Examining the Dimensions of Well-Being Associated with Sport Fandom

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Sport consumer behavior research has traditionally focused on understanding sport spectators to solicit positive organizational benefits (e.g., increased commitment and ticket sales). Such research has provided important insights from a brand management perspective, providing teams and leagues with information on how to attract, retain and develop fans. Whilst this research provides value to sport organizations, less consideration has been given to the possible impacts which sport fandom has on spectators and fans themselves.

Identifying an opportunity to address this gap in the literature, researchers have begun to investigate how sport fandom affects the lives of sport consumers. Such research has placed less importance on marketing implications and focused more intently on uncovering the social and psychological impacts of sport fandom. This shift in attention is in line with work in psychology which in recent years has investigated the notion of positive psychology, alongside the specific dimensions which contribute to well-being (e.g., Seligman, 2011).

Seligman’s (2011) theory of well-being postulated how an individual’s state of well-being may be improved should he or she experience improvements in five facets of his or her life. These dimensions include: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA). Although established in psychology, to date no research has examined how sport spectatorship may lead to improvements in these dimensions, nor how the dimensions may relate to improvements in overall social-psychological health.

In the sport context, Wann (2006b) developed the Team Identification–Social Psychological Health Model (TISPH) to understand how sport consumers may receive temporary and enduring benefits to their social-psychological health. The TISPH proposes that benefits to well-being are realized as individuals whom possess a sense of identification with a team are afforded more opportunities to develop social connections. Empirical research has provided validation to the TISPH in a variety of contexts, countries and sport settings, suggesting that there is a relationship between sport fandom and benefits to individuals’ general social-psychological health (e.g., Wann, 2006a; Wann, Keenan, & Page, 2009; Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011). Research has also begun to examine how team identification can impact specific dimensions of well-being (e.g., Wann & Weaver, 2009), although this research remains sparse.

The purpose of this research is to improve understandings of how sport team support may lead to improved well-being by examining the applicability of the PERMA dimensions in the sport context. As outlined, the PERMA dimensions remain untested in the sport context, despite gaining prominence in mainstream psychology (Seligman, 2011). Thus, this research aimed to examine how individuals may experience social-psychological health benefits through their team connections. In line with this objective, the following research question was developed:

RQ 1 – How do sport fans experience benefits to well-being through their team support?

To address the above research question, qualitative data were gathered from fans of a professional Australian Football League (AFL) team, during the team’s second season. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting between 20-48 minutes. Respondents were asked to discuss the nature of their connection with the team, how this had developed and to explain what, if any, benefits they gained from their support. The researcher asked further probing questions where appropriate to gather rich data and to better understand the meaning behind participant responses.

All data were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed using NVIVO. Data analysis consisted of a three-step coding process which was utilized to understand, organize and identify the underlying themes present in participant
responses (e.g., Creswell, 2009). The researcher allowed new themes to emerge and considered factors previously established in the literature.

Preliminary results indicate that the PERMA dimensions are applicable to elements of well-being which has been previously related to sport fandom. Results confirmed Wann's (2006b) research by highlighting that sport team support can lead to individuals enjoying social-psychological health benefits. These findings also extended understandings of the TISPH by explaining how and why such benefits may be experienced by sport consumers.

Respondents provided quotes which aligned with each PERMA dimension. For example, Lois described how the team had helped her to integrate into the community and develop her relationships with others. Describing why she initially followed the team, she said: “A big thing was to make friends, because I didn’t know anyone [on the Gold Coast]. Through the Suns I have a “Suns’ family” now.” Peter also recounted how his team support had impacted on his engagement with the community and provided meaning to his life. He said:

“The main thing is that basically you feel like you’re part of them. You really do. It’s probably the thing, you know. Living on the Coast not being down here for long, I suppose probably you want to really put your roots in somewhere as well. We’ve moved a few times [and] now where we are doing what we do now, we sort of feel still a little bit transient. [W]e haven’t really settled anywhere as far as home life as such. But to me that was one thing that would sort of cement me to the Gold Coast. You know, it made me feel like, “Okay, I’ve got something of ownership on the Gold Coast, and that’s the Suns.” It’s a match made in heaven [being able to be involved] right from the beginning. It's AFL, it's on the Gold Coast and I can get to everything. It's a win-win-win-win-win the whole way around for me.”

Overall, the current research findings contribute to the sport management literature and build on understandings provided by Wann (2006b). Findings also highlight areas which sport organizations can focus on in both marketing and social welfare initiatives to improve the sport consumer experience.