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## Understanding enthusiasm: structure, function, and social regulation

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# Summary

Enthusiasm is an emotion that is frequently mentioned and recognized in everyday life. At the same time, enthusiasm has received relatively little systematic attention in scientific research. Compared with negative emotions and several other positive emotions, relatively little is known about what enthusiasm precisely is, how it operates, and which role it plays in social interaction. The aim of this dissertation is to reduce this gap by studying enthusiasm as a psychological construct with its own structure, function, and social regulation.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The introduction outlines that enthusiasm has historically occupied an ambivalent position. In ancient Greece, it was viewed as a form of divine inspiration. Later, it became distrusted because of its presumed tendency toward exaggeration, fanaticism, and loss of reason. During the Romantic period, it regained appreciation as a source of creativity and vitality. In modern times, enthusiasm is regarded on the one hand as a driver of motivation and performance, but on the other hand it is criticized when deployed as a social obligation or as an instrument of manipulation.

Although research on enthusiasm is limited, empirical work has demonstrated its importance across diverse domains, including education, consumer behavior, and political psychology. This research indicates that enthusiasm is associated with motivation, persistence, influence, and performance. At the same time, this body of work is fragmented, relies on varying definitions and measurement instruments, and typically focuses on specific applications or contexts. As a result, there is no coherent understanding of what enthusiasm precisely entails, how it relates to other positive emotions, and how its experience varies across social contexts and cultural norms. This lack of conceptual and empirical integration provided the starting point for the systematic scientific investigation presented in this dissertation.

The empirical part of the dissertation consists of three chapters, in which enthusiasm is examined from complementary perspectives. First, the internal structure of enthusiasm was investigated using a prototype analysis. Second, the cognitive appraisals and response types associated with enthusiasm were examined, as well as how these patterns compare with the related positive emotions joy and hope. Third, the experience of enthusiasm and its perceived appropriateness were studied across different social contexts and cultures.

## **Chapter 2: The internal structure of enthusiasm**

Chapter 2 examines the meaning that people attribute to enthusiasm in everyday life. Although enthusiasm is widely used in both everyday and scientific contexts, there is little agreement about the characteristics that define this emotion. To clarify this issue, a prototype analysis was conducted. This method examines whether people perceive enthusiasm as a coherent emotional concept and which features they regard as defining. The prototype analysis consisted of five studies. In the first study, participants freely generated characteristics, associations, and descriptions that they associated with enthusiasm. This open-ended inventory yielded a large number of distinct descriptions. In a subsequent step, these descriptions were aggregated and organized by independent coders into 28 overarching features of enthusiasm. In the following studies, the cognitive accessibility of these features was examined. Multiple methods were employed, including free recall, recognition, classification speed, and autobiographical memory tasks.

The results indicate that enthusiasm has a clear prototypical structure, with both central and peripheral features. The central features of enthusiasm include a positive feeling, a high level of energy, goal directedness, and a clear social orientation. Enthusiasm is not only experienced as an internal state but is often accompanied by a desire to express and share feelings with others. Characteristics such as honest, sincere, friendly, and bursting with energy were considered typical of enthusiasm by participants. Other characteristics, such as busy, uninformed, and naive, were also mentioned but were found to be less central. These findings indicate that enthusiasm cannot be reduced to mere excitement or pleasure. Rather, it should be understood as a coherent and socially

embedded emotional concept. This social element has thus far been largely absent from most definitions and theories of emotion.

### **Chapter 3: Appraisal patterns and response types of enthusiasm**

Chapter 3 examines the extent to which enthusiasm can be distinguished from related positive emotions, in particular joy and hope. This is addressed within the framework of appraisal theory, which assumes that emotions differ in the ways situations are evaluated and in the responses they elicit. In two studies, participants described autobiographical experiences of enthusiasm, joy, or hope. The first study focused on cognitive appraisal patterns of the situation, such as goal relevance, perceived control, and uncertainty. The second study examined the associated response types, including feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The results indicate that enthusiasm has a distinct profile. Enthusiasm arises primarily in pleasant and intense situations in which desired goals are perceived as attainable.

Compared with joy, enthusiasm is less focused on enjoying a goal that has already been achieved and more centered on the energized anticipation that a goal is within reach. Compared with hope, enthusiasm is characterized by a stronger sense of control, lower uncertainty, and a greater willingness to take risks. Enthusiasm promotes immediate action, often without extensive consideration of potential negative outcomes. With respect to response types, enthusiasm appears to be the most action oriented of the three emotions. This combination of intensity, goal directedness, and readiness to act supports the conclusion that enthusiasm is not merely a variant of joy or hope, but a positive emotion with a clearly distinct profile.

### **Chapter 4: Social norms and the experience of enthusiasm**

Chapter 4 examines the relation between perceived social norms and the experience of enthusiasm. Although enthusiasm is often described as an expressive and contagious emotion, little is known about the role of perceived appropriateness and contextual factors. Drawing on a large-scale survey conducted in 51 societies, including a total of 12,851 participants, this chapter investigates how frequently people experience enthusiasm and how appropriate they consider it to express enthusiasm in three contexts:

private, work, and public settings. Cultural differences were also examined, operationalized in terms of individualism-collectivism and power distance.

The results indicate that people experience enthusiasm more frequently in situations in which they also perceive it as appropriate to express this emotion. This association is strongest in public contexts and weakest in private contexts, suggesting that perceptions of appropriateness play a greater role in public settings than in the private sphere. Notably, enthusiasm is considered most appropriate in work contexts, whereas it is experienced most frequently in private situations. This pattern suggests that enthusiasm at work may partly reflect social expectations rather than purely authentic experience.

Cultural differences were also examined, with specific attention to individualism-collectivism and power distance. Although these cultural dimensions were not clearly associated with perceived appropriateness of enthusiasm, they were related to the reported level of experienced enthusiasm. Collectivistic societies reported higher levels of enthusiasm in private and work contexts, and societies characterized by greater power distance reported higher levels of enthusiasm across all contexts. These findings indicate that enthusiasm is not merely an individual emotion, but is closely embedded in social norms, contexts, and culture.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation indicate that enthusiasm is a positive, energetic, and goal directed emotion with a clear social component. It arises when a desired outcome is perceived as attainable and promotes active engagement and visible expression, particularly in social situations that are experienced as safe and supportive. Enthusiasm integrates feeling, cognition, and action, and is sensitive to contextual factors. These insights have implications for education, organizations, leadership, consumer behavior, and politics. Enthusiasm can enhance performance, learning, and engagement, provided that it is authentic and allowed to emerge in a natural manner. At the same time, this dissertation cautions against imposed or instrumental forms of enthusiasm, which may over time lead to exhaustion and alienation. By understanding enthusiasm in terms of its structure, function, and social regulation, professionals and policymakers can make more

informed decisions about how this powerful emotion can be applied in a responsible and sustainable way.

