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Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Empirical - Sport

Using Sport Fandom to Aid in the Search for Meaning

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Abstract

The current investigation examined the extent to which sport fandom serves as a source of meaning in life. Participants completed a questionnaire packet assessing their level of fandom, level of identification with their favorite team, and their perception that following sport given their life meaning and purpose. The data suggest that, although sport fandom can and does provide meaning in life, it does so at modest levels. Additionally, as hypothesized, certain individuals were more likely to see sport fandom as a source of meaning, namely those with greater levels of general fandom and team identification.

Keywords: Sport, Sport Fans, Team Identification, Meaning of Life

Background

Although there can be negative consequences to following sport (Wann & James, 2019), research indicates that sport fandom is associated with positive outcomes as well. For instance, sport fandom can facilitate the adoption of positive values (Brown, Basil, & Bocarea, 2003) and it can promote prosocial behavior (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Platow et al., 1999). Another way sport fandom is associated with positive outcomes involves the use of fandom to assist in the quest to meet basic psychological needs. This includes the needs for belonging, distinctiveness, certainty/structure, and meaning in life (Wann, in press; Wann & James, 2019).

As for the need to belong, humans have an innate capacity to seek out group memberships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Given that fandom is a social activity (Wann, Friedman, McHale, & Jaffe, 2003), it has the ability to help individuals meet their need to belong (Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, & Luellen, 2012). As for distinctiveness, individuals have a desire to be unique (Brewer, 1991). Sport fandom can assist with this need by providing fans with an opportunity to be dissimilar from other fans (Dimmock & Gucciardi, 2008). For instance, they could choose to follow niche sports or support teams from a different country. In terms of the need for certainty, individuals often engage in behaviors that are designed to reduce the randomness in their lives (Grieve & Hogg, 1999). Because sport fandom adds structure and routine, it can help meet this need as well (Dimmock & Grove, 2006).

The fourth human need that can be partially met via sport fandom, the search for meaning, is the focus of the current examination. Meaning in life, viewed as someone's belief that life has purpose and one is a part of something larger than oneself (Doyle, Filo, Lock, Funk, & McDonald, 2016), has important psychological consequences given that it is associated with mental well-being (Czekierda, Banik, Park, & Luszczynska, 2017). Studies have found that sport fandom and meaning in life are related (e.g., Doyle et al., 2016; Keaton & Gearhart, 2014).

However, a limitation of previous work is that researchers often assessed general life meaning rather than specifically focusing on meaning achieved via sport fandom. For example, in their examination of meaning, team identification, and belonging, Wann, Hackathorn, and Sherman (2017) asked participants to respond to nonspecific items assessing meaning, such as, "My life has a clear sense of purpose."

Although this data is certainly informative, researchers also need to assess if sport specifically provides meaning for fans. For example, returning to the example above, it would be interesting and useful to examine reactions to items such as "Sport fandom provides me with a clear sense of purpose." This allows one to determine specifically if sport provides meaning rather than simply investigating the extent to which sport fan variables (e.g., team identification) are correlated with a general feeling that one's life has meaning.

Thus, the current investigation extended past work by specifically asking participants about the acquisition of meaning via sport fandom. We hypothesized that sport fandom (i.e., one's interest in sport, see Wann, 2002; Hypothesis 1) and identification with one's favorite team (i.e., one's psychological connection to a team, see Wann & James, 2019; Hypothesis 2) would be significant positive predictors of the belief that sport fandom provides meaning in life.

Method

Participants

Participants were 205 (72 male; 129 female; 4 not stating) students receiving extra credit or participating to fulfill college course requirements. Subjects were invited to bring family and friends to the testing session (provided that they were at least 18 years of age), thereby increasing the diversity of the sample. Participants had a mean age of 29.64 years ($SD = 16.94$).

Materials and Procedure

Upon entering the testing room and providing their consent, participants completed a questionnaire packet containing four sections. The first section simply assessed demographic information on age and gender. The next section asked participants to list their favorite sport team (if they did not have a favorite sport team, they left this and the next seven items blank). They then completed the seven-item Sport Spectator Identification Scale – Revised (SSIS-R; James, Delia, & Wann, 2019). The SSIS-R assesses an individual's degree of identification with a sport team. Response options to the SSIS-R ranged from 1 (*low identification*, e.g., *Slightly a Fan*) to 8 (*high identification*, e.g., *Very Much a Fan*). Therefore, higher scores reflected greater levels of identification.

The third portion contained the Sport Fandom Questionnaire (SFQ; Wann, 2002). This five-item

scale assesses general sport fandom, that is, the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of sport follower. Response options ranged from 1 (*low fandom*) to 8 (*high fandom*). Thus, higher scores on the SFQ indicated greater levels of general sport fandom.

