



## The Effects of Audience Behaviour on Football Players' Performance

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### ABSTRACT

Audience behaviour is an external factor which could influence an athlete's performance during a match due to the evaluative attitude which it might convey. One of the most common positive influences on a team's motivation can be attributed to a supportive and cheering audience. Contrastingly, jeering can be interpreted as negative influence. High emotions exchanged between the spectators and the players may also show the important ties which bind them together, and this can affect the players' behaviour on the field of play. This study focuses on how crowd behaviour in Maltese football influences the players' performance in the game. The influence of spectator behaviour on the psychological state of six male national senior football team members and six male national team youth players was analysed through data gathered from individual semi-structured interviews. Results show that both senior and youth players are influenced by variables of audience behaviour and feel pressured and anxious throughout matches. Incentives for positive behaviour need to be introduced, together with sanctions for the breaking of rules, as well as slogans and placards placed in the stands for further awareness need to become the norm. If we are to curb societal issues such as racism and violence, the need for educational strategies is clear.

## Introduction

Sport exposes athletes to perform in front of crowds, and this may affect both individual and team performance, apart from providing excitement for sport enthusiasts (Epting et al., 2011). According to Edwards and Archambault (1989), the presence of spectators during the match, their feedback or the absence of it, can affect sporting performance. Other components such as crowd size, density and

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hostility are also key factors towards home advantage in football (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2005; Ponzo & Scoppa, 2014; Pollard & Armatas, 2017).

The impact of audience behaviour in Maltese football has never been in the spotlight for research. This study, therefore, aims to give an overall view of audience behaviour and its influence on footballers in Malta, a small island state in the Mediterranean with a laid back mentality (Muscat et al., 2020). Previous research has focused on audience effects on sport performance in larger countries and leagues, but could the variables of a smaller league in a small densely populated country, where most people know each other (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008), have a bigger crowd effect on footballers? Furthermore, the authors sought to discover whether any measures are required to help athletes when dealing with issues concerning the audience. The word audience might variably change throughout the discourse of the study as it has other correlated words such as spectators, fans, supporters, and the crowd.

Several studies have examined the impact of the audience on athlete performance, but each and every study gives its own interpretation of theories and this leads to conflicting results (Bray & Martin, 2003; Ponzo & Scoppa, 2014). Therefore, the aim of this study is to shed light on whether crowd behaviour really does have some sort of influence, if any, on the athlete's performance in Malta. This study is also different from others in that it seeks to compare the possible audience effects on senior versus youth national team players.

### ***The Impact of Audiences on Athletes***

Athletes are under the scrutiny of the audience's judgement in every game, and this makes them exposed to the expression of the crowds' feelings (Epting et al., 2011). One can note that a crowd could either be supportive or non-supportive (Wallace, et al., 2005). The former is characterised by the fact that the crowd would want their performer/s to succeed through the transmission of its' vibes. The latter is described as showing the desire for the performer/s' failure to live up to expectations. Supportive behaviour, or lack of it, can be shown by various actions such as "applauding, booing, clothing and signs" (Wallace et al., 2005, p.430). For Epting and her colleagues (2011), supportive behaviour could be seen as cheering, whilst an unsupportive audience is conveyed as jeering.

### ***Social Facilitation, Home Field Advantage and Disadvantage***

According to Blascovich et al (1999, p.199), "...social facilitation refers to performance enhancement and impairment effects engendered by the presence of others either as cofactors or, more typically, as observers or an audience". This psychological factor was first hypothesised by Zajonc in 1965, who argued that the "mere" presence of others caused an increase in non-specific and non-directive arousal that enhanced the dominant responses of the performer. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that the "mere" presence of others does indeed leave its mark. A recent paper (McCarrick et al., 2021) analysing home advantage carried out during the Covid-19 (COVID) pandemic, where European football leagues played part of the 2019/2020 season with crowds present and finished with crowds absent, found that games without fans, produced considerably less offensive opportunities for home teams, thus resulting in lesser goals scored and points gained.

Moreover, there is a consistent finding that home teams wins well over 50% of the games played under a balanced home and away schedule, what is known as "home field advantage" (Courneya & Carron, 1992, p.13). This was also found in a recent statistical analysis, which included 18,052 football matches from 1987 to 2017 in the Turkish Super League (Inan, 2018). This psychological phenomenon is particularly evident when the performance level between the two teams is similar (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2005). It has been shown that in professional leagues (Courneya & Carron, 1992; Seçkin, 2006, Seçkin & Pollard, 2008; García et al., 2009; Goumas, 2013; Santos, 2019; Inan, 2020), a favorable atmosphere is present for the home side when compared to their visiting counterparts. Furthermore, this kind of influence is not only found in team sports (Jones, 2013; Leitzelar et al., 2016; Boudreaux et al., 2017; Harb-Wu & Krumer, 2019).

