Entertainment-Oriented Gratifications of Sports Media: Contributors to Suspense, Hedonic Enjoyment, and Appreciation

Alice E. Hall, University of Missouri–St. Louis
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Alice E. Hall
Department of Communication
University of Missouri-St. Louis
One University Blvd.
St. Louis, MO 63121

(314) 516-6662
halla@umsl.edu

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Author Note: Alice Hall (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Her research interests include audiences’ responses to entertainment media.
Abstract

This survey study investigated contributors to viewers’ hedonic enjoyment, appreciation, and emotional responses to a televised baseball game. There was an indirect relationship between athlete affinity and hedonic enjoyment by way of suspense. This relationship was moderated by the game’s outcome such that suspense was associated more strongly with enjoyment when the viewer’s team lost. Interest and knowledge of a player was the form of affinity that had a stronger relationship to suspense, rather than the viewers’ sense of having a virtual friendship. Virtual friendship and sport involvement were associated directly with appreciation. Enjoyment and appreciation were associated with different emotional responses. Whereas enjoyment was associated with stronger positive and weaker negative emotions, appreciation was associated with stronger positive, negative, and meaningful emotions.

Keywords: sports media, entertainment, suspense, survey
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Sports media are popular and prevalent. They also inspire an unusual level of audience engagement. Fans of sports media reported greater enjoyment, more pre- and post-viewing behavior, and stronger motivation to watch than fans of other media genres (Gantz, Wang, Paul, & Potter, 2006). Given the prominence and popularity of sports media, it is worth considering how it provides enjoyment for the audience and exploring what other desires it gratifies. Much of the previous work on audiences’ responses to sports media has applied either a disposition-based model of enjoyment, theories of suspense involving excitation transfer, or a combination of the two perspectives (e.g., Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschman, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick, David, Eastin, Tamborini, & Greenwood, 2009; Peterson & Raney, 2008). This work has also tended to focus on hedonic forms of media enjoyment - those associated with pleasurable, positive emotions. However, hedonic enjoyment is unlikely to be the only gratification that audiences gain from sports media. Although sports spectatorship can generate an enormous amount of positive emotion, as the euphoria of fans after their team wins a championship game illustrates, it can also bring its share of negative emotions without eliminating its appeal. Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of this is the loyal following for the Chicago Cubs, who have wrought a fair amount of heartache after falling short of the winning the World Championship every year for over a century. The current research investigates the gratifications offered by sports media that are not tied to positive emotions by examining audiences’ responses to professional baseball games. It explores whether suspense contributes to viewers’ responses in situations where a game’s outcome is inconsistent with their dispositions and considers how an alternative gratification, appreciation, or a sense of meaning and human connection, applies to sports media.
Disposition Models and Suspense in Relation to Sports

Previous research has often used disposition theory to explain spectators’ responses to sporting events. This perspective, which was initially developed to explain responses to drama, suggests that viewers have affective dispositions towards athletes or teams (Raney, 2003). The level of enjoyment and positive emotions they feel in response to particular games depends upon the strength of those dispositions and the game’s outcome. Enjoyment and positive emotions are enhanced when a team or athlete for which one has strong positive dispositions triumphs, and when a team or athlete for which one has strong negative dispositions loses. Previous research supports this model (for reviews, see Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

Disposition models also suggest a role for suspense, defined as fearful apprehension resulting from the anticipation of a negative outcome for a liked protagonist such as an athlete or a team in a sports contest (Zillmann, 1991). Stronger dispositions are thought to contribute to feelings of suspense and research has found spectators’ dispositions towards both teams and specific athletes to be associated with ratings of a game’s suspense. For example, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009) found viewers of a football game who were rooting for one of the teams reported more suspense than those with no preference for a winner (see also Peterson & Raney, 2008). Research considering the impact of feelings for particular athletes includes Hartmann et al.’s (2008) study of viewers’ reactions to Formula 1 auto races. They found that the strength of viewers’ hopes for a positive outcome for their favorite driver were associated with ratings of the race as suspenseful. Once generated, the tension and apprehension that characterize suspense are thought to carry over into the emotions felt when one’s favored team or player wins, thus heightening positive emotions and hedonic enjoyment (Zillmann, 1991). Madrigal, Bee, Chen, and LeBarge (2011) suggest that relief is the discrete positive emotion that transfers suspense
into enjoyment. Their work found relief to mediate the relationship between suspense and enjoyment of winning games. Previous research has found suspense to be associated with sports media enjoyment after controlling for dispositions toward the winner (Gan, Tuggle, Mitrook, Coussément, & Zillmann, 1997; Madrigal et al., 2011, Study 2; Peterson & Raney, 2008).

Although these models help explain why spectators enjoy some sporting events, they have limitations. This is perhaps most obvious in cases where a viewer’s favored team loses. In the case of drama, ambiguous or negative endings are the exception. One of the conventions of many narrative genres is that they end happily. In the case of real, unscripted sporting events, however, resolutions are more likely to be negative. Someone loses almost every game.

