Experiencing Together: The Effects of Sharing Experience on the Sports Spectators' Hope

Namkyeong Jang, Seoul National University
Yukyoum Kim (Advisor), Seoul National University

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An individual observing others who are experiencing a particular emotion can feel the same emotion. This occurs even when the situation is not directly relevant to the observer (Iglesias, 1996). People wince in pain when they see the pain of others (Bavellas, Balck, Lemery & Mullet, 1986). Self-perceptions are also influenced by observing the behavior of close others (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). These results indicate emotions and behaviors can change due to mere observation.

Vicarious experiences can be negative, such as vicarious trauma (Schauben & Frazier, 1995), but also positive, such as vicarious learning (Manz & Sims Jr, 1981). In sport management, vicarious achievement is a major concept to explain spectator motivation (Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995). Most of the studies on vicarious achievement have researched vicarious achievement as a motivational factor affecting sport consumption behaviors. Yet, there has been a lack of research on why spectators keep seeking vicarious achievement through watching sporting event and athletes.

Cialdini (1976) argued BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory) is the behavioral manifestation of the desire to enhance one’s self-esteem through achieving vicariously. Specifically, people with low self-esteem are more likely to seek vicarious achievement to alleviate the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance (Cialdini, 1976). However, pursuit of vicarious achievement is not completely explained by motives to enhance one’s self-esteem. This research fills the gap in the literature by showing sport spectator can feel hope through vicarious achievement. By experiencing the positive state of hope, sports spectators will continue to seek vicarious achievement.

The major tenets of hope are goals, agency thinking and pathway thinking (Snyder, 2002). Pathway thinking is the ability to find effective ways to achieve particular goals, and agency thinking is the will to continue to act to achieve these goals (Snyder, 1994). Vicarious achievement induces positive moods, which in turn increases the likelihood of achieving a particular goal by regulating current emotions and enabling action for the future (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007). Thus, vicarious achievement induces positive emotions, which leads to an optimistic view of reaching future goals (Proposition1) and self-regulation (Proposition 2). Also, optimistic view of the goal and self-regulation affect agency thinking (Proposition 3, 4).

Vicarious achievement can also be seen as the act of sharing experience with socially successful people. Upward social comparisons can improve one’s situation and increase motivation (Taylor and Lovell, 1989). Upward social comparisons facilitate to achieve goals by stimulating self-improvement motivation (Fesinger, 1954). Thus, by watching sports games to observe scenes of overcoming difficulties, or achieving goals in difficult situations, the observer’s motivation for self-improvement may increase (Proposition 5). The greater the incentive to develop oneself, the higher the likelihood that observers will continue to act to achieve their goals. Thus, influencing agency thinking (Proposition 6). Furthermore, these incentives may also increase pathway thinking (Proposition 7) by continuously constructing ways to develop oneself.

Prior research mainly focused on self-esteem to explain why spectator pursues vicarious achievement. This study contributes to explain why spectators seek vicarious achievement by understanding how vicarious achievement affects spectators’ hope.