Similarly, a study which included male age groups U9 (under nine years), U11, U13, U15, U17 and U19 in Germany, also confirmed the presence of the phenomenal advantage of playing at home. All age groups with the exception of the U9 indicated significant home advantage scores (Staufenbiel et al., 2018).

Inan (2020) reported that crowd support and crowd density were fundamental variables for home field advantage in football. However, other studies believe the reason for home advantage is still unclear (Courneya & Carron, 1992; Bray & Martin, 2003; Cashmore, 2008; García et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012). An experiment on Basketball players by Henningsen et al., (2009) affirmed that social facilitation projected from the home crowd helped the players perform better. However, Wallace and colleagues (2005) argue that when such instances occur, these can be viewed as being a detrimental experience more than a facilitating one for the footballer, and thus can be viewed as a home disadvantage.

Epting et al. (2011) concluded that there was neither an enhancing nor a detrimental effect from cheering, and this is confirmed by other studies (Salminen, 1993; Baumeister & Steinhilber, 1984). In a contrasting view, some researchers (Courneya & Carron, 1992; Waters & Lovell, 2002; Smith, 2003; Inan, 2020) believe that both the athletes and the fans acknowledge that positive support such as cheering from the audience may influence the performance of the home team, indicating an advantage. Additionally, positive support for the home-team might not be a factor of advantage but it might shield from the negative support of the visiting fans which are usually largely outnumbered by the home crowd (Epting et al., 2011). Travel elements, such as distance, direction and crossing time zones were also considered to give an advantage to the teams playing at home in the Australian League (Goumas, 2014) and in the World Cup qualification matches (Pollard & Armatas, 2017).

### ***Parents as spectators***

Parents could also be active spectators who watch their children compete and play. While parents provide emotional support and encouragement to their child by attending games and cheering them on (Clarke & Harwood, 2014), Palou and his colleagues (2020) argue that they could leave a negative mark through derogatory comments. The number of incidents involving parents being reported for violent conduct during competitive matches is increasing (Baldwin, 2013) due to the win at all costs mentality. This is an indication that some parents forget the perspective of seeing sports as a fun and healthy activity and start seeing their young athlete as an investment (Heinzmann, 2016). Though most youth enjoy having their parents as spectators, paradoxically, their presence seems to instil anxiety (Bois et al., 2009). This might be an implication of parents who exhibit negative behaviours of aggression, most commonly; shouting, fanatical cheering, arguing, blaming and disrupting (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011; Dorsch et al., 2015; Bean et al., 2016). A good number of these behaviours are not encouraging for what children strive to achieve through sports involvement (Witt & Dangi, 2018), and prefer their parents to be supportive, rather than acting like mad fans (Tamminen et al., 2017; Azimi & Tamminen, 2019). Interestingly, a study conducted in the Balearic Islands (Spain), which observed the behaviour of parents during U-15 second division league matches, found that 57.9% were neutral comments, followed by positive (21.2%) and negative comments (20.8%) (Palou et al., 2019).

### ***Crowd Size***

According to Hocking (1982) and Cashmore (2008), the composition, size and density of the crowd could have an impact on the performance of the athletes. This is also one of the contributing factors to the home advantage (Kremer & Scully, 1994; Nevill et al., 1996; Moskowitz & Wertheim, 2011; Inan, 2020). Nonetheless, Oviatt's findings (2005) suggest that the size of the crowd does not seem to affect the athlete. Anderson (2010) interviewed footballers on crowd density and most responses elicited that it was important to have a large turnout at the stadium, as it seems to psychologically impact the players, and in turn enhance their performance. One could, however, also have an unsupportive audience which is characterised by poor behaviour and consequently create a negative atmosphere for the athletes. The findings of Böheim et al., (2019), however, show that the

performance of Basketball home-team players declines as the size of the crowd increases, thus implying a negative influence. Moreover, the size of the crowd and violent behaviour also seem to be positively correlated to each other (Strang et al., 2018; Knapton et al., 2018). In Malta, Premier League clubs (Aquilina, 2017) and the Maltese national team relatively play in front of small crowds at the Ta' Qali national stadium (Azzopardi, 2018).

