Sport Spectatorship and Life Satisfaction: A Multi-City Investigation

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Public investments in sport projects are typically justified by their potential to bring economic benefits to communities (Howard & Crompton, 2014). However, the vast majority of academic research indicates such benefits are minimal (Baade & Matheson, 2001, 2004; Lertwachara & Cochran, 2007). As a result, researchers have examined broader social benefits of spectator sport events (i.e., elite or professional sport events) beyond economic impacts by focusing on the potential role of these events in promoting subjective well-being (Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010; Nenonen et al., 2014; Pawlowski et al., 2014). A review of literature suggests the following two possible pathways by which individuals may enhance subjective well-being, or “people’s evaluations of their lives” (Diener, 2000, p. 34), through spectator sport events: (a) attending these events as spectators (Nenonen et al., 2014; Pawlowski et al., 2014); and (b) developing team identification—a sense of psychological connection to teams competing in the events (Inoue et al., 2015; Wann, 2006). However, previous research testing the two pathways has lacked methodological rigor and has produced inconclusive results, thus highlighting the importance of further exploring the relationship between sport spectatorship and subjective well-being. As such, the current research investigates the extent to which engagement in spectator sport events, both behaviorally through live spectating and psychologically through team identification, could contribute to life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is a key component of subjective well-being, capturing a cognitive judgmental assessment of one’s quality of life (Diener et al., 1985).

First, the literature on the meaning-making capacity of leisure (Iwasaki, 2007) suggests that behavioral engagement in spectator sport may provide people with psychological resources (e.g., positive emotions) that are central to maintaining and enhancing life satisfaction. Consistent with this perspective, research points to a positive association between live spectating and life satisfaction (Kavetsos, 2012; Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010; Nenonen et al., 2014; Pawlowski et al., 2014). However, the existing evidence is subject to several limitations, including an inability to detect whether respondents attended sport events, the analysis of single, same source surveys, and the use of a single-item scale to measure life satisfaction. Consequently, the relationship between live spectating and life satisfaction will remain tentative until these limitations are resolved. The current study addresses the limitations of the previous research and advances the following Hypothesis 1: Live spectating will be positively associated with life satisfaction.

Second, the relationship between team identification and life satisfaction can be predicted based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and research has shown that team identification is associated with social well-being, a collective and public evaluation of life functioning (Inoue et al., 2015; Wann et al., 2011). However, evidence as to the positive relationship between team identification and life satisfaction—a more personal and private evaluation of one’s own life (Keyes & Lopez, 2001)—is inconclusive, with a review of empirical studies suggesting that team identification could have an adverse effect (Vallerand et al., 2008; Wann, 2006). Given the inconclusive evidence, it is essential to determine psychological processes that underlie this relationship (Vallerand et al., 2008). Specifically, self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1994) proposes that such processes may involve the mediation of social support, but this proposition has yet to be empirically confirmed. The current research extends the understanding of the psychological processes by which team identification affects life satisfaction by testing the mediating role of emotional support, a type of social support that refers to the provision of assistance through showing concern (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000) and captures the uniqueness of the spectator sport context (Holt, 1995; Inoue et al., 2015). Hypothesis 2 is: The relationship between team identification and life satisfaction will be mediated by the perception of emotional support from other fans.
Melbourne in Australia and Philadelphia in the United States are the research contexts for the current research, with both cities representing suitable settings to examine the relationship between sport spectatorship and life satisfaction. Across the two cities, two studies were conducted to test the hypotheses. The purpose of Study 1 was to test Hypothesis 1 by assessing the relationship between live spectating of a broad range of sport events and life satisfaction. To this end, an online survey was conducted with residents of Greater Melbourne. Study 1 employed a two-wave design, in which a separation of eight days was created to obtain information regarding the independent variable (live spectating) and the dependent variable (life satisfaction) at two different points in time. The two-wave design was used to provide a procedural remedy to minimize potential sources of common method biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The sample consisted of 268 respondents who provided usable responses for both live spectating (measured as the total number of any sport events respondents attended in the last 12 months) and life satisfaction (measured by three items from Diener et al.’s [1985] Satisfaction with Life Scale). Two hierarchical regressions were performed to assess the association between live spectating and life satisfaction by controlling for sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, income). Model 1, which included only the sociodemographic variables, explained 13% of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = .13$, $F = 3.77$, $p < .001$). In Model 2, the addition of live spectating to the first model significantly increased the proportion of variance explained for life satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p = .003$). These results confirmed Hypothesis 1 by indicating that live spectating uniquely contributed to life satisfaction beyond respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics.

The purpose of Study 2 was twofold: (a) to test Hypothesis 1 by explicitly assessing sport fans’ live spectating of their favorite professional sport team; and (b) to test Hypothesis 2 by examining the mediating effect of emotional support. The sample consisted of 564 residents of the Philadelphia metropolitan area who indicated they regularly follow a professional sport team and provided valid data on the following variables through an online survey: live spectating (measured as the total number of the favorite team’s home games respondents attended during the last 12 months), team identification (measured by Trail and James’s [2001] three-item scale), emotional support (measured with two items from Iwasaki and Mannell [2000]), and life satisfaction (measured with the same three items as Study 1). Structural equation modeling was performed to test the two hypotheses. First, live spectating had a small but significant positive association with life satisfaction ($\beta = .11$, $p = .006$), confirming Hypothesis 1. Second, the direct path from team identification to life satisfaction was nonsignificant ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .75$); however, team identification had a strong positive association with emotional support ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$), which in turn positively predicted life satisfaction ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$). Consistent with the mediating role of emotional support as predicted by Hypothesis 2, these path coefficients produced a significant indirect positive effect of team identification on life satisfaction through emotional support ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$).

The collective evidence from Studies 1 and 2 provides support for the social benefits accrued from spectator sport events by confirming previous findings on live spectating and life satisfaction through a research method addressing key limitations of past research. Moreover, the findings from Study 2 advance the understanding of the psychological processes underlying the relationship between team identification and life satisfaction by demonstrating the mediating role of emotional support. Collectively, these results underscore the value of spectator sport events in positively contributing to an individual’s life. The findings can inform the promotion of sport events to highlight these relationships to practitioners and government officials. Sport managers can design spectator experiences and sport venues to leverage these relationships and reinforce the positive outcomes.