How Would Athletes Receive Support from Casual Fans?

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In the sports management literature, a vast amount of research has found that highly identified fans are more likely to support a foundation that is run by a team or a player, than are lowly identified fans (Walker & Kent, 2009). Thus, it is important for athletes and their foundations to understand and identify effective strategies for motivating lowly identified fans to donate time and money. Despite the importance of developing such strategies, the sports management literature has done little to address this issue. Based on a recent view of entertainment literature, the current research proposes an effective strategy to positively persuade lowly identified fans to donate their time and money to a foundation run by an athlete.

In the field of sports management, researchers have mainly conceptualized sports-related consumption based solely on the hedonic dimension. That is, sports fans watch games featuring their favorite athletes or teams to immediately experience positive emotions (e.g., pleasure and excitement; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 202). However, recent research has proposed an additional dimension of entertainment consumption—namely, the meaningful dimension (Oliver & Raney, 2011). Particularly, the meaningful dimension has a strong connection with human kindness, meaningfulness, and personal growth (Oliver et al., 2015). Research has found that the biggest difference between those two dimensions is that the hedonic experience leads to positive affect while the meaningful experience results in a feeling of elevation (Krämer et al., 2016). Particularly, Hadit (2000) has defined elevation as “warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness, and compassion (p.1).” The current study proposes that highlighting the meaningful dimension of the athlete (e.g., meaningful related story) in a promotional campaign would be an effective strategy to encourage less identified fans to provide stronger support to the foundation than highlighting the hedonic dimension of the athlete (e.g., performance related story). When people experience a greater degree of elevation by watching the meaningful story performed by the athlete, the resulting emotional state will motivate lowly identified fans to provide support to the foundation. Similarly, research has demonstrated that a feeling of elevation positively influences various types of pro-social behavior, such as increasing warm feelings (Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010) and motivating people to help their friends and even strangers (Bailey & Wojdynski, 2015). Meanwhile, this study proposes that both the meaningful and hedonic dimensions of the athlete would encourage highly identified fans to provide support to the foundation. Likewise, sports management research has found that fans who are highly identified with the athlete provide greater support, compared with those fans who are less identified (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Based on previous literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: For less identified fans, the meaningful dimension of the athlete would lead to greater intention to support the foundation when compared with the hedonic dimension of the athlete

H2: For highly identified fans, there would be no difference in intention to support the foundation prompted by either the meaningful or hedonic dimension of the athlete

H3: (Moderated mediation effect) The feeling of elevation would mediate the effect of different dimensions of the athlete on intention to support the foundation for less identified fans.

Design
This study utilized a 3 (meaningful video vs. sports related hedonic video vs. non-sport related hedonic video) x 2 (high vs. low level of athlete identification) between subjects-design. A total of 145 online panel was recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions.

Procedure
In the first stage of the experiment, participants watched one of three experimental videos. In the meaningful video condition, participants watched a story about Dwayne Wade (DW) and a disabled child, named Michael. In the video, DW visits Michael's house to spend time with the boy who is missing an arm and a leg. Michael's biggest dream was spending time with DW because he is a huge fan. The video highlights the human kindness of DW, which is consistent with the conceptualization of the meaningful experience (Oliver & Raney, 2011). In the non-sports hedonic video, DW goes undercover at a Dick’s Sporting Goods store by dressing up in a wig and glasses. In the video, the undercover DW asks customers to perform strange tasks in exchange for a free drink. At the end of the video, the video portrays happiness and pleasure when customers realize that the undercover person was DW. In the sports related hedonic video condition, participants watched highlights of DW in action. Both videos are consistent with the conceptualization of hedonic consumption because the viewing experience induces immediate pleasure and excitement (Krämer et al., 2016). In addition, we included both sports and non-sports related hedonic videos in this study because today’s athletes are active both inside and outside of the stadium. In the second phase of the experiment, participants completed a questionnaire.

Measures
The feeling of elevation was measured with 10-item scale (Krämer’s et al., 2016). In addition, intention to help the DW’s foundation was measured with 2-item scale (Pavey, Greitemeyer, Sparks, 2012). Furthermore, the behavioral measure of helping behavior was measured with the “raffle task.” (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). Specifically, participants received 6 raffle tickets for an extra compensation (each worth for $1), and we asked how many ticket that they want to donate the DW’s foundation. The number of ticket that participants donate to the foundation was used as an indicator of a pro-social behavior.

Results
The results of the simple slope analysis indicated that the main effects of player identification (t = 6.32, p < .001) and different types of video (t = 2.90, p < .01), and interaction effects between those two variables (t = -1.98, p < .05) were significant on intention to help the DW’s foundation. The simple slope analysis further indicated lowly identified fans (SD below 1) exhibited the greatest intention to help the foundation when the video highlights the meaningful dimension of DW (M = 3.95), followed by non-sports hedonic (M = 3.40) and sports related hedonic dimension (M = 2.85; t = 3.10, p < .01), respectively. In contrast, for highly identified fans (SD above 1), the intention to help the foundation was similar across three dimensions: meaning video (M = 4.96), non-sports hedonic video (M = 4.89), and sports hedonic video (M = 4.81; t = .51, p = .61). In terms of the behavioral measure of prosocial behavior, the main effect of player identification (t = 2.41, p < .05) and different types of video (t = 2.27, p < .05), and interaction effects between those two variables (t = -1.98, p < .05) were significant on the amount of raffle ticket that participants donated to the foundation. The simple slope analysis further indicated for lowly identified fans, the amount of raffle ticket donated to the foundation was highest after watching the video that highlights the meaningful dimension (M = 2.84), followed by non-sports related (M = 2.28) and sports related dimension (M = 1.73; t = 2.22, p < .05), respectively. In contrast, for highly identified fans, the amount of raffle ticket that participants donated to the foundation was similar across three dimensions: meaning video (M = 2.97), non-sports hedonic video (M = 3.08), and sports hedonic video (M = 3.19; t = -.49, p = .62).

Discussion
The findings provide meaningful implications to the foundation runs by athlete in terms of how they can receive stronger supports from less identified fans.