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Understanding enthusiasm: structure, function, and social regulation

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Chapter 1

Introduction

... the more his body sank into it the more water ran out over the tub. As this pointed out the way to explain the case in question, without a moment's delay, and transported with joy, he jumped out of the tub and rushed home naked, crying with a loud voice that he had found what he was seeking; for as he ran, he shouted repeatedly in Greek, "Ευρηκα, ευρηκα"

(Vitruvius, 1914, Book IX, Preface)

According to Vitruvius, a Roman architect writing in the late first century before the Common Era, Archimedes had his famous insight while stepping into a bath. This episode is commonly cited as the prototypical example of sudden insight, but it also illustrates the core features of enthusiasm. The idea that occurred to Archimedes did not remain a purely cognitive event; it activated his entire body. He was overcome with positive energy and compelled to act immediately. He felt an urgent need to share his discovery with the world. So intense was this need that he did not even pause to get dressed before running through the streets of Syracuse.

A spark of enthusiasm: From field experience to academic inquiry

During my time as a market researcher, I was tasked with conducting customer satisfaction research for a law firm, using face-to-face interviews as the primary method of data collection. One of these interviews remains particularly vivid in my memory. I was speaking with one of the firm's most prominent clients. I had prepared my questions carefully and was eager to uncover valuable insights. However, after just ten minutes, it became clear that the respondent had no suggestions for improvement. Instead, he spoke with striking energy and positivity about his relationship with the firm. He was openly and unmistakably enthusiastic about the services provided by the law firm.

Despite the respondent's positivity, I experienced a slight sense of panic. Our organization had been well paid to conduct this research, and now it seemed I would have to return to the client empty-handed. The purpose of the interview was to identify concrete

areas for improvement, yet none had emerged. Instead, I was left with a strong but unstructured impression of enthusiasm, an affective state that did not fit easily within the evaluative frameworks we typically used. I was struck not only by the affective force of his response, but by the fact that, as researchers, we had no formal tools to register or understand it.

That something important was being overlooked became evident when I started probing further. In an effort to fill the remaining time, and perhaps find something useful, I began asking questions about the respondent's enthusiasm. Where did it come from? What did he do with it? He then shared that, seven years earlier, the law firm had saved both him and his company. He was still visibly emotional when recounting the experience and explained that, since then, he had referred approximately three new clients per year to the firm. In total, around twenty clients had become customers as a result of his recommendations. Behind his enthusiasm was a compelling narrative, one that we, as researchers, typically failed to uncover or even consider worth exploring.

Around the same time, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) emerged as a new metric for measuring customer engagement. While the use of recommendation-related questions such as "Would you recommend this service to your friends or colleagues?" was already common in market research, the NPS framework introduced a notable shift in emphasis. Specifically, it highlighted the responses at the extreme positive end of a ten-point scale, namely, the scores of 9 and 10, as indicators of particularly strong customer engagement. These high scores were interpreted not merely as signs of satisfaction, but as expressions of enthusiasm.

This conceptual shift resonated with my earlier field experiences. It suggested that enthusiasm might not only be observable in qualitative interviews, but also traceable in large-scale quantitative datasets. Motivated by this insight, I began systematically analyzing the behavior of customers who had provided such high ratings. In doing so, I identified a pattern: People who scored high on enthusiasm shared their positive experiences more often and tended to influence others in their social environment. This line of inquiry ultimately led to the publication of "The Superpromoter" (Vogelaar, 2011), a book in which I explored the role of enthusiastic customers as informal advocates and

agents of growth. The book argued that beyond satisfaction and loyalty, it is enthusiasm that drives meaningful word-of-mouth behavior and emotional contagion within networks. While this work was primarily applied in focus, it marked the beginning of a more systematic investigation into the psychological underpinnings and social functions of enthusiasm.

Over time, and through my work with a range of national and international organizations, I observed that the impact of enthusiasm extended far beyond customer engagement alone. In various corporate settings, simply highlighting the presence of highly enthusiastic customer often had a powerful effect on internal stakeholders. When employees were confronted with genuine, vivid expressions of appreciation and enthusiasm, it appeared to evoke a sense of pride, motivation, and renewed commitment. Gradually, I came to understand enthusiasm as a broader psychological and social force, relevant not only for marketing, but for leadership, employee motivation, and interpersonal dynamics more generally.

Before turning to a formal academic investigation, I developed a conceptual framework to capture the dynamics of enthusiasm in applied contexts. This framework distinguishes three interrelated processes: Flame, Flow, and Flood. Flame refers to the initial spark of enthusiasm. It refers to finding and fanning this flame on a personal and an organizational level, much like the symbolic Olympic flame that burns throughout the Games. Flow represents the state in which this energy is translated into synchronized, productive interaction, as seen in musical harmony or collaborative group performance. Flood captures the social spreading of enthusiasm, as seen in viral ideas, cultural waves, or sudden collective adoption. These insights eventually led to the publication of “The Enthusiasm Trilogy: Flame, Flow, and Flood” (Vogelaar, 2014).

