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Exploring PERMA in spectator sport: Applying positive psychology to examine the individual-level benefits of sport consumption

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ABSTRACT

Sport spectating provides numerous benefits for sport organisations and individuals. In this paper we use a positive psychology approach to examine the individual-level benefits of sport consumption in order to investigate the activation of five domains of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Using a two-study panel research design, we collected qualitative data from a sample of Australian Rules Football consumers. In the first study, we explored how the PERMA domains were activated during the season. Study two included a follow-up interview with eight initial respondents in the off-season. We found evidence of four PERMA domains that were activated in the sport spectator context by a variety of consumer experiences. The emergence of these domains in both studies suggests sport marketers would benefit from actions including: creating more social spaces within their stadiums, hosting regular off-season events, and creating social-media based competitions which promote fan engagement and interactions throughout the calendar year.

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Sport management researchers have traditionally focused on how to leverage the relationship between individuals and sport organisations to benefit sport leagues and teams. Such research contributes to understanding how sport organisations might best connect with customers to reap organisational benefits (Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014). Whilst valuable, this perspective focuses largely on the perspective of sport organisations, which detracts attention from the individual-level benefits of spectating. Inoue, Berg, and Chelladurai (2015) illustrate this oversight, outlining a paucity of research attention

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dedicated to the relationship between sport consumption, and health and well-being. Furthermore, [Inoue et al. \(2015\)](#) note that only 9% of studies exploring this relationship are located in sport management journals, prompting a call for more research in this emerging area. Thus, in this paper we investigate the wider impacts of sport consumption and how specific domains of well-being are activated through sport spectating ([Wann, 2006c](#)).

Research concerning the health and well-being benefits associated with sport has focused mainly on participation; rather than spectatorship. Existing spectator research, however, focuses on health and physical domains of well-being, devoting less attention to psychological states. A review of 135 relevant spectator manuscripts published between 1990 and 2014 demonstrated that health (47%) and physical well-being (24%) are well researched; however, domains of mental (20%) and social well-being (15%) receive much less attention ([Inoue et al., 2015](#)). Despite this weakness, researchers have established that sport spectating and psychological health are conceptually ([Wann, 2006c](#)) and empirically related (e.g., [Branscombe & Wann, 1991](#); [Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, & Luellen, 2012](#); [Wann, 2006a](#); [Wann, Dimmock, & Grove, 2003](#); [Wann, Keenan, & Page, 2009](#); [Wann & Pierce, 2005](#); [Wann, Rogers, Dooley, & Foley, 2011](#); [Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011](#); [Wann & Weaver, 2009](#)). These contributions demonstrate the capacity of sport consumption to deliver individual-level benefits; however, the specific domains that contribute to well-being are not completely understood. Thus, research in the spectator context has determined that spectatorship has the capacity to influence well-being, but has yet to reveal how this occurs.

We use [Seligman's \(2011\)](#) positive psychology framework with five domains: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) as guidance to explore the well-being benefits of sport spectatorship. [Filo and Coghlan \(in press\)](#) utilised positive psychology to understand the specific domains that contribute to well-being among sport event participants. They found that participation in charity sport events activated each PERMA domain to varying degrees. Meanwhile, [Koortzen and Oosthuizen \(2012\)](#) provided some evidence of PERMA activation in the spectator context, finding that South African residents believed that the 2010 FIFA World Cup would activate positive emotions amongst community members, provide socialisation opportunities, and create a sense of national solidarity. More recently, [Powłowski, Downward, and Rasciute \(2014\)](#) demonstrated a link between attending sport events and happiness (e.g., pleasure) using data from individuals in 46 countries. These studies support consideration of positive emotions (P), relationships (R), and meaning (M) from the PERMA framework.

In this paper, we use a two-study research design examining how the five PERMA domains are activated in the spectator context, and how these domains are experienced during the season and in the off-season. This extends efforts in the spectator context, which have called for exploration of the underlying facets linked to the individual-level benefits of sport consumption (e.g., [Wann, 2006c](#); [Wann et al., 2003](#)). Consequently, the present research objective is to explore the activation of the PERMA domains within the sport spectator context. Two research questions (RQ) frame our investigation:

RQ1: How does sport spectatorship activate the individual-level PERMA domains?

RQ2: How does the activation of the individual-level PERMA domains vary between in-season and off-season contexts?

1. Literature review

Sport spectatorship can influence psychological well-being due to the social nature of the activity ([Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001](#); [Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989](#)). Through consumption, individuals often experience psychological benefits, which include an increased sense of belonging in society and attachment to other spectators ([Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002](#); [Lock & Funk, 2016](#)). In conceptual work, [Wann \(2006c\)](#) proposed that sport spectating contributes to social-psychological health as it enables the creation of temporary and enduring connections with others. [Wann \(2006c\)](#) explains that temporary or transient connections emerge in environments where an individual's team preference is not likely to expose them to other in-group members on a regular basis (e.g., when a fan resides a long distance from his or her favourite team but encounters other in-group fans at a bar). Enduring connections emanate in more permanent settings, such as when an individual supports a team in the local area and is therefore often surrounded by other in-group members. In this instance, the individual is provided with frequent opportunities to talk to others, form friendships, and engage in team supportive behaviours with likeminded individuals (e.g., [Gibson et al., 2002](#); [Katz & Heere, 2013](#)).

Substantial research supports [Wann's \(2006c\)](#) propositions. [Elling, Van Hilvoorde, and Van Den Dool \(2014\)](#) found that sections of the Dutch population experienced short-term increases in their sense of belonging based upon the country's success at large sport events. Furthermore, evidence suggests the social connections derived from sport spectatorship reduce the likelihood that an individual will experience negative emotions (e.g., depression or social alienation), and increase the likelihood that he or she will experience positive feelings (e.g., belongingness) and social connectedness (e.g., [Branscombe & Wann, 1991](#); [Theodorakis et al., 2012](#); [Wann, 2006a](#); [Wann & Pierce, 2005](#); [Wann et al., 2003, 2009](#); [Wann, Rogers, et al., 2011](#); [Wann, Waddill, et al., 2011](#); [Wann & Weaver, 2009](#)). In this paper, we focus on expanding understanding of the specific domains and processes that influence well-being by utilising a positive psychology approach (e.g., [Wann, 2006c](#)).

1.1. Positive psychology

Positive psychology refocused mainstream psychology from directing effort towards correcting negative psychological states, to proactively examining the processes of human functioning that enable individuals to thrive and experience flow

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