Sport Spectators' Flow Experience and Satisfaction in Virtual Reality Spectatorship (VRS)

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As Virtual Reality (VR) technologies have advanced the sport media industry is experimenting with VR Spectatorship (VRS) to give its consumers optimal watching experiences (e.g., NBA and NCAA). A useful theoretical concept to understand such optimal experience in VRS is flow experience because it is a typical aspect of the media users’ optimal experience (Hoffman & Novak, 2009) as well as a barometer and enhancer of the quality of the sport consumption experience (Lee, Gipson, & Barnhill, 2017).

Accordingly, the purpose of the current study was to explore when and how flow experience and satisfaction are enhanced in VRS. Specifically, we examined the underlying mechanism regarding the effects of a media factor (VR vs. 2-D), personal factor (sport involvement), and game factor (rivalry) on the flow experience via media attributes (i.e., vividness, interactivity, and telepresence) and investigated the impact of flow experience on satisfaction.

For the purpose of the current study, we used a 2 (Media Type: VRS vs. 2D) × 2 (Rivalry: High vs. Low) between-subjects experimental design with sport involvement as a selection variable (measured) in the NBA context. We performed a conditional process modeling with 10,000 resamples for the bootstrap confidence intervals using the syntax (Model 79: Stride, Gardner, Catley, & Thomas, 2016) in Mplus8 for estimating moderated-mediation models based on Haye's (2013) process model.

The results revealed that VRS significantly enhances telepresence through increased vividness and interactivity in the context of sport media consumption; total indirect effect of media type on telepresence via vividness and interactivity = 1.286; 95% CI [.887 to 1.694]. Specifically, the results indicated that VRS provides sport media consumers with higher vividness and interactivity than traditional media (e.g., 2-D screen), and then such two media attributes significantly enhance their perceived telepresence. The results also showed that VRS amplified flow experience via vividness, interactivity, and telepresence to the greater extent than the traditional medium (2-D screen); total indirect effect = .980; 95% CI [.500 to 1.678]. Meanwhile, sport viewers’ sport involvement was found to amplify flow experience (β = .44, p < .001) as well. Moreover, sport involvement moderated the serial mediation (media type → vividness and interactivity → telepresence → flow experience); the effects of VRS on flow experience was stronger for those who are less interested in the target sport than highly involved sport fans (β = -.51, p < .05). Lastly, flow experience in VRS was found to substantially enhance user satisfaction (β = .80, p < .001).

We argue that the media factor and personal factor are major determinants of flow experience in the context of sport media consumption. Interestingly, offering VRS to less involved sport viewers could be an effective strategy to enhance their consumption experience. We also content that flow experience is a robust predictor of satisfaction in the context of sport media consumption. Therefore, we conclude that VRS should be further advanced in a way that it amplifies flow experience via enhanced media attributes.