Since the publication of my first book, I had been searching for scientific evidence to support what I observed in practice, but I found surprisingly little. Enthusiasm was rarely examined as a distinct construct within psychological research. After more than a decade of working on customer and employee enthusiasm through applied research, keynotes, and workshops in a variety of international settings, the need for scientific grounding became increasingly urgent. Although I had gathered a substantial amount of empirical insight

through applied work, it lacked the theoretical validation required for academic integration. The absence of conceptual and empirical clarity marked the starting point for a more systematic investigation. The present dissertation is the outcome of that endeavor.

Enthusiasm through the ages

From divine inspiration to philosophical suspicion

The meaning and significance of enthusiasm have changed considerably over the course of human history. What was once considered a form of divine possession gradually evolved into a subject of philosophical debate. In the following section, I offer an overview of how various philosophers and historical figures have addressed the concept of enthusiasm, focusing specifically on those who explicitly use the term or direct equivalents in other languages, such as Begeisterung in German. I have mainly focused on thinkers who treat enthusiasm as a distinct and meaningful phenomenon, rather than as a passing metaphor or secondary theme.

Enthusiasm as divine madness in ancient Greece

In ancient Greece, enthusiasm or enthousiasmos (ἐνθουσιασμός) was closely linked to divine inspiration (Verhoeven, 1972). Derived from éntheos (ἔνθεος), literally "having a god within," the term described a state in which poets, prophets, and orators were believed to speak with divine inspiration. One of the earliest discussions of the concept appears in Plato's short dialogue Ion, in which Socrates converses with the rhapsode Ion, a professional performer of Homer's poetry. In this dialogue, Plato explores the nature of artistic inspiration and distinguishes it from rational expertise (technē), which is based on knowledge and method. Plato compares enthusiasm to a magnetic chain, in which a magnet (the Muse) imparts a divine force to iron rings (poets), enabling them to transmit this energy to others. Enthusiasm was therefore regarded not only as divine inspiration but also as a state intended to pass on divine messages to others.

Socrates observed that most people regard the enthusiastic person as mad or confused (parakinoon), failing to recognize that such a person is filled with the divine (enthousiadzoon). He considered enthusiasm a distinctive form of irrationality, not easily distinguishable from ordinary madness. In Ion, this ambiguity is deliberate, serving to express the vulnerable nature of enthusiasm. By contrasting the seemingly irrational inspiration of poets with the rational expertise of philosophers, Plato emphasized the marginal position of poetry. Poets were excluded from access to true knowledge, which placed their work closer to insanity than to intellectual authority. At the same time, this exclusion reinforced the idea that their achievements were not the result of deliberate method but rather the outcome of divine gifts.

In contrast to Plato's emphasis on divine madness, Aristotle paid less explicit attention to enthusiasm as a separate phenomenon. Yet his distinction between pathos (emotions as experiences that befall us), ethos (character and moral disposition), and logos (reasoned argument) offers a conceptual framework that remains relevant. Whereas Plato located enthusiasm outside rational control, Aristotle situated emotions within a broader view of human agency: emotions arise as pathos, but they gain meaning and direction through ethos, and they can be tempered and articulated through logos. Later commentators, such as Verhoeven (1972), have drawn on this distinction to describe enthusiasm as something that overtakes a person (pathos), yet at the same time involves their active engagement (ethos). Building on this interpretation, enthusiasm can thus be understood not only as active engagement but also as a force that provides direction, since ethos connects emotional energy to orientation and purpose.

The Enlightenment's wariness

The tension between divine inspiration, emotional passion, and rational control continued to echo through late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, where enthusiasm was alternately celebrated as a sign of inspiration and feared as a source of excess. This longstanding ambivalence set the stage for its eventual critique in the Enlightenment, when enthusiasm came to be regarded with pronounced suspicion, particularly in the English philosophical context (Heyd, 1995). An influential early example was Henry More's "Enthusiasmus Triumphatus" (More, 1656/1966), which

sought to distinguish between true divine inspiration and the delusions of religious fanaticism. This critical stance was later further developed by John Locke, who devoted an entire chapter of "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (Locke, 1706/1975) to a critique of enthusiasm, characterizing it as an unrestrained religious zeal based on personal conviction rather than reason, and warning of its dangers to rational inquiry and civil order. David Hume (1741/1987) similarly described enthusiasm in his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," as a dangerous religious and political passion. However, Hume also recognized that enthusiasm, as exemplified by figures such as Joan of Arc, could inspire admirable courage and significant contributions to society (Coleman, 2012). It should also be noted that even at the height of this distrust there were thinkers who sought to rehabilitate the concept. Among them was Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, who in "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm" (1708/2001) argued that when tempered by good sense and moral taste, enthusiasm could be a vital and elevating force in human life rather than a threat to reason (Heyd, 1995).

