Sports Spectators' Experience of Flow and its Antecedents

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Numerous studies have shown engaging in sport activities leads to an increase in one’s happiness and well-being. One of the concepts that explain such relationship is “flow”. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), flow plays an essential role in enhancing happiness by providing an experience of total absorption. Experiencing the state of flow can benefit one by enriching his quality of life. This study demonstrates the occurrence of flow experience in the spectating behavior of sport games, in an attempt to find watching sport events is an activity that can enhance the well-being and happiness of the spectators.

In the domain of spectator sport, flow has been accounted for no more than a leading variable influencing spectator satisfaction, spectator intention, and adherence behavior. Hence, empirical investigation and structural analysis of flow in the spectating behavior of sport games will not only enable the diversification of marketing techniques for professional sports clubs but also contribute greatly in heightening the value of spectator sport as a distinct type of leisure activity.

Few studies on the positive effects of sport on people’s well-being have been conducted in the context of spectator sport. This might be due to the conception that behavior of “watching” is not a type of activity in which flow can occur. Such passive leisure activities as television viewing are considered as those that can hardly trigger flow due to its intrinsic nature of causing relaxation and senselessness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Such notions led to the exclusion of spectator sport in the study of flow experience. Most previous studies on spectator sport tend to revolve around financial aspects of professional sports teams or clubs.

Nonetheless, recent studies are setting the grounds for watching sport games to be viewed as a distinct form of active leisure activity. It is argued the new media environment has the potential to widen the choice of media consumers (McQuail, 1987) and television viewing is a multi-dimensional, complex behavior (Shim, 1999). In addition, viewers who possess premeditated and active viewing habit tend to reach a deeper state of flow during their media consumption (Shim, 1999). Watching sport games, therefore, is not a passive action simply ‘seeing’ the game, but the embodiment of dramatic and active elements including social interchange, identification to a team, and tensions caused by uncertainty of winning and losing the game.

This study aims to examine the occurrence and process of reaching ‘flow’ in sport spectators. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to (a) corroborate the occurrence of flow within the spectating behavior of sport games and (b) investigate the process that a spectator goes through in reaching the state of flow.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1988), Novak, Hoffman & Yung (1996), and Hwang (1998), Background Knowledge does not have a direct influence on Flow but indirectly influences Flow via Self-efficacy. Moreover, Challenge influences Flow via raising Arousal. Based on such causal structure model, two hypotheses are framed in this study. First, Background Knowledge in Sport and Challenge will positively influence Self-efficacy and Arousal respectively. Second, Self-efficacy and Arousal will positively influence Flow.

The target population for the study was individuals who watch sport games through the media such as TV and internet on a regular basis. Online survey modes were employed to collect the data. A total of 320 individuals participated in the study, of which 288 were valid and therefore analyzed. Measures for Background Knowledge (4 items), Challenge (3 items), and Flow (4 items) were used after being modified to meet the purpose of the study. These items were originally taken from Hoffman, Novak and Yung (1999), Hwang (1998), Park (2009), and Ham (2011). Two items from Kim and Park (2001) and two items from Lee (2007) were taken and modified to measure Self-efficacy (4 items). Arousal (4 items) was measured using items from Kim (2010).
A CFA was performed using the Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2014) and the model fit the data well (S-B $\chi^2/df = 310.36/142 = 2.19$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .97, SRMR = .05). The measurement scales showed adequate psychometric properties as indicated by all significant factor loadings in the predicted direction ($p < .05$), AVE values ranging from .45 to .71 and reliability coefficients ranging from .71 for Challenge to .93 for Flow. In addition, correlations for all pairs of latent factors were significantly different from 1.0, rendering support for discriminant validity. According to path analysis, the structural model shows an adequate fit to the data (S-B $\chi^2/df = 384.508/145 = 2.65$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .95 , SRMR = .07). Background Knowledge significantly affected Self efficacy ($\gamma = .69$, $p < .05$) and Arousal ($\gamma = .544, p < .05$). Challenge significantly influenced Self-efficacy ($\gamma = -.0228, p > .05$) but showed no significant effects on other variables. Self-efficacy had significant effect on Flow ($\gamma = .20, p < .05$) and Arousal also had significant influence on Flow ($\gamma = .71 p < .05$).

This study applied the theoretical framework of Flow Theory to sport spectating and investigated the process through which sport spectators reach the state of flow and their experience of flow. The results of the research provide empirical support for the experience of flow structure in watching sport games. This confirms viewing sports on a regular basis can lead to regular experience of flow. It, therefore, confirms viewing sport games is a type of leisure activity that can improve an individual’s happiness and well-being.

While Background Knowledge yielded positive effect to Arousal, Self-efficacy, and Flow, Challenge did not show any significant influence on Arousal or Flow. Such results indicate spectators should have sufficient background knowledge and that expected difficulties of spectators are minimized in advance, in order to fully enjoy the event and experience Flow while viewing sport games. Future research should focus on the uncertainty of the result in sport games and on loyalty of sport fans in investigating the determinants of arousal and attention while watching sport games.