

How Sports Entertain: Enjoyable and Meaningful Experiences for Sports Audiences

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This study explores how sports media entertains audiences. A survey found that sports media provides both enjoyable experiences and meaningful experiences for audiences. In doing so, this study illuminates how and why sports media entertains audiences. Watching sports can be understood as a hedonic media experience that is fun and pleasurable, but this study shows that sports media consumption can also be a deeper, meaningful experience that gives insight into the human condition. This shows that even for an audience member who is not enjoying an event, they still might be deriving meaning from the event. Further, this study examines how sports media might generate these experiences as the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, the dimensions of self-determination theory and affective state of audience members, are explored. The dimensions of self-determination theory were instrumental in predicting audience enjoyment while affect was instrumental in predicting meaningful experiences for audiences. Overall, this study provides information relevant in understanding how and why people consume sports media - which should be of interest to practitioners and scholars alike.

Keywords: Sports media, self-determination theory, fans, enjoyment, meaningfulness

Imagine the following scene: On Christmas morning, a smart phone records a family opening gifts. When the grandfather of the family takes his turn, he smiles dutifully and makes a playful joke while opening the present - an envelope. Upon tearing open the envelope, the grandfather, initially puzzled, realizes what the gift is and he is overcome with emotion. His eyes fill with tears and he hugs all of his family members one after another, shouting with excitement and touched by the thoughtfulness of the gift: Tickets to a sporting event. Sites like YouTube have hundreds of these types of videos uploaded (Kalaf, 2013). A diehard or lifelong fan of a team gets tickets to an event featuring that team and the event is quite sentimental. This anecdote, and the abundance of these videos, illustrates that sports can be meaningful in audience members' lives and this study explores that very phenomenon through a survey.

Despite this example and the host of similar videos online, how sports entertain audiences might focus on enjoyment or hedonic pleasures rather than feelings of appreciation or meaningfulness. Indeed, sports are games and games are typically understood to be fun. However, the gift recipients in these videos and in the anecdote above are likely experiencing something more profound than enjoyment as well as hedonic pleasure. In short, sports fans likely experience fun and meaningfulness when consuming sports. As a result, this study aims to provide evidence that sports media can be entertaining for audiences through both hedonic enjoyment and meaningful appreciation.

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Types of Fans

A dichotomy between fans and non-fans of sports has been introduced (Gantz & Wenner, 1995) but the difference is not necessarily in the domain of watching sports versus not watching sports, it is between expertise and knowledge and lack of interest. In short, even nonfans might consume sports media but not as much or as regularly as fans. The difference lies in how engaged in the sport they are, not whether or not they watch. As a result, studies such as the current one should look at people who consider themselves fans as well as people who do not in order to more fully understand any differences or similarities and gain a more complete picture of the phenomenon.

Meanwhile, social media has given rise to another type of fan. These fans, connected fans, might bypass traditional sports media outlets in favor of interacting and discussing topics with others via the Internet (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Indeed, some have argued that social media platforms like Twitter are displacing more traditional media platforms like television and radio (Hull & Lewis, 2014), but others suggest that social media and traditional media are not mutually exclusive and should not be thought of as a “zero-sum game” (Gantz & Lewis, 2014). That is, when someone uses Twitter, he or she does not necessarily stop using television. Nor is the inverse necessarily accurate. In fact, someone is likely to use both television and Twitter to complement each standalone experience. For example, if someone is watching a soccer game on television and a goal is scored, he or she might check in on Twitter to see fan and league reactions. Thus, the media landscape should be thought of more broadly than simply by platform or fan-use of specific platforms.

