

"The Game Could Have Been Worse..." The Role of Counterfactual Thinking in Sport Consumer Behavior

Jun Woo Kim, Florida State University
Jeffrey James (Advisor), Florida State University
Yukyoun Kim (Advisor), Florida State University

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The research on counterfactual thinking is a multidisciplinary pursuit including psychology and consumer behavior (Roese, 2000). Cognitive psychologists initiated research on counterfactual thinking to examine its impact on satisfaction (Medvec & Savitsky, 1997), emotions (Mandel, 2003), and behavioral intentions (Smallman & Roese, 2009). Marketing theorists have applied counterfactual thinking to decision-making and consumer-oriented judgment (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1992). Although counterfactual thinking is considered an important factor in the post-consumption evaluation process, there have been no attempts to investigate the effect of counterfactual thinking in sport consumer behavior.

According to Roese and Olson (1997), people can be influenced by how actual outcomes compare to alternatives that "might have been." Such thoughts are called counterfactual thinking "because such thoughts focus on events that, in actual fact, did not happen" (Mandel, 2003, p. 140). Through counterfactual thinking people engage in comparisons of factual circumstances to alternatives that are evaluatively better or worse. A worse alternative is identified as a downward counterfactual, whereas a better alternative is identified as an upward counterfactual (Epstude & Roese, 2008). Marketing theorists posit that satisfaction depends to a large extent on the performance of the chosen product (Oliver, 1980), whereas psychologists have found that satisfaction also depends on information about outcomes that were not experienced (Cooke, Meyvis, & Schwartz, 2001). When people compare an actual outcome to alternatives that would have been superior (referred to as an upward counterfactual), they are less satisfied with their outcome. When people compare an actual outcome to alternatives that would have been inferior (referred to as a downward counterfactual), they are more satisfied with their outcome (Medvec et al., 1995).

Counterfactual thinking has been identified as a strong behavior regulating function (Smallman & Roese, 2009). The impact of counterfactual thinking on behavior intentions is explained by causal inference (Epstude & Roese, 2008). The specific causal insight retained in the counterfactual provides the basis for formation of behavioral intentions. Assume that your favorite team lost the final game of the World Series. The game outcome will activate your counterfactual thinking: "if only my favorite team won the World Series, I would have purchased souvenirs to celebrate the winning." The counterfactual conditional is an inference that connects a favorite team's performance (i.e., antecedent—action) and game outcome (i.e., consequence—goal). Because counterfactual thinking itself has causal implications, counterfactual thinking has a direct influence on corresponding behavioral intentions.

In summation, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Downward counterfactual thinking will positively relate to satisfaction.

H1b: Upward counterfactual thinking will negatively relate to satisfaction.

H2a: Downward counterfactual thinking will positively relate to behavioral intentions.

H2b: Upward counterfactual thinking will negatively relate to behavioral intentions.

Methods. Participants were 38 female and 53 male undergraduate students at a large university in the southeastern United States. Of the participants, 69 percent were Caucasian, followed by African American (16%), Asian (13%), and Hispanic (2%). To induce different directions of counterfactual thinking, participants were asked to watch a college football video clip. The participants were separated into four groups; 25, 23, 21, and 22 participants were randomly assigned to the straight win, disappointing win (i.e., a team won, but there is some level of disappointment with the team performance), straight loss, and relieving loss (i.e., a team lost, but there is some level of appreciation with the team performance) games, respectively. Each clip lasted about 10-15 minutes. Prior to watching a video, participants completed an assessment of team identification (seven 7-point Likert-type scales, Wann & Branscombe, 1993). After watching the video clip, participants responded to a survey questionnaire that included (1) counterfactual thinking (two 10-point Likert type scales; Medvec & Savitsky, 1997), (2) satisfaction with team performance (four 10-point

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Likert-type scales; Madrigal & Chen, 2008), and (3) behavioral intentions (three 7-point Likert-type scales; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000).

Results. To check whether the different game outcomes did induce different counterfactual directions, the mean number of counterfactual directions was analyzed through one-way ANOVA, with game outcome as a between-subjects variable. There was a main effect of game outcomes [downward counterfactual: Welch's $F(3, 48.05) = 49.86$, $\omega^2 = 0.57$, $p < .01$; upward counterfactual: Welch's $F(3, 40.62) = 160.32$, $\omega^2 = 0.84$, $p < .01$]. A Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that participants generated more downward counterfactual thinking ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 2.70$) than upward counterfactual thinking ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.71$) after watching a straight win game. In contrast, participants generated more upward counterfactual ($M = 8.52$, $SD = 1.47$) than downward counterfactual thinking ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.53$) after watching a straight loss game. Interestingly, participants who watched a relieving loss game generated significantly more downward counterfactual thinking ($M = 8.05$, $SD = 1.94$) than those who watched a disappointing win game ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 2.40$). Consistently, participants who watched a relieving loss game generated significantly less upward counterfactual thinking ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.85$) than those who watched a disappointing win game ($M = 7.70$, $SD = 2.46$). To examine the independent effect of each counterfactual direction on sport consumer satisfaction with team performance, multiple regression was used controlling for types of game outcome. The overall multiple regression was statistically significant [Adj $R^2 = 0.77$, $F(3, 87) = 104.01$, $p < .01$]. As predicted with H1a and H1b, downward counterfactual thinking had a significant positive effect on satisfaction [$r = 0.41$, $t(87) = 6.35$, $p < .01$], whereas upward counterfactual thinking had a significant negative effect on satisfaction [$r = -0.34$, $t(87) = -5.20$, $p < .01$]. To further assess whether counterfactual directions impact behavioral intentions, we computed a multiple regression, controlling for levels of team identification and types of game outcome. The regression model was statistically significant [Adj $R^2 = 0.35$, $F(4, 86) = 13.05$, $p < .01$]. As predictive with H2a, downward counterfactual thinking had a significant positive effect on behavioral intentions [$r = 0.11$, $t(86) = 2.31$, $p < .05$]. In regards to H2b, upward counterfactual thinking was negatively related to behavioral intentions [$r = -0.02$, $t(86) = -0.04$, n.s.], but the result was not statistically significant. Hence, H2b was partially supported.

Conclusion. This study complements and expands prior sport consumer behavior research by examining the role played by mental simulations of alternative outcomes that are better (upward) or worse (downward) than what actually happened. The results of this study lead to the conclusion that a positive game outcome generates greater amounts of "what might have been worse" thoughts, and that engaging in downward counterfactual thinking is positively associated with satisfaction and behavioral intentions. In contrast, the thoughts of "what might have been better" reduced the levels of sport consumer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Such outcomes are points of reference that can be actively promoted by sports marketers when a team loses a game. After a football team loses an NFL playoff game, for example, the following message could be promoted: "How wonderful it is we made a playoff game because it could have been a whole lot worse. A majority of teams did not even get this exciting opportunity." This study contributes to the extant literature on sport consumer behavior by examining the extent to which sport consumers use "what might have been" heuristics in the formation of satisfaction.