Kant and Hegel: Enthusiasm between reason and progress

Immanuel Kant continued this more nuanced approach, moving further away from the explicitly religious framework that had long shaped the discourse on enthusiasm, yet without entirely abandoning the caution of earlier thinkers. As Lyotard (2009) explains, Kant saw in the enthusiasm of the spectators of the French Revolution a "sign of history," a symbolic indication of humanity's moral capacity for progress.[1] While he distinguished such enthusiasm from dangerous forms of fanaticism, he regarded it as a legitimate and even necessary motivational force, provided it remained under the guidance of reason. As Elster (2021) points out, Kant draws a clear distinction between Enthusiasmus (enthusiasm) and Schwärmerei (often translated as "visionary rapture"). He uses the term Schwärmerei

1. Kant focused on spectators rather than participants because the latter might be driven by personal interest, political ambition, or other motives unrelated to moral principle. Spectators, by contrast, had nothing to gain directly from the events, yet could still feel genuine enthusiasm and moral approval at the struggle for freedom and rights. For Kant, it was precisely this disinterested and morally grounded enthusiasm that revealed a predisposition in humanity toward moral advancement.

to refer to individuals who believe they are directly inspired by God, a view closely aligned with David Hume's understanding of enthusiasm, which Kant regarded as a form of fanaticism. Enthusiasm, by contrast, is sharply differentiated from this concept. Kant (1790/ 1913, p. 122) asserts, "Die Idee des Guten mit Affect heißt der Enthusiasm. Dieser Gemüthszustand scheint erhaben zu sein, dermaßen daß man gemeiniglich vorgiebt: ohne ihn könne nichts Großes ausgerichtet werden" (The idea of the good, with affect, is called enthusiasm. This state of mind seems to be sublime, so much so that it is commonly maintained that without it nothing great can be accomplished), implying that enthusiasm functions as a necessary condition for achieving significant accomplishments[2]. Nevertheless, Kant adds important qualifications to this praise. He warns that enthusiasm can become excessive and describes it as "blind" either in the selection of its goals or the means to achieve them. Even when guided by reason, an enthusiast may pursue morally commendable goals while failing to identify the most effective methods for realizing them. This observation aligns with Béatrice Allouche-Pourcel's (2010, p.105) argument that enthusiasm illustrates the principle that "the best can be the enemy of the good"**.**

As Clewis (2018) explains, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offers a link between the Enlightenment's cautious view of enthusiasm and the more positive appreciation that followed. Hegel shared the Enlightenment concern that enthusiasm could become excessive or misguided, but he also saw its potential value. He understood enthusiasm (Begeisterung) as a powerful and meaningful force that could drive important developments in politics and art, as long as it remained connected to reason. In this way, Hegel helped shift the idea of enthusiasm from something dangerous to something that could play a positive role in human progress.

[2] This statement closely parallels Ralph Waldo Emerson's later and more widely known claim in his 1841 essay Circles that "nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm," in which he presents enthusiasm as an indispensable force for both personal achievement and societal advancement (Emerson, 1841/2023).

Romantic revival: Enthusiasm as creative and emotional vitality

The Romantic movement, emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, renewed the celebration of enthusiasm as an authentic expression of creativity, artistic genius, and emotional depth. Enthusiasm was seen not merely as a force to be restrained but as an essential source of inspiration and moral vitality. As Mee (2003) explains, enthusiasm became recognized as a vital emotional influx that poetry channels, necessary for great poetry though requiring regulation to avoid descending into chaotic or misplaced excitement. Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth sought to balance deep enthusiasm with self-discipline, while Blake embraced it as an all-encompassing power. Furthermore, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, preceding the Romantic era, profoundly influenced these ideals by emphasizing passion and enthusiasm rooted in a direct, uncorrupted connection to nature. Within Romantic thought, enthusiasm also served as a counterpoint to bourgeois values such as rationality and individualism, instead embodying a communal and embodied emotional expression that was central to Romantic poetics (Mee, 2003).

Modern philosophy and enthusiasm: Neglect and critical suspicion

In contemporary philosophy, enthusiasm is rarely treated as a central concept. While earlier philosophical traditions occasionally praised it as a virtue or divine gift, modern thinkers tend to approach enthusiasm with critical distance or outright suspicion, if they engage with it at all. According to Bösel (2008), this attitude may be understood in light of the catastrophic consequences of ideological mass movements in the twentieth century. The Nazi regime, for example, systematically appropriated the language and imagery of collective enthusiasm, transforming it into a political instrument of mass mobilization and control (Kershaw, 2001). This led philosophers to associate intense emotional currents with fanaticism, manipulation, and the erosion of critical judgment.