How Sports Entertain

Raney (2006) offers a detailed explanation as to why people enjoy watching sports media. First of all, people watch sports to feel entertained through an increase in feelings of arousal. In other words, sports can provide enjoyable feelings of excitement for audience members. For example, cheering during a game-changing play or celebrating a win can be arousing for audience members. Likewise, when a person’s favorite team wins a big game, that win can help to bolster the self-esteem of that fan. When a team is tied up with a person’s identity, the team winning can translate to positive feelings for the fan, consider the bragging rights of a New York Yankees fan over a Boston Red Sox fan or vice versa after a playoff game. On top of this, watching sports can provide an escape for audiences looking for a distraction from their daily lives. If someone is bored at home or has a stressful day at work, he or she can put on a sporting event to help forget about those problems and break free of the monotony. Each of these examples demonstrate some iteration of enjoyable arousal: feelings of excitement, boosts in self-esteem, and escape. Second, according to Raney (2006) people watch sports because they want to learn about the sport or something related to the sport – a utilitarian pursuit. Consequently, media portrayals of sports can help satisfy this goal. Third, many sports are shot beautifully and some tune in to enjoy the aesthetics of the media program. Thus, the videography can be pleasing. Also, many watch sports because they have placed a bet on the event and are motivated financially to watch the event. In each of these cases, the consumption of sports seems motivated either by pleasure-seeking or by some use of the sporting event, financial or informational. Overall, consuming sports can result in a global “feel-good effect” that combines many different aspects of a sporting event (Maennig, 2008).

However, perhaps most relevant to this study, many people have relationships that are fostered by watching sports, whether it is with a broad group or with select loved ones (Raney, 2006). Indeed, sports are often watched in groups and are related to feelings of social engagement (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015). Taking this body of work as a whole,

sports media can both provide hedonic enjoyment and experiences that are more meaningful like connecting with others. Beyond that, some scholars have argued that sports are designed in such a way that they reinforce specific ideologies (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). This ideology creates consumption patterns for audiences. In turn, behaviors surrounding sports can be entwined with deeply held beliefs and motivations – something that goes beyond pure enjoyment.

In summary, there are many different reasons that people might consume sports media and many ways in which people consume sports for entertainment. So many, in fact, that parsing differences for individual motivations may prove difficult. One article, looking at the mechanisms underlying the motivations for consumption more directly, suggested that measuring audience attitudes toward sports media should be split, as much as possible, from contextual variables in order to develop a better understanding of audiences (Woodford, Goldsmith, & Bruns, 2015). Attitudes toward sports media could be dictated by context rather than the sports media itself. This seems plausible; however, the “context” in this case might help determine whether or not people are deriving enjoyable or meaningful experiences from sports media and thus should be considered further. In another study, positive affect was a significant predictor of entertainment (David, Horton, & German, 2008). This was an expected finding. However, the authors found a positive correlation between negative affect and entertainment as well. This is a puzzling finding at first glance – negative affect should show a negative correlation with entertainment - but a satisfactory explanation might be extrapolated from other research detailed in sections below. The positive correlation between negative affect and entertainment suggests that sports might not be purely hedonic or only related to positive affect. They might be entertaining because they provide some feelings that can be understood as negative or, at least, not entirely positive.

Bartsch, Oliver, Nitsch, and Scherr (2016) expanded on this and argued that consumption of certain sports, in this case Paralympic events, is related to reflective thoughts, feelings of empathy, and feelings of pity. The social implications of these findings notwithstanding, this study highlights the way in which sports might entertain outside of the realm of pure enjoyment. Indeed, feeling pity and engaging in reflection are not necessarily enjoyable experiences. Though, those feelings might be profound and give appreciation to audience members and, therefore, become meaningful entertainment experiences. In fact, the attitudes experienced when consuming sports do not have to be positive to result in entertainment. Sports might be noteworthy for their ability to provide enjoyable experiences as well as meaningful ones. This can be extrapolated from existing studies and, as a result, this paper argues, that sports should be examined within the meaningful entertainment paradigm, which is described in more detail in the following passages.