### ***Sport Violence***

According to Strang et al., (2018), several factors may induce violent and antisocial behaviour in competitive football events. Notably, psychological factors (feeling of adrenaline and meaning), the influence of alcohol, sporting rivalries, socio-political and spatial elements, as well as reaction to their team's performance may spark violent behaviour (Strang et al., 2018). In addition, Stott and colleagues (2008), indicated that the 'Elaborated Social Identity Model' explains that the behaviour of a crowd during an event acts as a whole and members of a crowd can change the influential behaviour, and other shared actions can emerge. Ironically, sport-related aggression and violence may also help to increase the entertainment during a sporting event (Jewell et al., 2012). The term "football hooliganism" which could also be described as "spectator violence", is defined as "the competitive violence of socially organised fan groups in football, principally directed against opposing fan groups." (Spaij, 2006, p.11). It also refers to the football fans who inflict damage to society in the name of sport. As stated by Madensen & Eck (2008 p.45), the six most common forms of spectator aggression are attributed to; verbal actions (yelling taunts or obscenities), gestures (threatening others or obscene motions), 'missile' throwing (throwing material such as food, drinks, bricks, bottles, broken seats, cell phones on random or intended targets), swarming (rushing the field or stage, and trying to crash the gates to gain entry, or rushing the exit - both of which may result in injury or death from trampling), property destruction (inflicting damage to sound systems, tearing up the playing field, burning the venue or property), and physical actions – spitting, kicking, shoving, fist-fights, stabbings and shootings. Thirer & Rampey (1979, p.1048), add that violence could be set off "by a bad call, nullifying a goal, or an act of violence which occurs during the game." These could thus escalate and lead to violent events where fans may suffer severe injuries and death (Gumusgul & Acet, 2016; Knapton et al., 2018).

### ***Sport Racism***

According to various authors, (Williams 1996; Anderson 1996; Cleland & Cashmore 2013; Sonntag & Ranc, 2015), racial harassment has been on the decline for the past two decades. However, racism, or the ill treatment of people because of their race, is declining at a relatively slow pace when one takes into consideration that from 1990-2010 instances of racism experienced by participants in the study, only dropped from 67 per cent to 50 per cent (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013). Racist acts by the audience include insults, offensive singing, fascist salutes, petitions against hiring certain athletes, denial of opportunities for such players, monkey chants and the setting up of racist banners (Bandini, 2013; Sonntag & Ranc, 2015). FC Porto player Moussa Marega, from Mali, was subjected to racist abuse from opposing fans in the match against Vitoria Guimarães (The Guardian, 2020). Eventually, the striker scored the winning goal and celebrated by pointing to his skin. The home crowd reacted with aggressiveness, throwing seats onto the sport field and hurling further abuse (The Guardian, 2020). This violent behaviour indicates the function of protest and frustration against the player (Tamir, 2020). In July 2021, racism was also the highlight in the final of the UEFA European Championship between England and Italy, as coloured English players were discriminated by their own fans, having lost to the Italians on penalties (Caselli et al. 2021). Maltese football is also no stranger to racism. In January 2021, Maya Lucia, a female footballer and Malta U-19 national team player, experienced racial abuse at the hands of parents from the rival team during a league match (Sansone, 2021).

### ***The Athlete's Viewpoint***

The subjective viewpoint of the athlete is what makes him/her resilient or susceptible to the effects of audience behaviour (Wallace et al., 2005). There is an assumption that athletes picture "home

audiences as supportive and ‘away’ audiences as unsupportive,” (Wallace et al., 2005, p.430). Furthermore, Greer (1983) and (Nevill & Holder 1999), state that the crowds’ cheering and jeering underlines the contribution offered by social support. Therefore, such behaviour does indeed influence the specific skills of individual players, producing differing outcomes for their respective teams. Having a reassuring and supportive audience drives the athletes to put more effort into their performance (Epting et al., 2011).

According to Hill and Shaw (2013), participants acknowledged that an audience present during competition led them to feel under pressure - in particular when the media, talent scouts, parents and coaches were present. Some athletes could argue that the audience could also serve as a distraction as they would want to impress the crowd with their performance and therefore, overdo it. This implies that even though the player has the skill required to perform a task, with the presence of the audience, he/she has a greater chance of choking under pressure and missing the chance to score (Ranney, 2007; Böheim et al., 2019; Harb-Wu & Krumer, 2019). This is further supported by Wallace and his colleagues (2005), who argue that supportive audiences could improve a team-based effort, but put increasing pressure on individual players to demonstrate skill-based tasks.

Environmental factors such as open versus closed venues, size of the venue, and timing of games are all factors associated with poor behaviour. Nicholson (2005), argues that game stakes (a final or a knock-out) are also a dominating factor, as high emotional levels of spectators can affect the players, and vice versa.

Research aimed at investigating the incidents of poor spectator behaviour and their impact upon youth players (aged under 12, 12-16 and 16+ respectively), has shown that negative actions such as swearing, name calling, making fun of, threatening, pushing, kicking, spitting, hitting/punching and racist comments were all experienced by youths (Sport Scotland, 2012). Even though there is a tendency to consider such acts as “part of the game”, one cannot deny the fact that they have some impact on young players’ emotional well-being, health, enjoyment of the game and their progress in sport (Sport Scotland, 2012). When experiencing poor spectator behaviour; children “just ignored it” – 18%, felt “intimidated and scared” - 13%, “it affected their performance badly” or “wanted to quit” – 19%, felt “angry” – 15%, “fed up” or “hacked off” – 23% (Sport Scotland, 2012 p.13).