The final section contained seven items measuring the extent to which persons believed that sport fandom provided meaning in their lives. The first four questions were based on items from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). These items were reworded to focus specifically on meaning derived from sport fandom. Participants indicated the degree to which, "Following sport as a fan helps me understand my life's meaning", "Following sport as a fan helps my life have a clearer sense of purpose", "By following sport as a fan, I have a better sense of what makes my life meaningful", and "Following sport as a fan has helped me discover a satisfying life purpose." Three more items were developed specifically for this project to further assess sport fandom as a source of meaning. These items were, "Being a sport fan provides meaning in my life", "Being a sport fan gives my life a sense of purpose", and "Being a sport fan gives my life significance." The meaning items had response anchors ranging from 1 (*Absolutely Untrue*) to 7 (*Absolutely True*). Therefore, higher scores revealed a greater belief that sport fandom providing meaning.

After completing the questionnaire packet, participants received a debriefing statement. This form disclosed the purposes/hypotheses of the study and contained contact information for participants to request a report of the research findings. Once they had received their debriefing statement, they were excused from the testing session. Sessions lasted approximately 15 minutes.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and reliability alphas (Cronbach) appear in Table 1. Overall, perceptions of sport fandom as a source of life meaning were modest. The meaning scale had a potential range of 7 to 49 and a midpoint of 28. The sample-wide average was 17.79 ($SD = 12.01$). However, several individuals did report moderate to high scores for sport fandom as a source of meaning. Notably, 21.5% of the sample reported a meaning score above the midpoint, and approximately 12% reported a meaning score of 35 or greater.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for the Dependent Measures

Measure	Mean	SD	Alpha
<u>Sport fandom (SFQ)</u>	23.64	11.55	.95
<u>Identification for favorite team (SSIS-R)^a</u>	40.90	11.92	.93
<u>Sport fandom as a source of meaning</u>	17.79	12.00	.98

Note: ^a $n = 166$ as 39 participants did not report a favorite team and, thus, did not complete the items on the SSIS-R.

It was hypothesized that both sport fandom and identification with a favorite team would be significant positive predictors of the belief that sport fandom provides meaning in life. This was tested in two ways. First, a regression was computed in which fandom and identification served as predictor variables and fandom providing life meaning was the dependent variable. A total of 39 participants did not list a favorite sport team. Thus, this analysis was only computed on persons who completed both the SSIS-R and the SFQ ($n = 166$). Correlations among the variables appear in Table 2. The combined effect of the two predictor variables was significant, $F(2, 163) = 51.55, p < .001$ (see Table 3 for regression statistics). Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, both sport fandom ($t = 6.28, p < .001$) and team identification ($t = 2.12, p < .05$) accounted for a significant proportion of unique variance in perceptions of fandom as providing life meaning.

Table 2
Correlations among the Variables

	SFQ	SSIS-R	Meaning
<u>Sport fandom (SFQ) --</u>			
<u>Identification for favorite team (SSIS-R)</u>	.64*	--	
<u>Sport fandom as a source of meaning</u>	.65*	.49*	--

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level

Table 3
Regression Equation with Sport Fandom and Identification with Favorite Team as Predictors of the Perception that Sport Fandom Provides Meaning in Life.

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta.</i>	<i>t</i>	sig.
-					
<u>Sport fandom</u>	0.57	0.09	.50	6.28	**
<u>Identification for favorite team</u>	0.17	0.08	.17	2.12	*
<u>Overall <i>R</i></u>	0.62				
<u>Overall <i>R</i>²</u>	0.39				
<u>Adjusted <i>R</i>²</u>	0.38				
<u>Overall <i>F</i> (2, 163)</u>	51.55*				

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Next, to give context and provide a visual perspective on the data, we computed an additional series of analyses in which scores on the measures of sport fandom and identification with a favorite team were split into five roughly even groups (i.e., approximately 20% of the sample was in each group). With respect to sport fandom, means and standard deviations for the groups appear in Table 4. A one-way analysis of variance computed on the meaning scores revealed a significant result, $F(4, 200) = 35.94, p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons (Student-Newman-Keuls) revealed that, with the exception of the two lowest fandom groups, all groups were significantly different. Specifically, as sport fandom increased, so too did perceptions of fandom as a source of meaning. It warrants mention that, even for the group with the highest levels of sport fandom, perceptions of sport fandom as a source of life meaning were modest. That is, given that the highest fandom group had a meaning score of 28.96, it is clear that, although some fans certainly found sport fandom to provide meaning, it was not endorsed as a particularly powerful source of meaning and purpose in life, even for the strongest fans.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for Perceptions of Sport Fandom as a Source of Meaning in Life by Five Levels of Sport Fandom.