Meaningful Entertainment and Self-Determination Theory

Media entertainment research, including sports, historically examines entertainment from a hedonic perspective, but this does not show a complete picture of how media entertains audiences (David et al., 2008; Zillmann, 1991, 2000). In the mid-90s, Oliver (1993) discussed the paradox of enjoying a sad movie – why would people want to go see a tearjerker movie like *The Notebook*? The entertainment one derives from this movie is not likely hedonic but something else. Instead of hedonic pleasure, this movie might provide audience members with feelings of connectedness, insight into the human condition, and an opportunity to explore complex moral questions (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Tamborini, 2011). For another comparison, one would likely derive different gratifications from the movie

Life is Beautiful than from *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*. Though both are beloved by many – one an award winner and the other a cult classic - they provide very different media experiences for the audience. The same distinction can likely be found in sports media. Consequently, the argument in the current study is that audience members may be having both hedonic and meaningful experiences with sports content. This paradigm helps explain the puzzling results in David et al.'s (2008) piece where negative affect and entertainment were positively correlated. Those results can be explained through meaningful entertainment experiences. Indeed, enjoyment, as related to media, is typically associated with positive affect while a lack of enjoyment is associated with negative affect (Oliver, 2008). However, meaningful entertainment experiences tend to include emotions that are not clearly positive or negative but a mixture of positive and negative, such as feeling moved, touched or compassionate (Oliver et al., 2016). Therefore, there should be a correlation between negative affect and entertainment as shown in David et al.'s (2008) piece.

The same pattern, enjoyment associated with positive affect and meaningfulness associated with negative effect should be expected within sports media. One person might find watching a baseball game to be particularly fun and enjoyable after a long day of work while another might find watching the same baseball game stressful and would avoid that negative emotion. Person one would enjoy the game and person two would not. A third person might watch the same game because it provides a connection with a family member or friend. This third person would find the game to be meaningful and positive affect and negative affect would be important factors to consider. Consequently, examining the mood states influenced by sports media can shed light on how sports are entertaining audiences insofar as they provide enjoyable and meaningful experiences.

Meanwhile, the dimensions of self-determination theory (SDT) have been shown to be associated with meaningful or hedonic entertainment experiences (Oliver et al. 2016). One article on sports content consumption examined the dimensions of SDT but did not tie the specifically to meaningfulness and enjoyment (Frandsen, 2010). Specifically, this paper provided qualitative evidence that watching handball could increase feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness—the dimensions of SDT. Thus, this lens is a meaningful way to examine sports media. Some evidence for this has been found in the context of devices used when consuming sports media (Rogers, Strudler, Decker & Grazulius, 2017).

According to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), competence describes feelings of knowledge and skill. Autonomy is comprised of feelings of independence and agency. Relatedness refers to feelings of closeness with other people. Typically, when a person feels that these dimensions are fulfilled, a person will be intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of media, the more these dimensions are fulfilled the more audiences will perceive entertainment from media.

More recently, these dimensions have been parsed further. When people have higher feelings of relatedness through media, they tend to find the experiences to be more meaningful. Conversely, when people feel more competence and autonomy, they tend to feel that the experience is more hedonically entertaining (Bowman et al., 2016; Oliver et al. 2015; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, 2011). In short, media is enjoyable because it makes audiences feel autonomous and competent but media is meaningful when it makes audiences feel related to others. This represents early evidence for these relationships and this pattern has not been tested in sports media. The same pattern found in other media may be found here or a different pattern may emerge for sports media.

In review, the current study argues that enjoyment and meaningful experiences can be attained through sports media. Enjoyment and meaningful experiences with sports

media will be predicted by the dimensions of SDT as well as audience affect. Previous studies give an idea as to how these patterns will emerge though sports media may show a different pattern. Regardless, there is reason to believe that people have both hedonic and meaningful experiences with sports media. This study aims to provide evidence for this phenomenon.

Method

Participants and Procedures

This sample included 277 people who were at least 18 years old. The sample was majority white (80.8%) and female (50.9%) with an average age of 39 ($SD = 12.24$). Participants were recruited on Mechanical Turk and offered 10 cents USD for completion of the questionnaire. On Mechanical Turk, participants were provided a URL which led to the online questionnaire.

Measures

The main outcomes in this study were feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness. The enjoyment and meaningfulness measures (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver et al., 2016) included "I have a good time when I consume sports media" (enjoyment, $\alpha = .95$) and "I find sports media to be very meaningful" (meaningfulness, $\alpha = .92$) where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. There were three items for each measure. These measures provided insight into whether or not sports media provided enjoyable and/or meaningful experiences.