The review of literature presents a background to the issue of spectators’ influence on athletes. This study seeks to investigate whether audience behaviour has a psychological impact on the players on the field of play from a Maltese perspective. Moreover, three other main research questions are outlined. In different contexts during a football match, what causes spectators to behave in a certain way? Does this impact differ with respect to youth and senior players? Could the variable of culture give different results in various environments?

## **Methodology**

The main aim of the research is to discover the feelings and emotions of the players which could contribute to other variables during the course of play, and the best way to collect such data is through the qualitative approach. This is underlined by Lichtman (2010), as she attests that the intent of qualitative research is to administer a comprehensive description and a perception of the human experience. It can give a sympathetic description to understand to what makes human phenomena, human synergy and human rhetoric. Qualitative research methods were adopted with six male and six U-15 Malta national football team players. Through face-to-face interviews, personal experiences and opinions are substantiated for data collection. Purposive, snowball and convenience sampling were utilised in this research (Mack et al., 2005).

### ***Participants***

National team players were selected (used as a requirement criteria) using the purposive method as they are usually exposed to added pressure, and are subjected to audiences in international matches.

Selecting senior and youth players has provided an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast two different age groups, and to explore whether experience and age play a role. All players were invited by through the permission granted by the Malta Football Association (MFA) to act as intermediary where three different methods of sampling were used, purposive, convenience and snowballing. The purposive method was used to satisfy the criteria of players from the national team, while convenience sampling was applied because of the availability and willingness of the players. The snowballing technique was mainly utilised to increase the number of participants among the seniors as they proved more difficult to reach due to their commitments.

### *Interview procedure*

The interviews were recorded using a Sony Mono Digital Voice Recorder (participants were informed prior to the start of meeting up) and the duration of the interview was approximately forty-five minutes. To ensure minimal distractions, interviews were conducted in private and quiet places such as offices at their club training premises.

The interviews were semi-structured, as this offers better flexibility to the interviewee in terms of replying back in any preferred way (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are targeted to get the feel of the person being interviewed as it profoundly goes into detail about the topic being discussed upon. A characteristic of semi-structured interviews is the flexibility of open-ended questions. This leaves the participant free to express further and more meticulous claims to the inquiry of the questions provided by the interviewer. Furthermore, an interviewer must be vigilant and aware of the aspect that one must not be subjective and biased through-out the interview (Oppenheim, 1992; Cohen et al., 2007).

An interview guide based on a thorough review of the relevant literature was designed (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Through peer triangulation and pilot work (Richards & Hemphill, 2017), the first guide was amended a number of times until the researchers were happy with the final version. The pilot study conducted with both the senior players and two youth players helped the interviewer in determining whether there are limitations or weaknesses within the interview design. This allowed the researchers to make the necessary amendments before the actual implementation of the interviews. As suggested by Seidman (2012), throughout the pilot study, one can investigate whether the research structure is applicable to the study as it enhances his/her experience in conducting the interview.

The first three questions in the interview served as an ice-breaker; aiming to put the interviewee at ease and to open the main questions of the study. These questions were about their footballing experience, the club they belong to and the division in which they play. The six questions that followed focused on audience behaviour during a football match. The interviewees had to relive their experiences during matches in order to discuss about any behaviour which they have witnessed throughout their sporting career. Questions followed on the influence of the audience, aiming to bring out their emotions and feelings from the stimuli projected by the crowd.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) while access to footballers was obtained through permission from the MFA. Since the study involved the U-15 and senior national team players, getting their personal consent in partaking in this study was paramount. Recruitment letters and consent forms were also sent to the parents of the U-15 players. Participants were also verbally assured that they have the right to leave the study at any point without any negative consequences and not to answer any questions which they might deem uncomfortable.

Since anonymity and confidentiality were required, all the U-15 and senior players were given fictitious names. The table below (**Table 1**) indicates the fictitious names and their respective category. The 'Y' and 'S' which accompanied the fictitious names represented youth and senior players respectively.

**Table 1.** Player Pseudonyms

U-15 Players	Senior Players
John-Y	Keith-S
Steve-Y	Christopher-S
David-Y	Matthew-S
Thomas-Y	Adam-S
Luke-Y	Nicholas-S
Philip-Y	Isaac-S

### **Data Analysis**

Procedural guidelines of a number of authors conducting interview studies were considered (Smith & McGannon, 2018; McGrath et al., 2019). The transcriptions were then read several times to ensure familiarity with the transcriptions and participants and to provide as exact a representation as possible of what was discussed during the interview (McGrath et al., 2019). Transcriptions were then analysed using thematic analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) through coding of the responses of the participants. A procedure where the investigator organises raw data into meaningful themes and allows these to emerge from the participant's own words (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Each theme needed to be defined in the clearest way possible as the researchers had to shape the analysis in respect to the opinions and experiences surfacing from the data. This was executed by issuing themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process was discussed with all the authors to provide trustworthiness and credibility (Smith & McGannon, 2018)

### **Results and Discussion**

This section aims to outline the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews and is represented by using selected verbatim quotes to highlight the players' perceptions relating to the research questions.