<i>Sport Fandom (SFQ) Range</i>				
5-11 (<i>n</i> = 41)	12-19 (<i>n</i> = 41)	20-27 (<i>n</i> = 38)	28-35 (<i>n</i> = 39)	36-40 (<i>n</i> = 46)
8.07 _a (3.57)	11.44 _a (7.30)	16.47 _b (9.65)	22.80 _c (10.15)	28.96 _d (12.58)

Note: Means sharing a common subscript were not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level (Student-Newman-Keuls test).

As for identification with one's favorite team, means and standard deviations for the groups appear in Table 5 (this analysis was only computed for those persons listing a favorite sport team, $n = 166$). A one-way analysis of variance computed on the meaning scores revealed a significant result, $F(4, 161) = 12.41, p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons (Student-Newman-Keuls) revealed that the lowest group was significantly different from the other four. The next two groups were not significantly different from each other, but did have higher scores than the first group and lower scores from the top two groups. And finally, the top two groups were significantly higher than the other three, but they themselves were not significantly different. Similar to the aforementioned analyses targeting sport fandom, it should be noted that, even for the group with the highest levels of identification, perceptions of sport fandom as a source of life meaning were generally modest. That is, given that the highest identification group had a meaning score of 25.62, although some persons believed that fandom provided meaning, it was not endorsed as a particularly powerful source of meaning and purpose in life, even for individuals with the highest levels of identification with their favorite sport team.

Table 5
Means and Standard Deviations for Perceptions of Sport Fandom as a Source of Meaning in Life by Five Levels of Identification with One's favorite Team.

Identification with Favorite Team (SSIS-R) Range				
9-29 (n = 32)	30-40 (n = 34)	41-45 (n = 30)	46-51 (n = 33)	52-56 (n = 37)
9.16 _a (5.44)	17.50 _b (9.75)	19.17 _b (10.01)	24.52 _c (10.40)	25.62 _c (15.20)

Note: Means sharing a common subscript were not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level (Student-Newman-Keuls test).

Discussion

Research has uncovered ways that sport fandom assists in meeting psychological needs, including needs for belonging, uniqueness, and structure (Wann, in press; Wann & James, 2019). A fourth psychological need, and the focus of the current investigation, concerns the ability of sport fandom to help in the search for meaning. Previous studies have suggested that fandom can be a viable avenue for acquiring meaning and purpose (e.g., Doyle et al., 2016; Wann, Hackathorn, et al., 2017). We sought to expand on this work by asking questions that directly assess sport fandom as a source of meaning, rather than targeting general perceptions that life has meaning.

The data acquired in the current investigation suggest that, although sport fandom can and does provide meaning in life, it does so at modest levels. That is, few individuals reported that sport fandom contributed to meaning in large amounts. Perhaps this finding should be taken at face value and, simply put, we should conclude that sport fandom can assist in the search for meaning, but likely does so in modest amounts. However, another potential explanation is that individuals underestimate the extent to sport fandom is a source of life meaning. This possibility is supported by work finding that sport fans often have difficulty articulating how fandom aids in the search for meaning. For example, in their qualitative study investigating how fans of a professional team used their fandom to gain meaning, Delia, James, and Wann (2020) found that many fans reported it was hard to put into words precisely how their fandom fostered meaning. Thus, for our participants, perhaps fandom was a stronger source for meaning than they realized.

Although the sample-wide scores for sport fandom as a source of meaning were modest, some persons did report that their fandom provided meaning and purpose to their lives. In support of our hypotheses, certain individuals were more likely to see fandom as a source of meaning, namely those with greater levels of general fandom and team identification. This finding seems quite reasonable. That is, one should not expect persons to find meaning in activities with which they have little to no interest. Put simply, to provide meaning, an activity needs to be meaningful to someone. People often report that hobbies and pastimes can be a source of meaning (Where Americans find meaning in life, 2018), but they would need to have some interest and/or investment in the leisure pursuit for this to occur.

And finally, although it appears that sport fandom can (for some) serve as an important source of meaning in life, it remains unclear what it is about fandom that provides this sense of meaning. Perhaps is it the social nature of the activity (e.g., see Wann, Hackathorn, et al., 2017). Or perhaps it is the excitement and thrill of sporting competitions, a plausible possibility given that drama and arousal often play a key role in a fan's desire to follow sport (James, Trail, Wann, Zhang, & Funk, 2006; Wann & James, 2019). Maybe fandom provides meaning by aiding in general mental health (Delia et al., 2020). Or maybe it has to do with the success of a team (or expectations of success), which is known to impact a variety of fan responses (Wann, Grieve, et al., 2017; Wann & James, 2019). Indeed, the list of factors that could facilitate meaning from fandom is likely quite long. Future researchers should provide fans with such a list and ask them to indicate which play the greatest role in providing meaning.

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