success and failure groups. There was significant difference in the evaluations made by the success and the failure group ( $t(102) = 4.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results suggest that success has a higher impact on a fan's mood than failure does.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that ratings made by fans would be higher than control group's evaluations. Comparing the means showed that almost all aspects are rated better by fans than by common sport spectators (see Figure 2). Again, t-tests were conducted to thoroughly compare these evaluations of sporting and non-sporting aspects in experimental groups and control group. Differences were significant for almost every aspect except the ratings on FCB coach's competency. For the VfB coach's competency, for example, there was a significant difference in the evaluations made by fans and control group (see Figure 2).





**Figure 2:** Comparison of means between fan base and control group

## 5. Discussion and Implications

So far, limited research on halo effects has been conducted in the sporting environment. Moreover, former studies mostly focused on halo effects that can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and apply for differences in evaluations based on membership of either an in-group or an out-group. Hypothesis 4 also supports these previous findings and showed that sport fans mostly evaluate sporting and non-sporting aspects of their favorite sports club better than common sport spectators that do not belong to the same social category. That is, through the halo effect the overall positive feelings for one's group of belonging as such, spreads to each and every aspect of the same group.

This study, however, further complements existing research by examining halo effects within one social category and thus eliminates effects coming from differences among in-groups and out-groups. Hypothesis 1 predicted that team success or failure would influence how other aspects in the team's environment are evaluated. The data, however, could not support this hypothesis. No matter if victories or defeats of the favorite team were recalled, the ratings on other aspects were not influenced significantly by this information.

The level of team identification is another important factor in the sporting environment (Wann & Grieve, 2005) and can also influence fans' behaviors and

judgments. However, an allocation of respondents into high and low identification groups and respective analyses could not reveal any halo effects. Thus, based on the absence of the effects, hypotheses 2 and 3 finally cannot be answered. However, a general analysis of the differences in ratings of high and low identification groups showed that fans with a higher level of team identification tend to give better ratings as compared to less identified fans. This also supports findings by Hickman and Lawrence (2010) who showed that a higher team identification led to better ratings for the respective team's sponsor.

To assess whether team success or failure also has a halo effect on daily life aspects outside the social category, the influence on a person's affective state was examined. The positive relationship between team identification and a person's mood suggests that the higher the level of team identification, the more will peoples' affective states be influenced by team success or failure. Given that prior research further suggests that a person's affective state has an influence on how people judge, let it be about life satisfaction or other aspects in daily life (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007; Schwarz & Clore, 1983), it can be concluded that team success and failure can at least indirectly have an influence on other judgments.

## **6 Conclusion and Limitations**

The study showed that sport fans generally rate aspects that are related to their favorite team better than people that are not part of this social category. This effect even strengthened with a higher level of team identification. As these findings support results of previous research (Hickman & Lawrence, 2010), it can generally be assumed that there is a halo effect in professional soccer. This halo effect, however, only occurs when judgments are made among different social categories as explained by the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, as soon as judgments are made within only one social category, these halo effects are eliminated. The study failed to find evidence for halo effects that occur within one social category. Collected data suggest that there are no in-group halo effects stemming from team success or failure.

Since on-field success cannot be directly influenced by sport managers, fan identification should be valued even more by them. Sporting organizations should make every effort to understand and utilize the emotional bond with their fans. Fan loyalty can also function as a pre-crisis weapon, creating a halo effect that protects a soccer club's image in difficult times. This can be illustrated by the example of Kevin Großkreutz: The German 2014 world champion's contract was terminated of his club VfB Stuttgart after his night out with underage junior players, which ended in Großkreutz's being taken to a hospital following a fight. Although the incident did not represent the first personal crisis for the professional soccer player, VfB Stuttgart fans initiated an online petition signed by over 30,000 supporters to convince the club into re-signing Großkreutz (Focus Online, 2017). This example indicates the potential of a fan loyalty based halo effect, protecting a sporting organization's image in difficult times.

However, the absence of halo effects in the study could also be attributed to flaws in methodology or study design. First of all, the effectiveness of the initial information about a team's success or failure needs to be questioned. The short paragraph carrying information about prior soccer games might have failed to effectively recall a feeling of success or failure in participants' minds. Recalled games are only few out of many and thus are not decisive for the whole term. That means, fans might rather focus on their overall impression about the team's performance based on the entire term and thus might be unaffected by the information the study provides. Additionally, the point in time of survey completion might also have affected evaluations. As further games of the team took place in between the recalled games and the time of the survey, participants might have found it easier to recall more recent games, again being unaffected by the information given in the study. Furthermore, as the survey was conducted online, it could not be observed whether participants really paid attention to the information given and read them thoughtfully or if they just skimmed through them quickly. Therefore, it can be argued that an improvement of the survey and the elimination of potential error sources might reveal possible halo effects in the given setting.

Particularly in sport management and sport marketing, knowledge about how fans think, react and behave is essential to come up with appropriate and effective strategies. However, given the distinctive features of sport fans and their often entailed irrationality, it is hard to forecast how they react and how new strategies work out. Therefore, further research on halo effects in the sporting environment might help a great deal in better understanding the real nature of sport fans.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Natalie Alesi for preparing the paper. Of course, all remaining errors are mine.

### **About the Author**

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