To measure affect, there were measures adapted for the three affective states from Oliver and Bartsch's study (2010) and Oliver et al. (2016): meaningful affect, negative affect, and positive affect. Participants were asked to note how much they felt the corresponding emotions when consuming sports media from 1 = Not at All to 7 = Very Much. Meaningful affect included the items *touched*, *moved*, *compassionate*, and *inspired* ($\alpha = .94$). Negative affect included items *angry*, *anxious*, *tense*, and *negative* ($\alpha = .87$). Positive affect included the items *amused*, *humored*, *happy*, and *positive* ($\alpha = .90$). These measures allowed the researchers to examine the different types of affect were experienced in the context of consuming sports media.

Competence, autonomy, and relatedness were measured using an adapted version of the Player Experience of Need Satisfaction scale (Ryan et al., 2006). Each was measured with 3 items including "I feel knowledgeable when consuming sports media," "I feel like I have a lot of interesting options to consume sports," and "I feel like I am part of a community when consuming sports media." These all demonstrated high reliability (respectively, $\alpha = .88, .84, .92$). Notably, these are the three dimensions of SDT and thus allowed for analysis of the role of SDT in sports media consumptions.

The frequency with which individuals consumed sports media was also examined with one item asking subjects to note how many hours per week they watch sports.

Analysis

To shed light on how people are having enjoyable or meaningful experiences with sports media, the study examined how affect and the dimensions of SDT influenced feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness. To do so, a hierarchical linear regression was used. In step 1 of the regression, demographic variables (gender and age) were entered. In step 2, frequency of consumption was entered alongside gender and age. In step 3, the three dimensions of

SDT were entered alongside all previous variables and in step 4 the affect variables were entered along with all previously included variables. One regression model was run with enjoyment entered as the dependent variable and another was run with meaningfulness entered as the dependent variable.

Results

The results for both regressions models are detailed below.

Enjoyment

Feelings of enjoyment were positively predicted by all three dimensions of SDT (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) as well as positive affect. Enjoyment was negatively predicted by negative affect. See Table 1. Enjoyment tended to be highest for males who frequently consumed sports media.

	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Gender (1= male, 2= female)	-1.04	.20	-.31 ^c
Age	.01	.01	
	F(2,258) = 13.72 ^c Adj. R ² = .10		.07
Step 2			
Gender	-.35	.18	-.10 ^a
Age	.00	.01	.00
Consumption	.42	.04	.56 ^c
	F(1,257) = 49.21 ^c Adj. R ² = .27		
Step 3			
Gender	-.20	.11	-.06
Age	-.01	.00	-.05
Consumption	.08	.03	.10 ^b
Competence	.48	.05	.45 ^c
Relatedness	.17	.04	.17 ^c
Autonomy	.32	0.06	.28 ^c
	F(3,254) = 155.43 ^c Adj. R ² = .42		
Step 4			
Gender	-.21	.10	-.06 ^a
Age	-.01	.00	-.05
Consumption	.06	.02	.09 ^a
Competence	.41	.03	.39 ^c
Autonomy	.27	.05	.24 ^c
Relatedness	.16	.04	.16 ^c
Positive Aff	.25	.05	.21 ^c
Negative Aff	-.01	.03	-.01 ^c
Meaningful Aff	-.04	.04	-.04
	F(3,251) = 116.86 ^c Adj. R ² = .02		

^ap < 0.05. ^bp < 0.01, ^cp < 0.001

Meaningfulness

Feelings of meaningfulness were positively predicted by positive affect and meaningful affect (See Table 2). There were no significant predictions for demographics or consumption.