Besides the suspicion caused by recent political history, some philosophers also critique the role of enthusiasm in consumer culture and the performance-driven ethos of late modernity. Byung-Chul Han (2015) argues that in a society governed by self-optimization and constant positivity, genuine enthusiasm has become rare. The artificial

excitement demanded by employers, he suggests, produces not vitality but exhaustion, contributing to widespread burnout. In the Netherlands, Coen Simon (2014) offers a related critique, warning that enthusiasm often functions as a substitute for genuine knowledge, reducing discourse to loud opinion rather than informed insight. More than forty years earlier, Verhoeven (1972) had already voiced a similar concern. He warned against the commodification of enthusiasm in contemporary culture. According to Verhoeven, it cannot be imposed at will, and the obligation to appear enthusiastic leads to imitation rather than authenticity. What remains is a hollowed version of the phenomenon, shaped less by inner conviction than by social norms and external pressures. Although Verhoeven is critical of inauthentic or externally imposed forms of enthusiasm, he differs from many modern philosophers in ultimately affirming its value. He even calls it indispensable, particularly in education.

Empirical foundations: Mapping the study of enthusiasm

Although much of the research in psychology has traditionally emphasized the adaptive role of negative emotions (Roseman et al., 2020), recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in the functions of positive emotions. Since the emergence of the positive psychology movement, scholars have increasingly highlighted how positive emotions contribute not only to subjective well-being but also to adaptive functioning and resilience (Fredrickson, 2013; Seligman, 2002). This has resulted in extensive studies on awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), gratitude (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), hope (Averill et al., 1990), joy (Johnson, 2020), and pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007). The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2013) provides a unifying explanation by suggesting that positive emotions expand people's thought–action repertoires and build enduring psychological and social resources, thereby enhancing long-term survival prospects and social cohesion.

Although enthusiasm has attracted attention in philosophical debates and evolutionary theorizing, systematic empirical research on this emotion remains scarce. Compared to the other positive emotions mentioned above, enthusiasm has received relatively little focused attention. Nevertheless, some scholars have begun to examine

its distinctive role. The studies that exist are scattered across psychology, education, organizational science, consumer research, political science, and related disciplines, and they vary considerably in their scope and methodology. In the following overview, I compile empirical work in which enthusiasm has been explicitly measured or analyzed, whether as a primary construct or as part of broader investigations.

Empirical evidence from physiological and cognitive research

Physiological research supports the view that enthusiasm functions as an approach-oriented emotion that motivates individuals toward action and engagement. In one study, Shiota et al. (2011) induced five discrete positive emotions (anticipatory enthusiasm, amusement, attachment love, nurturant love, and awe) using autobiographical recall and film clips while recording autonomic nervous system responses such as heart rate, skin conductance, and respiration. Their results demonstrated that enthusiasm had a distinctive physiological profile, consistent with an approach-oriented state preparing individuals for reward seeking and goal pursuit.

Neurocognitive work provides complementary support. Falk (2012), using fMRI in a message-sharing paradigm, found that stronger activation in brain regions involved in reward valuation (ventromedial prefrontal cortex) and social cognition (dorsomedial prefrontal cortex) predicted which messages participants later shared with enthusiasm. These neural signatures suggest that reward and social motivation mechanisms underlie the spread of enthusiastic communication. Extending this communicative perspective, Viegas et al. (2021) introduced the Entheos multimodal dataset of TED Talks and showed that enthusiasm can be reliably recognized through vocal, facial, and textual cues, with multimodal models classifying enthusiasm with high accuracy.

Cognitive research that has examined enthusiasm directly shows that it shapes judgment and decision making in systematic ways. Griskevicius et al. (2010) induced enthusiasm through autobiographical recall and found that participants in this state were more likely to accept weak persuasive arguments, suggesting increased reliance on heuristics in contexts that signal opportunity. Druckman and McDermott (2008) also induced enthusiasm, among other emotions, before asking participants to make risky

choices framed in terms of potential gains or losses. Their results showed that participants experiencing enthusiasm were more willing to take risks and were less influenced by framing effects, highlighting the role of enthusiasm in orienting individuals toward action under uncertainty.

Other studies provide indirect support through investigations of related high-approach positive states. Gable and Harmon-Jones (2008) used picture-viewing tasks with affective stimuli that varied in motivational intensity and measured attentional scope with a global–local letter task. They found that high-approach positive states narrowed attention to goal-relevant cues, contrary to the general assumption that positive affect broadens cognition. Follow-up experiments confirmed that attentional narrowing was driven by motivational intensity rather than valence, occurring for both high-approach positive states and negative states such as disgust, but not for less intense emotions (Domachowska et al., 2016). Price and Harmon-Jones (2010) similarly found that approach-motivated positive affect biased cognitive categorization toward goal-relevant categories, while Gable and Poole (2012) demonstrated that such states led participants to underestimate elapsed time, suggesting that high-approach positive affect accelerates subjective time perception. Although these studies did not measure enthusiasm specifically, their findings are consistent with its motivational profile.

