The Power of ‘If’ : The Effect of Imagination on Postgame Fan Emotions

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Competition is the essence of sports and there is inevitably a loser in every game. The loss results in negative fan emotions, particularly for those who strongly identify themselves with the team (Campbell et al., 2004; Shank & Beasley, 1998). Despite the team’s failure and the following negative emotions, real-world observations often demonstrate fans’ continued support and loyalty toward the team. Extant sport management literature is thick with the understanding of psychological attachment and loyalty to explain the ongoing fanship despite adversity. However, research on the mechanism or process how these fans cope with their team’s failure, has been limited. Thus, this study attempts to address this gap and provide insights regarding a potential coping mechanism for sports fans.

Built upon judgement and decision making literature, this study proposes imagination as a way to cope with the defeat. The nature of counterfactual thinking and its effect on emotion has been explored extensively (Johnson & Sherman, 1990). Kahneman and Miller (1986) indicated that both negative (regret, guilt, and shame) and positive emotions (relief, satisfaction, and sympathy) can be amplified through the generation of counterfactual imagination. This study examined counterfactual and prefactual thoughts, which can be generated by fans of the losing team. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between counterfactual and prefactual imagination of losing team’s fans and their postgame emotions.

A total of 225 sets of surveys were collected at four basketball games. Team-identification Scale (6 items; Kim, 2004) and K-PANAS (20 items; Park & Lee, 2016) were adopted and modified. For the assessment of imagination, open-ended response format was designed following previous research on counterfactual and prefactual thinking (N’gbala & Branscombe, 1995; Niendenthal).

Results showed that a significantly greater number of prefactual imagination (M=3.97) was generated than counterfactual imagination (M=2.73) by the losing team’s fans (t(59)= -2.57, p<.05). Next, a greater number of upward imagination was generated than downward imagination in both the counterfactual (t(29)=4.10) and prefactual groups (t(30)=2.91). Regression results indicated, counterfactual imagination group reported 0.92 weaker postgame negative emotion than the control group (β=-0.92, t(98)=-2.55). Prefactual imagination group also exhibited 0.49 weaker negative postgame emotion but was not statistically significant (p=.16). Furthermore, both groups displayed stronger positive emotions than the control group (β=1.31, t(98)=3.62, and β=1.64, t(98)=4.72).

The results demonstrated that prefactual imagination was effective in engendering positive emotion among the fans after the team’s poor performance. This finding can be meaningful in two respects. First, it confirms negative game outcome does not necessarily result in overall negative emotion. Fans may feel excited and aroused after the game even after the team’s loss. More importantly, it shows how creating diverse imaginative thoughts about the imminent game can foster the fans’ positive attitude and emotion in the face of their team’s failure. Although fans produced more thoughts about winning the game by making upward prefactual thoughts than losing the game, imagination of a possible negative (downward) situation may also help them cope with an adverse outcome.