#### **Audience Behaviour**

Irrespective of the negative consequences which audience behaviour may bring, including violence, racism and insults, each participant in this study argued that spectators are an important part of football. The audience is seen as the 12th man on the pitch by four players, as David-Y states that it, "boosts your morale; chanting people's names and the team's name, you feel more confident, and you give your best and tend to perform better." The '12th Man' is often referred to as the power of the crowd that enhances the performance of the home team, what is known as home-advantage (BBC, 2008; Buraimo et al., 2010).

All the players interviewed considered audience behaviour as an important variable which can encourage them throughout the match. According to Steve-Y, spectators transmitted dynamic behaviour which may be deemed as an "active presence" (Glushakow, 2011), whilst Keith-S argues that although the fans could hurl insults towards him, he preferred to play in a full stadium rather than an empty one. Charness and colleagues (2003) state that the mere presence of an audience could leave an effect which is called social facilitation, being both positive and negative. Furthermore, Thomas-Y, explains:

*...without the spectators, it is boring because they add to the atmosphere, the chanting, encouraging the team, the banners, they keep you going. It is nice seeing the crowd around the packed stadium. It lightens up the game, it is an important part of football.*

Steve-Y claimed that he would run that extra mile in front of a big crowd, hence putting more effort in the match. His argument has been put forward by the evaluation-apprehension theory which states that the presence of an audience causes an increase in arousal because of the awareness of being

evaluated by someone else (Jarvis, 2006). Audience behaviour could also pose a problem. As a senior player, Nicholas-S sees Maltese spectators as supportive of other countries' teams, and leagues rather than the national Maltese players' and their league. This was also remarked by the South End Core† who believe that the Maltese would rather attend at the national stadium to watch and support England or Italy, rather than to encourage the Maltese national team to earn a positive result against such heavyweight nations (Aquilina, 2017). Similar to Norwegian supporters (Hognestad, 2006), this socio-cultural orientation might come from the fact that the Maltese fans have a big viewership of English and Italian football in their own country also through TV coverage (Galea, 2021a), which has been influenced by the 'The Language Question' in Malta, greatly affected by Anglo-Italian geopolitical relations (The English Press, 1902). Christopher-S and three other senior players believe that the Maltese audience is quite indifferent, and thus national players lack support. This comes about from the lack of enthusiasm generated by the audience.

*In Malta there is no atmosphere present. You will be losing or else you'll draw; either way there is absolute silence most of the time. If you commit a bad pass, you will hear insults shouted at you. Then, again, perfect silence. That is the way we feel on the pitch; there is totally no support.*  
(Christopher-S)

The Maltese audience seems to transmit a "passive presence" (Glushakow, 2011 p.15), and therefore variables and processes which are interrelated with physical presence such as evaluation and distracting non-verbal cues, are not present among a Maltese crowd (Glushakow, 2011).

This could be a missed opportunity to exploit the home advantage dynamics on Maltese soil. When compared to the statistical values analyzed throughout four seasons (2015-2016, 2016 – 2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019) of five major European Leagues, such as the Serie A (Italy), Ligue 1 (France), the Bundesliga (Germany), La Liga (Spain) and the Premier League (United Kingdom), home advantage determined by crowd support indicated to be an instrumental factor that contributes to enhanced player performance (Inan, 2020). Nonetheless, one must note that the study of Inan (2020) examined domestic league matches and not international ones. Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that the same variables are present. The authors of this study recall the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) 2008 match between Malta and Turkey played on the 8th of September 2007 at the Ta' Qali National stadium, with the Maltese national team achieving a respectable draw against the Turkish favourites. Coincidentally, Malta celebrates Victory Day (a national holiday) commemorating the triumph over the invading Ottoman Turks in the historic Great Siege of 1565. As a result, the stadium was full to the brim, spectator emotions were high and this had an remarkable influence on player passion and drive to succeed (The Malta Independent, 2007). Contrarily, Pollard & Armatas (2017) did not indicate that crowd support has an influence on home advantage, and thus enhanced performance for the home players. Yet, the findings did specify that the size of the attendance in the stadium contributed to wins in the group stages of World Cup qualification (Pollard & Armatas, 2017). This confirms that players could be impacted with both positive and negative influences.

### ***Positive Behaviour and Influence***

Psychological influence is not the only type of effect on the players during the game. Players can also be impacted in a physiological manner through arousal and cardiac performance (Epting et al., 2011). One of the player's states:

*Yes, if it is a motivating behaviour, one is automatically going to play better. On the contrary, if it is a demoralising one and you feel it is just, then I realise I'm not playing so well. This might make it even worse because you start panicking, losing concentration and experience palpitations. Mind you, if it is demoralising but you feel it is not fair, that can motivate me too.* (Isaac-S)

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† The South End Core is a group of Maltese nationals who support the national team in their endeavours.