Taken together, both direct and indirect evidence suggests that enthusiasm does not function as a diffuse positive mood but rather as a high-intensity approach state that channels attention, judgment, and decision making toward the pursuit of valued goals.

Empirical evidence from education

The most extensive body of research on enthusiasm has been conducted in educational settings. Early intervention studies examined whether teachers could be trained to display greater enthusiasm. Bettencourt et al. (1983) provided enthusiasm training to teachers and observed their classrooms. Students of trained teachers were more frequently on-task, although improvements in achievement were inconsistent. Streeter (1986) similarly trained teachers and videotaped their lessons, with subsequent student surveys showing that trained teachers' enthusiasm enhanced students' attitudes toward reading.

Beyond these early training efforts, subsequent research has consistently shown that teacher enthusiasm predicts positive student outcomes. Patrick et al. (2000) combined classroom observations with self-reports and demonstrated that enthusiasm was the strongest predictor of students' intrinsic motivation and vitality among a range of positive teacher behaviors, such as knowledge of subject, preparedness, and clarity of presentation.

Wheeless et al. (2011) provided further evidence by surveying 570 university students and examining how instructors' communication behaviors affected students' intent to persist in college. They found that enthusiasm, along with immediacy and perceived similarity, predicted perceived instructor credibility, which was operationalized as students' perception of the instructor's competence, trustworthiness, and caring.
This perceived credibility, in turn, strongly influenced persistence intentions. Among all behaviors studied, enthusiasm made the greatest contribution to credibility. The authors conclude that, beyond boosting motivation and vitality as shown in earlier research, enthusiasm also contributes to students' intent to continue their studies. Moè (2016) experimentally manipulated delivery style by presenting reading passages either enthusiastically or neutrally. Students in the enthusiastic condition recalled more information, reported higher intrinsic motivation, and felt that time passed more quickly. More recently, Valentín et al. (2022) extended this experimental tradition using video-based instruction in elementary schools. Students who viewed enthusiastic teachers reported greater motivation and achieved higher performance than those exposed to neutral delivery.

While these studies highlight the positive effects of teacher enthusiasm on student motivation and performance, other lines of research have focused on clarifying the nature and structure of enthusiasm itself. Kunter et al. (2011) demonstrated that teacher enthusiasm is not a unitary construct but consists of at least two dimensions, enthusiasm for teaching and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Enthusiasm for teaching was more strongly related to teachers' occupational well-being and to classroom characteristics, particularly higher student enjoyment and lower levels of disruption, whereas enthusiasm for the subject matter showed weaker and largely nonsignificant associations.

A growing body of research has also distinguished between experienced and displayed enthusiasm. Keller et al. (2014) analyzed teacher and student surveys with

multilevel structural equation modeling and found that dispositional teacher enthusiasm predicted student interest only when students perceived the teacher as enthusiastic. Keller et al. (2018) extended this approach by identifying four lesson-level profiles that combined teacher self-reports of experienced enthusiasm with student ratings of displayed enthusiasm. Students reported the highest levels of enjoyment when both forms of enthusiasm were high, whereas misalignment between felt and displayed enthusiasm diminished positive outcomes. Interestingly, in the condition where teachers were perceived as enthusiastic but did not report high levels of experienced enthusiasm, students still reported more enjoyment than when enthusiasm was only internally experienced, indicating that enthusiasm needs to be expressed to generate positive effects. However, while the display of enthusiasm benefits students, it may have different implications for teachers themselves. Taxer and Frenzel (2018) found that teachers who displayed enthusiasm without experiencing genuine enjoyment reported poorer occupational well-being. Pretenders reported significantly lower self-efficacy, higher burnout, and lower job satisfaction. These findings underscore that enthusiasm can be highly beneficial for students, but that its expression must also be authentic to support teachers' own motivation and health.

Empirical evidence from leadership and organizational contexts

Enthusiasm has also been examined as a key factor in organizational life, extending from leadership charisma, entrepreneurship, and workplace dynamics. Bono and Ilies (2006) experimentally manipulated leaders' emotional expressions. Leaders who displayed enthusiasm, excitement, and optimism were rated as more effective and put followers in a more positive mood. Damen et al. (2008) reinforced this point by combining experimental manipulations of leader affective displays in speeches with field surveys in organizations. Across both designs, enthusiasm was the only affective display consistently linked to charisma attributions and the transfer of positive affect. More recent evidence extends these findings to group-level processes. Gonçalves et al. (2024) surveyed employees in Portuguese organizations and found that leaders' enthusiasm significantly predicted employees' perceived performance. Importantly, this relationship was largely mediated by higher group satisfaction and more positive emotions within teams, indicating

that enthusiasm operates both through direct influence and by shaping the broader emotional climate. Laguna et al. (2017) further found that enthusiasm both fuels and is fueled by personal resources, as entrepreneurs who reported higher enthusiasm also developed stronger self-efficacy and work engagement over time.