Table 2. Regression analysis for feelings of meaningfulness while watching sports

	B	SE	β
Step 1			
Gender	-.30	.18	-.10
(1= male, 2= female)			.07
Age	.01	.01	
F(2,262) = 1.93 ^c Adj. R ² = .01			
Step 2			
Gender	.08	.18	.03
Age	.00	.01	.02
Consumption	.24	.04	.38 ^c
F(1,261) = 13.87 ^c Adj. R ² = .12			
Step 3			
Gender	.14	.15	.05
Age	.00	.01	.01
Consumption	.04	.04	.06
Competence	.21	.08	.23 ^b
Relatedness	.31	.05	.37 ^c
Autonomy	.09	.08	.09
F(3,258) = 28.51 ^c Adj. R ² = .26			
Step 4			
Gender	-.4	.03	-.01
Age	.00	.00	.01
Consumption	.01	.01	.01
Competence	-.03	.02	.03
Autonomy	.01	.02	-.01
Relatedness	-.01	.01	.01
Positive Aff	.56	.02	.55 ^c
Negative Aff	.01	.01	.01
Meaningful Aff	.46	.01	.54 ^c
F(3,255) = 1085.78 ^c Adj. R ² = .58			

^ap < 0.05. ^bp < 0.01, ^cp < 0.001

Discussion

Perhaps the most important finding from this study was that sports media provided both enjoyment and meaningful experiences for audiences. In doing so, this study illuminates how and why sports media entertains audiences. Watching sports is a hedonic media experience, but this study shows that it can be affiliated with more profound meaningful experiences as well. This mirrors previous studies on media such that video games and movies could be consumed for reasons beyond pure enjoyment despite assumptions to the contrary (Oliver, 1993; Oliver et al., 2016). Watching a sporting event can be fun but it can also be a deeper experience.

Indeed, sports consumption has been noted for hedonic enjoyment such as arousal, escape, (Raney, 2006) and the “feel-good effect” (Maennig, 2008). However, some work has also hinted at notions closer to meaningfulness than enjoyment. For example, sports can help to develop relationships with others (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Hull & Lewis, 2014; Raney, 2006) or give insights into the human condition (Bartsch, et al., 2016). This can help explain why people consume sports even when it seems as if they are not enjoying it. There are plenty of fans who seem annoyed, irritated, or frustrated with their teams. This might leave some wondering why would these fans watch the game if it is so unpleasant. The answer is that watching the games is not fun but it is meaningful. Those fans are deriving value from the sporting event that does not represent pleasure but represents a connection to others. In sum, this study provides evidence that sports can provide both fun and meaningful entertainment experiences for audience members and thus provides a notable step forward in understanding how and why people consume sports media. Revisiting the anecdote from the start of the piece detailing the gift of tickets, one could conclude that the sporting event is meaningful to the recipient. If the gift recipients’ relationship to the sport was one of hedonic pleasure, the reaction would likely be very different. The reaction, instead, indicates a profound, moved feeling.

More narrowly, these results provide a model for understanding how people are entertained by sports media and, notably, this reflects existing models of media entertainment in other domains (Bowman, Oliver., Rogers, & Sherrick, 2016, Oliver et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2006; Tamborini, 2010) though there are differences that are worth detailing later in this piece. Specifically, the mechanisms which led to enjoyment or meaningfulness were examined and gave insight into how an audience member achieves an enjoyable or meaningful experience. To state plainly, the results in this study showed that enjoyment was predicted by competence, autonomy, relatedness, positive affect, and negative affect. Meanwhile, meaningfulness was only predicted by positive affect and meaningful affect. These results show the gulf between enjoyment and meaningfulness derived from sports media. Enjoyment seems to be derived from a more complete fulfillment of the dimensions of SDT. Feeling knowledgeable can be fun such that feeling a degree of mastery is rewarding and creates pleasant feelings. This is likely the case in many domains, including sports. Similarly, feeling free to consume the sports one enjoys is also fun. The flexibility to pursue content of interest is important to the enjoyment of sports. Lastly, connecting with friends around sports can be enjoyable for audiences. The notion of watching and cheering with friends is an enjoyable experience. Importantly, these dimensions of SDT are not necessarily exclusive to one another and should not be treated as such. In fact, they likely overlap in relevant ways. For example, someone likely feels more competent when they are free to pursue information they are interested in, which relates to feelings of autonomy.

As expected, enjoyment was also predicted positively by positive affect and negatively by negative affect. This supports the notion that enjoyment of sports media is truly hedonic as it maximizes positive feelings and minimizes negative ones. This is in accordance with theorizing related to enjoyment (Oliver, 2008).