According to Butler & Baumeister (1998), a supportive audience reduces the threat or distress which is accumulated from the judgmental opinions of the public. Therefore, this provides a buffer against emotional stress which enables effective performance. Overwhelmingly, all players remarked that supporting behaviour helps improve performance.

*They give courage to the players. They try to cheer them on even when they are losing. When they are going through a tough moment, they try to bring them back and help them fight for every ball and make the players competitive again. (Keith-S)*

Referring to the statement above, Keith-S revealed that when the crowd is cheering the players, they feel like they have an added boost in motivation to work harder in the game, just like Steve-Y.

### **Negative Behaviour and Influence**

Negative audience behaviour can be defined as verbal and emotional abuse, vandalism, pitch invasion, intimidation and actual violence (Nicholson & Hoye, 2005). Players in this study confirmed that for them it varies from insulting, shouting, taunting, and discouraging. Keith-S pointed out that in the presence of insulting comments, he gets distracted:

*A supporter from the start till the end of the match will insult you, again and again. That influences you in a negative way in matches. The aim of the supporter is maybe to try and motivate you so you will start playing better. When in reality, it does not, it damages you more; you will keep on performing badly.*

Three of the players (two seniors and one U-15) remarked that when the audience hurls abuse towards them personally, their performance will improve through motivation to frustrate the opposing spectators. According to Geukes (2012), although pressure could make athletes suffer, such situations could also bring an improvement in performance. Furthermore, when it comes to the U-15 players, supporters usually consists of the parents and this underlines familiarity which neither promotes performance facilitation nor performance decrement (Oviatt, 2005).

According to Oviatt (2005), the performance of inexperienced players in front of an audience decreases. On the other hand, experienced players will in turn perform better. This explains why U-15 players might be more susceptible to be influenced by certain behaviour, particularly if it is negative, during a match. When compared to the senior counterparts, only two U-15 players stated that they manage to ignore spectator behaviour. A number of senior players admitted that the ability to block any type of behaviour (mostly negative) was acquired through years of experience.

### **Relationship between what happens on the pitch and the audience**

Three senior players and one U15 player, acknowledged that the audience might be a detriment to them, however, it depends on the course of the game. Christopher-S stated:

*If you will be losing, you will receive a lot of insults. When we are winning, everyone is kind of alright. There is no balance. Even in a match itself, you'll be drawn in the first fifty minutes, and there is tension; everybody shouting. When you score, all of a sudden you are like a God to them.*

The views of the players show that there is a correlation between the behaviour of spectators and what happens on the pitch. What makes Maltese football different is that there is a tendency for the audience not to support the team when losing, instead, negative behaviour such as insults are targeting their own favorite team. Participants in this study have shown that this is mostly prevalent in senior matches. This claim is rejected by two youth players, who argue that even when losing, the fans (or parents) keep on cheering them on to obtain positive results.

### **The Impact of Important Fixtures (High Stakes Matches)**

According to Dotson et al. (2013), when the teams are evenly matched, more suspense is conveyed from the spectators, hence there is more pressure on the players. The majority of the senior players in

this study argued that high stakes matches inject some form of tension throughout. In addition, one senior player also highlighted that pressure increases as there is a lot more to lose. Nicholson and Hoyer (2005) state that spectators and players could influence each other due to the high emotional levels felt. According to Adam-S, although pressure is present during important games, psychological skills are acquired to block the insults and focus more on the support. Another player argued that there is a high influence in the atmosphere caused by the spectators in such matches. Matthew-S remarked:

*Of course, there is a high influence if it's a knock-out stage or a final. Knowing that there's a lot to lose makes it even more exciting. When the stakes are high the spectators themselves might have a lot to lose because they might bet money. The thought of losing might be more thrilling, subconsciously, than winning.*

In comparison to the opinion of the majority of the senior players, a study by Hill and Shaw (2013), reported that players felt that important games may be the cause of choking under pressure, referring to the significant decline in athletic performance under stressful conditions (Hill & Shaw, 2013). High expectations from a supportive audience can make the task seem more difficult to the team due to low levels of performance caused by pressure (Butler & Baumeister, 1998). The claim of high expectations coming from fans is backed by the general overview of the replies of the U-15 players. Other types of behaviours experienced, and which are projected from the spectators include "hot temperedness", "creating a lot of noise", "teasing" and "being excited". A common factor featuring in important matches is that spectators predominantly transmit tension and pressure. According to John Y, spectators put pressure on players because they want them to win. Two U-15 players also discussed that the excitement and noise can get too much as communication with team-mates will be disrupted on the pitch. Matches of high importance can also lead to arguments, physical violence and insulting due to the culminating amount of tension on the stands, and most players have implied and this could negatively influence performance, as David Y states:

*Sometimes they shout at each other. They do not even care about the game, and we need to concentrate. It is difficult for us because when we listen to them fighting, we actually look and the stands are close to the pitch so it is easy to hear them shouting.*

Only two U-15 players said that during important games positive support could be experienced most prominently. This might indicate that pressure experienced by the youth players would be very high, which overwhelms any positive feedback which the spectators convey. In contrast however, pressure experienced by youth players due to the high stakes of the match may at times help performance, therefore resulting in better outcomes (Geukes, 2012). The seniors and U-15's experience is relatively the same when it comes to decisive matches. Since the U-15 national team players are not as experienced as their senior counterparts, they could be more intimidated by a larger turnout at the stadium. Seniors might have already mastered the psychological skills in order to block any negative behaviour from influencing them.