Some studies have examined how enthusiasm shapes workplace dynamics. Basch and Fisher (2000) analyzed events reported by hotel employees and found that enthusiasm was most often elicited by goal achievement, recognition, challenging tasks, and involvement in planning, confirming its strong association with achievement-related events in organizational life. Rego and Cunha (2008) demonstrated that opportunities for learning and personal development significantly increased employees' enthusiasm, which in turn predicted higher self-reported performance. They also found that stress was negatively related to enthusiasm. Extending this line of research, Rego et al. (2009) found that perceptions of camaraderie at work were positively related to employees' enthusiasm. In a complementary vein, diary studies of German employees showed that enthusiasm was consistently triggered by positive work events, particularly goal attainment, problem solving, and task-related success (Ohly & Schmitt, 2015).

While event-based studies show that enthusiasm is triggered by specific work experiences such as goal attainment, recognition, and problem solving, complementary large-scale survey research points to its role as a broader disposition. Peterson et al. (2009) found that zest, defined as approaching life with energy and enthusiasm, was strongly associated with experiencing work as a calling, as well as with greater job and life satisfaction. In addition to these individual- and leader-focused findings, case-based and organizational studies further emphasize the role of enthusiasm in driving team success and collective achievement (Sandberg, 2007; Walker, 2002). Within organizational and group contexts, high-arousal positive states such as enthusiasm have also been shown to be particularly contagious, boosting cooperation and collective performance (Barsade, 2002).

In the context of job interviews, Stollberger et al. (2023) conducted experiments with recruiters in China and found that moderate enthusiasm increased perceived job suitability, whereas excessive exuberance could undermine evaluations when judged as inappropriate. In training settings, Arndt and Wang (2014) found that high instructor

enthusiasm in internet-based sales training improved participant evaluations and significantly increased intentions to apply learned material, although it did not enhance rote memorization.

The authenticity of enthusiasm has also proven important in workplace contexts. Totterdell and Holman (2003) surveyed call center employees and compared "surface acting," in which workers faked enthusiasm, with "deep acting," in which they aligned felt and displayed enthusiasm. Employees who engaged in deep acting reported less exhaustion and greater effectiveness than those relying on surface acting. These findings correspond with research in education (Taxer & Frenzel, 2018) and suggest that enthusiasm is a powerful workplace resource, but only when it resonates with genuine inner states.

Empirical evidence from consumer behavior

It is striking that enthusiasm has received relatively little scientific attention in consumer research, despite its prominence in market research practice where it is often regarded as a key driver of customer engagement and loyalty (Reichheld, 2003; Vogelaar, 2014). The limited number of empirical studies that directly address enthusiasm nevertheless provide valuable insights. So et al. (2014) identified enthusiasm and attention as key components of customer engagement, which through the broader engagement model significantly predicts brand loyalty.

Enthusiasm has also been used to identify distinct consumer segments. Moreo et al. (2022) showed that food enthusiasts engaged in exploratory consumption patterns such as cooking classes, culinary travel, and experimenting with new recipes. In a similar vein, Johnson and Bastian (2015) showed that wine enthusiasm provides a meaningful basis for segmenting the wine market, distinguishing groups based on their knowledge, behavior, and spending. They identified three consumer segments, namely Wine Enthusiasts, Aspirants, and No-Frills drinkers, and found that Wine Enthusiasts consumed more wine, spent more money on it, and were more knowledgeable about wine than the other two groups. Close et al. (2006) further demonstrated that enthusiastic sport fans developed more positive brand attitudes toward sponsors perceived as expert and engaged, which in turn increased purchase intentions. Sandberg (2007) extended this perspective to the

context of innovation, studying five successful Finnish cases (Hi-Fog, Nordic Walkers, Spyder, DyNAzyme, and ePost Letter). The study showed that enthusiasm, originating from informal internal advocates and core teams, spread throughout organizations and to customers, facilitating both innovation processes and market adoption. Together, these findings suggest that enthusiasm not only shapes individual attitudes and behaviors but also functions as a structural variable for understanding consumer markets and plays an important role in innovation and organizational success.

Empirical evidence from political behavior and policy processes

Evidence from political psychology further underscores the unique role of enthusiasm. Marcus and MacKuen (1993) demonstrated that enthusiasm and anxiety are distinct emotions that drive different forms of political behavior. Whereas anxiety stimulated learning and more attentive information processing, enthusiasm mobilized voters by strengthening their candidate preferences and increasing campaign involvement. Brader (2005) showed that enthusiasm cues in political advertisements significantly increased campaign interest and voting intention, while reinforcing prior candidate preferences rather than stimulating critical information processing. Groenendyk and Banks (2014) demonstrated that enthusiasm is not only a driver of political behavior but also rooted in partisan identity, as strong party supporters expressed more enthusiasm when thinking of themselves as party members. Valentino et al. (2011) further found that enthusiasm, although generally weaker than anger, can significantly increase costly forms of political participation such as attending rallies, donating money, or volunteering for campaigns, highlighting its mobilizing potential in democratic engagement. More recently, McLaughlin et al. (2020) showed that enthusiasm plays a central role in polarization during elections. Enthusiasm for one's own candidate strengthens affective polarization, while enthusiasm for the opposing candidate reduces it. Anxiety, in contrast, displays a less consistent pattern: fear of the opposing candidate sometimes increases polarization, but in other contexts has no significant effect.