Meanwhile, meaningfulness was predicted by two of the dimensions of SDT until affect was entered into the model which subsumed the influence of the two dimensions of SDT. Since meaningfulness is categorized, typically, as insights into the human condition, these results can be explained. The more sports media makes a person feel a powerful emotion, especially one that is complex and encompasses a variety of thoughts and ideas, the more he or she will find that media to be meaningful. Indeed, meaningful affect is more complex than positive or negative emotion. These feelings are blends of positive and negative affect which often relate to the human condition. This helps to show the profound nature of meaningful experiences and this profundity outweighs the other predictors — in this case, dimensions of SDT. The predictive ability of positive affect was unexpected but is not too surprising and can be speculated upon. If someone has a great time watching a game, it could provide a meaningful experience, especially if that experience is positive and memorable. In other words, a meaningful experience can also feel good for audience members.

In previous work on meaningful entertainment experiences, enjoyment was predicted by feelings of competence and autonomy while meaningfulness was predicted by feelings of relatedness (Oliver et al., 2016). The context of this study was video games and the authors speculated that, for a video game, feeling in control and feeling skilled were fun experiences while connecting with characters and other players were meaningful ones. A similar but, in some ways, divergent pattern was found for sports media. Perhaps this can be explained by the differences in media. In terms of enjoyment, the same reasons likely explain the predictive ability of competence and autonomy. The significance of relatedness suggests that fun for a sporting event is more contingent on others than enjoyment of a video game. Given the communal nature of sporting events, this should not come as a surprise. For meaningfulness, before affect was entered into the model, relatedness and competence predicted meaningful experiences. The relatedness finding echoes previous research and is expected because meaningfulness, on a certain level, describes connections with others. The significance of competence, however, was not expected but shows that in order to achieve a meaningful experience with sports media, an audience member must first have some degree of understanding of the sport. Further, competence and relatedness are likely interrelated. For example, for two people to feel related in the context of sports media, the two must have enough understanding of the sport to interact with one another in a meaningful way.

The demographic predictors were significant for enjoyment. Frequency of sports media consumption predicted enjoyment of that content. People are likely watching sports because they find that they gratify the need for enjoyment. The fact that men enjoyed sports more reflects the notion that sports can reinforce masculine ideologies and comports with previous research not explored here (Messner et al., 2000). However, frequency of sports media consumption did not predict meaningfulness. This suggests that frequent spectatorship is not necessary for someone to have a meaningful experience with sports media. One great game can be meaningful to someone while a series of games might be more enjoyable. Similarly, the other demographics (age and gender) did not predict meaningfulness. Within sports media, meaningfulness appears to be a more transcendent experience than enjoyment that is not dictated by demographics but instead is accessible

to all sorts of people. Despite the masculine ideology of sports, women can, and do, have meaningful experiences with sports media.

As for limitations to this piece, the study was a survey and, therefore, cannot test causality. A follow up study to examine the causal nature of these relationships would be helpful and beneficial in further understanding these relationships. Another limitation was that relatedness could refer to other fans, friends, family, and the teams/players. This was intentionally left broad in order to assess the viability of the concept more expansively. Parsing these relationships further in the future would be useful and the current study suggests that this would be a fruitful area of exploration. Another limitation is that the study implemented Mechanical Turk users. This can potentially create issues surrounding lab and participant oversight though best practices were used by the researchers and, in doing so, Mechanical Turk is a dependable resource. On this point, the people responding to the survey were not necessarily sports fans. This in no way invalidates the data but the numbers should be interpreted with this in mind and a future study examining sports fans specifically would be compelling.

In conclusion, sports media can elicit both enjoyable and meaningful entertainment experiences for audiences. Similarly, the dimensions of SDT and affective state are valuable in understanding the underlying mechanisms of how sports entertain. This article should advance understanding of how sports entertain and how sports are viewed by audiences and content producers with practical applications regarding how sports are presented to audiences. Perhaps, most importantly; this study sheds light on how people have meaningful experiences with sports media.

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