Exciting vs. Winning Game? Relative Effects of the Game Outcome and Process on Fans’ Happiness and Overall Game Evaluations

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People invest substantial amounts of resources in the pursuit of happiness (Van Boven, 2005). Especially, sports is a ubiquitous consumption that promotes happier lives to individuals. Existing research suggests that both sports participation and spectatorship promote happiness to individuals (Huang & Humphreys, 2012). However, there is limited understanding of how specific characteristics of the game consumption experience impact happiness. Based on sport consumer behavior literature, the current study proposes that the utility of happiness from watching a game can be derived from either a process (exciting vs. boring) or an outcome (winning vs. losing) of the game. Furthermore, the current study proposes that the relative effects of game process and outcome on fans’ happiness and their evaluations of overall game consumption experiences are determined by their identification levels with the competing teams. Particularly, this study proposes that fans with high identification derive a utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience from the outcome of the game, whereas fans with low identification derive a utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience from the process of the game.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Existing literature suggests that sports fans’ evaluations of overall game consumption experiences are determined by either the process or the outcome of the games (Wann & Schrader, 1997). Research shows that fans induce more positive emotions (Madrigal, 2008), evaluate the overall game consumption experience more favorably (Madrigal & Chen, 2008), and are more likely to attend a game in the future (Yoshida & James, 2010) when either a process (e.g., an exciting game) or an outcome (e.g., a winning game; Madrigal & Chen, 2008) is positive. Based on these findings, the current study proposes that the utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience from watching a game could also be derived from whether the process or the outcome of the game is positive or negative.

While researchers can predict that fans will promote a greater degree of happiness and will more favorably evaluate overall game consumption experiences when both the process and the outcome of the games are positive, there is limited understanding of the relative effects of the process and outcome of the games. One effective way to examine this is to investigate a situation in which these two variables contradict each other (e.g., an exciting but losing game vs. a boring but winning game; Yang, Mao, & Peracchio, 2012). Specifically, the current study proposes that the relative effects of the process and outcome of the games are determined based on fans’ identification levels with the competing teams in the games. In fans’ behavior literature, existing research has suggested that behaviors of fans with high identification are significantly influenced by the outcome of the games (Madrigal, 2008). For example, Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that fans with high identification are more likely to bask in reflected glory when their favorite team win the game, but fans with low identification were not as likely to react in such a way. In contrast, researchers have found that fans with low identification (e.g., a casual sports spectator) usually watch games to satisfy hedonic related motives (e.g., entertainment). Particularly, hedonic related motives are more strongly associated with the process of the games as opposed to the outcome (Koo & Hardin, 2008). Overall, these findings imply that fans with high identification may derive a utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience from the outcome of the games whereas fans with low identification may derive a utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience from the process of the games. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Fans with high identification will promote a greater degree of happiness and more favorably evaluate overall game consumption experiences when the outcome of the game is positive (but the process is negative) than when the process of the game is positive (but the outcome is negative).
H2: Fans with low identification will promote a greater degree of happiness and more favorably evaluate overall game consumption experiences when the process of the game is positive (but the outcome is negative) than when the outcome of the game is positive (but the process is negative).

Procedures

This study employed a 2 (game characteristics; positive outcome but negative process vs. positive process but negative outcome) x 2 (team identification: high vs. low) between-subject experimental design. Game characteristic was the manipulated variable while team identification was the measured variable. 208 participants were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Before analyzed the data, 14 participants who had already participated in this study (e.g., pilot study) were excluded. Thus, the final sample size was 194. A combination of game characteristics was manipulated by asking participants to recall and write down in 50 or fewer words their thoughts or feelings about the most recent sports match (Yang et al., 2012). Under positive outcome but negative process condition, participants were asked to recall and write down the most recent sports match in which “(a) your team won the game but (b) the process in the game was frustrating or boring.” In contrast, under the positive process but negative outcome condition, participants were asked to recall and write down the most recent sports match in which “(a) your team lost the game but (b) the process in the game was involving and exciting.” Team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), happiness (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), and future intention to attend the game (Jang, Ko, & Wann, 2015) were measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale. Game satisfaction (Yang et al., 2012) was measured with a 7-point Semantic Differential-type scale.

Results

The results of simple slope analysis indicated a significant interaction between game characteristics and team identification on happiness ($\beta = -.38, t = -2.97, p < .01$) and game satisfaction ($\beta = -.31, t = -1.92, p = .05$), but not on future intention ($\beta = -.22, t = -1.33, p = .18$). In addition, the main effect of team identification on happiness ($\beta = .69, t = 3.48, p = .001$) and future intention ($\beta = .51, t = 1.95, p = .05$) were significant. Specifically, fans with high identification promoted greater degree of happiness and exhibited higher intention to attend the future game than those with low identification. Furthermore, the main effect of game characteristic ($\beta = 1.04, t = 4.92, p = .001$) on future intention was significant. To investigate the nature of interaction effect, the authors performed a spotlight analysis at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean (Aiken & West, 1991). The results indicated that at a 1 standard deviation above, fans with high identification reported marginally greater degree of happiness ($\beta = -.43, t = -4.76, p = .06$) after recalling and writing down a game that the outcome was positive (but the process was negative) compared to a game in which the process was positive (but the outcome was negative). However, there was no difference between those two conditions on game satisfaction ($p = .30$). On the other hand, at 1 standard deviation below, fans with low identification reported greater degrees of happiness ($\beta = .52, t = 3.04, p < .05$) and showed a marginally greater degree of game satisfaction ($\beta = .48, t = 1.69, p = .09$) after recalling and writing down a game that the process was positive (but the outcome was negative) compared to a game in which the outcome was positive (but the process was negative). A spotlight analysis was not performed for future intention because interaction effect was not significant. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported for happiness; whereas, H1 was rejected while H2 was supported for game satisfaction.

Implications

This study shed new light on fans’ behavior literature as well as provided useful practical implications by demonstrating how fans derive a utility of happiness and overall game consumption experience by considering both process and outcome of the game depending on the level of team identification. More detailed theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the presentation.