Extending beyond voter behavior, Pierce (2021) offered a conceptual extension by linking enthusiasm, alongside anger and fear, to major policy process frameworks. Rather than presenting new empirical evidence, the study synthesized existing research

to argue that enthusiasm may not only mobilize voters but also sustain engagement in policy debates.

The following section integrates these empirical findings and discusses why it is important to study enthusiasm by turning to the practical importance of enthusiasm across applied domains.

Why enthusiasm matters: Implications for education, business, and society

The evidence reviewed above indicates that enthusiasm is not merely a pleasant accompaniment to effective action but a psychological resource with wide-ranging implications. In education, enthusiastic teaching enhances student motivation and achievement, with the strongest benefits occurring when enthusiasm is both perceived by students and authentically expressed by teachers. This highlights its dual importance for education: authentic enthusiasm energizes learners while simultaneously supporting teachers' professional engagement and well-being.

In organizational contexts, leader enthusiasm increases perceptions of charisma and strengthens follower engagement. It operates as a mechanism through which transformational and authentic leaders stimulate creativity, encourage collaboration, and build commitment. Yet the same body of evidence also shows that enthusiasm is effective only within certain boundaries. Displays that are excessive or inauthentic may undermine credibility, reduce trust, or harm employee well-being.

Beyond schools and workplaces, enthusiasm also plays a role in shaping markets and societies. Enthusiastic customers are not only more satisfied and loyal but also exhibit higher levels of engagement, which predict more positive brand attitudes, stronger loyalty intentions, and support the spread of innovations. Further, enthusiasm mobilizes citizens in the political domain, encouraging active engagement with policy issues and public debate. Across these settings, enthusiasm operates as a force that amplifies attention, fuels communication, and spreads motivation across networks.

Taken together, these findings highlight that enthusiasm is a core psychological resource. Across diverse domains, it functions as an energizing force that focuses attention,

mobilizes action, and reinforces social bonds. Recognizing its benefits while respecting its boundaries enables education systems, organizations, and societies to harness enthusiasm in ways that promote authentic engagement, sustainable performance, and collective vitality. Despite its evident significance across contexts, research on enthusiasm remains limited, leaving several important questions unresolved. The following section therefore outlines the conceptual and empirical gaps that are addressed in the present dissertation.

Aim and scope: Addressing unresolved issues and research gaps

Although philosophical writings and scattered empirical studies have provided valuable insights into enthusiasm, several important gaps remain. Even at the definitional level, enthusiasm lacks conceptual clarity. Dictionaries typically describe it as an energetic feeling linked to eagerness or excitement, yet they vary in detail and emphasis and rarely address its function or social implications (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023; Collins Dictionary, 2023). Similarly, scholarly work reveals differing views and approaches. Evolutionary and functional models portray enthusiasm as a high-arousal, goal-conducive state that motivates reward-seeking behavior (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Scherer, 2005; Shiota et al., 2014). However, these perspectives focus primarily on the intrapersonal level and remain largely theoretical, with limited empirical evidence. Empirical studies have also operationalized enthusiasm in divergent ways, ranging from behavioral indicators such as vocal animation and gestures to self-reports of enjoyment, humor, or related emotions such as hope and pride (Collins, 1978; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Murray, 1983). While these approaches converge on the idea of enthusiasm as a positive, high-energy, goal-oriented state, they also introduce additional elements such as control, humor, or contagious energy, leaving its defining characteristics unclear. Moreover, the interpersonal dimension of enthusiasm has received little conceptual attention, despite findings in education and organizational research showing that displayed enthusiasm strongly influences motivation and performance in others (Keller et al., 2014; Patrick et al., 2000). Taken together, these differing approaches indicate that a bottom-up perspective would be beneficial for understanding how laypeople conceptualize enthusiasm, and which features they perceive

as central. Chapter 2 contributes to filling this gap through a prototype analysis that provides a more coherent and comprehensive account of enthusiasm.

A further challenge concerns the functional role of enthusiasm. Evolutionary scholars have hinted that enthusiasm may serve a distinct adaptive function. Building on Darwin's (1872) view of emotions as evolved adaptations that coordinate responses to threats and opportunities (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Russell, 2003; Scherer, 2009), it has been suggested that negative emotions prepare individuals to deal with danger, while positive emotions facilitate exploration, cooperation, and social bonding (Fredrickson, 2013). Within this framework, enthusiasm seems to fit among the positive emotions that promote exploration and collective motivation. Yet it remains unclear whether enthusiasm represents a distinct emotional state or merely a more intense manifestation of other approach-related emotions. Chapter 3 examines whether enthusiasm can be empirically distinguished from related positive emotions through its underlying patterns of appraisal and response tendencies. This analysis provides a critical test of whether enthusiasm warrants recognition as a distinct emotion. The focus is on how these patterns differentiate enthusiasm from joy and hope, two emotions that are often considered closely related. Demonstrating these differences provides a stronger empirical basis for understanding enthusiasm's motivational profile.