### **Home-Advantage**

Five senior and five youth players see home-advantage as a positive experience when competing at a national level. According to Waters and Lovell (2002), players feel more positive, confident and also anxious at home, taking it for granted that it is harder to win a match away from home. When playing at home:

*...they pump you up. They put adrenaline in you and you want to win not only for yourself but for them especially at home. It gives you that extra boost. When you are away you lack something, you need a home crowd with you. (Thomas-Y)*

A supportive audience at the stadium is one of the factors which gives the home team that extra edge (Courneya & Carron, 1992; Ponzio & Scoppa, 2014). Three seniors and one youth argued that playing away in national games offers a disadvantage:

*You have 14,000 cheering the other team, and when you make a mistake, you have 14,000 whistling and making fun of you, it is not like you are playing in the street, maybe you have your mother or father watching. You have 14,000 people plus the ones on television. So, you get nervous, you start being afraid of making mistakes... (Adam-S)*

One could refer to the audience viewing the match from television as ‘implied presence’. This makes the performer aware of such attention, which might also contribute to increased pressure (Glushakow, 2011). Maltese national team players both at club and national level, do not experience a large turnout when compared to other countries. This might make the National players nervous due to the crowd size, density, and the media which might pile up external pressure (Anderson, 2010). Hence, this might be one of the reasons for which there might be a drop in performance in away matches for the visiting team (Charness et al., 2003). Even though there is an acknowledgement of having an advantage at home by the majority of the players, two senior and one youth player argue that they prefer playing away due to high expectations at home. In contrast, Philip-Y saw home advantage only as a mental variable, hence no added boost as other players claimed. Christopher-S also complained about the lack of support football players have in national matches when compared to a foreign audience:

*Playing at home or away there’s no difference because even during the National Maltese anthem, you do not hear anyone singing it except, again, the South End Core.... I will be asking myself, am I playing at home? It is very sad. Very sad!*

As results show, the influence of home-advantage is present but it ultimately comes down to the viewpoint of the respective player (Anderson, 2010; Jarvis, 2006).

### **Spectator Violence**

Violence from spectators is no rare occurrence in football as all the twelve players in this study have confirmed, and nine of them have experienced “missile throwing” during a match. Even though the characteristics of aggression and violence are similar, violence is a behavioural component, whilst aggression is considered as motivation (Russel & Ward, 2002). Keith-S compared aggressiveness with cheering and enthusiasm, expressing that he enjoyed it whilst also distinguishing it from violent behaviour:

*I enjoy it. There’s a difference between being aggressive and violent. An aggressive atmosphere creates cheering and enthusiasm and will always motivate a player, as long as it stays aggressive. If it starts getting violent then it’s something different.*

Similarly, Matthew-S viewed aggressive behaviour as an opportunity to play better as it enticed and motivated him. In the Maltese context, Aquilina (2008) found that the audience entices violence where the main principle of spectator violence is to attract media coverage and not for controversial issues (Russel & Ward, 2002). High expectations might be another causal factor when trying to understand the motives behind spectator violence, as three players explained. They see a relationship with what is going on the pitch and in the stands. Tamir (2020) argues that aggressive behaviour comes from frustration.

*When the stakes are high maybe the spectators themselves possibly have a lot to lose themselves, not because the team they side with is losing but if the stakes are high maybe even there someone’s stakes in the sense that they play money. So, they might also have something to lose, so it makes it a bit more exciting. The thought of losing might be more thrilling, subconsciously than winning.  
(Matthew-S)*

Only one U-15 player out of 12 feels that aggressive behaviour encouraged him to play better. Also, just four of the U-15’s, have experienced some sort of violent behaviour during the match. They all commonly argued about the distractions imposed from violence, which in turn impedes their

performance. The fact that most of the spectators were their parents or close relatives was an extra variable for distraction:

*Most of the crowd are parents so if you know there has been a fight or an argument you will say “was that my parent?” if you cannot see them. I would worry on what’s happening in the game then we will take care of it later. (Philip-Y)*

Parents are seen as instigating violent behaviour in nurseries and this makes it a worrying situation (Aquilina, 2008), even more so when they are expected to be role models for their children. Although we know that parent violent behaviour is problematic, there is little awareness on how they should actually behave during youth competitions (Omli et al., 2008; Azimi & Tamminen, 2019). Luke-Y suggested that more security and rules on the ground could be forced, together with more education campaigns aimed at spectators and parents.