Another unresolved issue concerns the role of social norms in shaping enthusiasm. Although enthusiasm is often defined as a socially expressive and contagious emotion, little is known about how its experience is guided by perceptions of appropriateness across contexts. Research on emotion regulation shows that individuals sometimes downregulate positive emotions to comply with social display rules (Fernandes & Tone, 2021; Gross & Levenson, 1997), yet empirical research for how such norms influence enthusiasm has been lacking. Little is known whether perceived appropriateness consistently predicts experienced enthusiasm, whether this relationship differs across private, work, and public contexts, and how cultural values may shape these dynamics. Chapter 4 addresses this gap by investigating the link between appropriateness and experienced enthusiasm across 51 societies. By testing preregistered hypotheses with large-scale cross-cultural data, the study

clarifies how context-specific social norms and broader cultural dimensions relate to the experience of enthusiasm.

Together these studies provide valuable insights into how enthusiasm can be conceptually defined, how it differs from related positive emotions in terms of underlying mechanisms and behavioral outcomes, and how its experience and expression are shaped by contextual and cultural factors. The remainder of this introduction outlines the structure of the dissertation and briefly summarizes the content of each chapter.

Overview of the remaining chapters

Chapter 2: The internal structure of enthusiasm

This chapter provides a clearer conceptualization of enthusiasm than is commonly found in existing definitions and empirical research. Here we address the question of how enthusiasm can be conceptually defined by identifying its most central features. Although enthusiasm is frequently referred to in both everyday and academic contexts, there is no consensus on its defining characteristics. To address this gap, we applied a prototype analysis approach, a bottom-up methodology that obtains laypeople's views to determine which features are perceived as more or less central to a concept. Across five studies, participants generated and rated features of enthusiasm, and we examined the centrality of these features through recall, recognition, classification speed, and autobiographical recall tasks. With this approach we examine whether enthusiasm has a prototype structure and determine its most defining elements. By using multiple methodological strategies, the chapter provides an empirically grounded conceptualization of enthusiasm that can inform later theoretical and empirical work. The analysis indicates that the fundamental elements of enthusiasm are positive valence, high arousal, goal conduciveness, and interpersonal orientation.

Chapter 3: The appraisal patterns and response types of enthusiasm

In this chapter we examine the question of how enthusiasm can be distinguished from related positive emotions, specifically joy and hope, in terms of underlying cognitive appraisals and response tendencies. Drawing on appraisal theory, which posits that emotions can be differentiated by patterns of appraisal and response tendencies, the chapter investigates which appraisals are most and least strongly associated with enthusiasm. In addition, it examines whether enthusiasm is linked to distinct response types, such as action tendencies, expressions, and thoughts, compared to joy and hope. To address these questions, two studies were conducted. In Study 1, participants evaluated autobiographical episodes to identify the appraisal dimensions associated with each emotion. Study 2 assessed the response tendencies evoked by each emotion in terms of behavioral, expressive, and cognitive outcomes. The findings demonstrate that enthusiasm emerges as a unique emotion, characterized by pleasant intensity, goal orientation, active social engagement, and a profound sense of self-empowerment. It differs from hope and joy through its goal-directed energy and readiness for action.

Chapter 4: The appropriateness and experience of enthusiasm

Chapter 4 addresses the question of how social norms regarding emotional expression, operationalized as perceived appropriateness, shape the experience of enthusiasm across different contexts and cultures. Enthusiasm is a high-arousal, socially expressive emotion that often motivates individuals to share their feelings, yet its expression may be influenced by context-specific social rules. Drawing on cross-cultural and emotion regulation research, this chapter investigates whether appropriateness judgments differ across private, work, and public settings, and whether these judgments predict experienced enthusiasm. Using data from a large-scale and world-wide survey conducted in 51 societies (N = 12,851), participants reported on their frequency of experiencing enthusiasm and their perceptions of how socially acceptable it is to express enthusiasm in each context. Cultural dimensions of individualism and power distance were included to explore how broader societal values relate to these perceptions and experiences. The preregistered analyses demonstrate that appropriateness

judgments play a central role in explaining context-related differences in experienced enthusiasm and reveal systematic cultural variation in the experience of this emotion.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The final chapter integrates the findings of the preceding studies and reflects on what they reveal about the structure, function, and social regulation of enthusiasm. It discusses theoretical and practical implications across education, organizations, and society, and outlines promising directions for future research.