### **Spectator Racism**

Racist behaviour normally consists of hurling insults and racist chanting, usually towards a coloured player. It could be perceived as a problem with incidents mostly happening in men’s sports and to a lower occurrence, in youth football (Peucker, 2009). Nevertheless, on September 30th 2021, coloured player Glen Kamara who plays for Scottish club Rangers, was booed by schoolchildren accompanied by a few adults on the stands, while he played against Sparta Prague of the Czech Republic (Lane, 2021). The match was initially set to be played behind closed doors after Sparta Prague was handed a crowd attendance ban following racist abuse in a similar incident against another player in August. However, the youths who replaced them started booing Kamara whenever he touched the ball (Lane, 2021). Most of the players stated that racial insults were nothing new with Isaac-S arguing that:

*They insult them. Kind of ‘go back to where you came from’ since the person will be coloured. ‘Go up a tree’ or something like that, “go back with a boat”.*

Four of the youth players have experienced some sort of racial slurs towards a coloured player during matches, whilst five seniors admitted that they have witnessed such behaviour. According to an article published in by the Press Association (The Guardian, 2014), 57% of players have witnessed racism and a further 24% have been subjected to racist abuse towards black and ethnic minority players. One senior player, Adam-S, argued that due to racism, some players were ready to abandon their career, whilst one youth player stated that coloured players are more vulnerable to criticism than other players. Even though Peucker (2009) reported that racist behaviour is less common in youth games, it still is a worrying factor that four of the six U-15 players stated that they have seen such behaviour.

In fact, racial slurs during football games in Malta are regular according to international goalkeeper Rashed Al-Tumi (Carabott, 2020). In a separate occurrence, goalkeeper Julani Archibald was also racially insulted by a supporter at the Tony Bezzina stadium during the BOV Premier League match between Santa Lucia and Floriana FC (Galea, 2021b). In response, the MFA charged disciplinary actions against the perpetrator combined with police accusations (Malta Football Association, 2021a). Moreover, a local Premier Division club did launch an anti-racism campaign to raise awareness about discrimination in the Maltese islands in 2020 (European Commission, 2020). Seven players in this study see racist behaviour as a way to make the player lose focus on the game and they have confessed in having experienced it. Therefore, this gives an indication that racist behaviour is present in the stands in Malta.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Both senior and youth players may be influenced by the audience and action needs to be taken to address the influence that negative behaviour could leave on players. As pointed out by one of the youth players, football nurseries may need to organise a yearly compulsory educational seminar on ethics, fair play and respect for parents. Sampol et al., (2019) and Azimi and Tamminen (2019),

recommend providing parent education programmers as an effective strategy for curbing such behaviours and positively influencing youth sport.

Familiarising the spectators with the rules of football and etiquette through the use of placards and brochures in the stadium can help to educate them even further. Penalties for breaking the rules can include deduction of points through a disciplinary point system for youth games, similar to the anti-racism rules which the MFA has recently published (Malta Football Association, 2021b). Football players' psychological problems can be reduced by creating cognitive-behavioral intervention (Bakhshalipour et al., 2021). Other initiatives could include developing codes of conduct, dividing team spectator areas, not allowing parents to make noise, and introducing "fair play" points/awards for positive behaviour (Omli et al., 2008). In fact, the Maltese Football Association did conduct a series of parent education courses over the past years in order for parents to learn how they can support their children in a better manner (Muscat, 2017). This was followed up by the Institute for Physical Education and Sport at the University of Malta, who for the second consecutive year are organizing online sport parent talks with the aim of educating parents further (Newspoint, 2021).

With respect to senior level, increasing the presence of stewards, security personnel and police would help to curb deviant behaviour. Furthermore, campaigns initiated by the Football Associations to encourage fans to cheer could be implemented through slogans and banners set up in the stadiums. As a senior player suggested, the big fan groups could be moved to the centre of the stadium. This will spread the support which such football die-hards may transfer to the other spectators present. Awards for fair play and respect could be awarded for exemplary demeanour for players and for groups of spectators during the game which will be also reinforced with a zero-tolerance stance for racist abuse and violence. This can be conveyed through public address notices before the commencement of the match.

This study has shown that there is indeed an effect on the players' physical and psychological state through the course of the game. The data gathered implies that the behaviour of the spectators is not consistent, and changes according to the circumstances and to the player's character and perspectives on the field of play. Moreover, it was noted that in Malta the behaviour of the audience has a connection to the result during a match. This means that if supporters are backing a team, and the team is losing, the negative behaviour of the supporters will influence the players both mentally and physically. In the small Maltese community, football is greatly celebrated. However, it is historically shaped by a range of cultures which undoubtedly portrays the Maltese as constantly looking over their shoulders to see what others are up to (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). As a result, this study is unique in that it explores the behaviour of football fans from the tiny nation which sits between Africa and the rest of Europe.

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