Disposition models suggest that watching athletes for whom one feels positive dispositions lose produces negative emotions and therefore little enjoyment. However, the ongoing popularity of spectator sports suggests that watching one’s favored team lose must offer some recompense. In Major League Baseball, for example, even the best teams tend to win less than 60% of their games. It would be difficult to build multimillion-dollar businesses from these teams if sharing in the pleasure or glory of a winning game was all they offered. Sports media are likely to evoke other responses that audiences find appealing and that function to drawn them back to games, even in the face of the risk of watching athletes they care for lose.

The current study, therefore, explored other gratifications that sporting events offer spectators. First, it explores an aspect of suspense not fully addressed by the excitement transfer model: what happens when a game’s outcomes are inconsistent with viewers’ dispositions, and thus there are relatively few positive emotions to enhance. Second, it considers an alternative gratification that can be offered by entertainment media: appreciation.

**Suspense and Sporting Events’ Outcomes**
Most previous research on suspense in situations that lack a positive resolution focus on narrative drama. Some researchers have compared audiences’ suspense and enjoyment of stories that conclude happily with those of stories with an ambiguous or unresolved ending. In a study with children, Zillmann, Hay, and Bryant (1975) found that an adventure story was evaluated more highly when the resolution was positive rather than ambiguous. Hoffner and Cantor (1991) found that children’s reports of emotions related to suspense (i.e., fear and worry) were associated with enjoyment of the story’s ending when it was resolved, but not when it concluded before the threat to the protagonists was addressed. However, the relationships differed when one considered evaluations of the story as a whole. Suspenseful emotions were associated with more positive overall evaluations for both the resolved and unresolved versions. In a more recent study of young adults Madrigal et al. (2011, Study 1) found that the relationship between suspense and enjoyment was only significant when the story was resolved positively. When the ending was left in doubt, they were not associated. As a whole, this body of research suggests that ambiguous endings reduce, but do not eliminate, the likelihood that suspense will contribute to enjoyment.

Relatively little work has investigated the relationship between suspense and enjoyment in situations where the feared negative outcome – such as losing a game – actually occurs. In one of the few exceptions, Madrigal et al. (2011, Study 3) investigated enjoyment of computer-simulated races featuring avatars associated with favored or neutral sports teams. They found that suspense was associated with enjoyment when the avatar associated with the participant’s favored team lost. However, the relationship was not mediated by feelings of relief, as was the case with races that ended favorably. The current study extended these findings by testing whether a game’s resolution affects the relationship between suspense and enjoyment in relation
to a real sporting event.

RQ) Does the relationship between suspense and hedonic enjoyment vary depending on the resolution of the game?

**Sports and Appreciation**

The possibility that suspense contributes to a game’s appeal when the outcome is negative raises the question of what alternative gratifications sports spectatorship offers. One possibility is suggested by the work of Oliver and her colleagues (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011). They argue that there are two distinct forms of response to entertainment media: hedonic enjoyment and appreciation. In contrast to materials that produce hedonic enjoyment, those that are appreciated can evoke a mix of emotions, including those with a negative valence such as sadness or melancholy. However, they are rewarding in that they evoke a sense of meaningfulness or human connection. Material that is appreciated can evoke positive emotions, but it might also lead the viewer to be sad or thoughtful (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). This multi-dimensional model of audience responses to entertainment media suggests that conceptualizing emotional responses to media on a single dimension that ranges from positive to negative cannot fully capture the audiences’ experiences because it does not account for complex, bittersweet responses that include high levels of both positive and negative emotions. Much of the research in this area has used a three-factor model for measuring emotional responses that includes positively-valenced emotions, negatively-valenced ones, and a third factor measuring feelings of being touched or moved (e.g., Oliver et al., 2012; 2013). The concept of appreciation has been most often applied to enjoyment of media narratives such as movies (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver et al., 2012). However, recent research is expanding the application of the concept to other forms of media. For example, Oliver et al. (2013) investigated
the concept of appreciation in relation to video games, finding that appreciation differed from hedonic enjoyment in that it was associated with different game characteristics and the satisfaction of different needs. The current study applies the concept of appreciation to sports media.

Sporting events have several elements that may evoke the sense of meaning and connection associated with appreciation, most obviously though their potential to illustrate and evoke teamwork and in-group loyalty, which theorists such as Haidt and Joseph (2004) argue is one of several broadly-recognized intuitive moral virtues. Part of the strategy and play of team sports is cooperation between players. Watching teams work together may evoke a focus on this virtue. The sense of connection that many spectators feel in relation to teams, athletes, or other fans may contribute to this as well. Watching sports can allow viewers to feel that they are part of group with a shared wish or goal, even if the game is lost and it is not fulfilled. Evidence that sports can tap into audiences’ sense of connection is provided by previous research investigating the relationship between the salience of particular values to individuals and their liking for sports programming. Bowman, Jockel, and Dogruel (2012) found that the salience of “binding” moral factors such as loyalty was associated with stronger preferences. Similarly, Winegard and Deaner (2010) found that intensity of one’s identification with a sports team was associated with the individual’s sense of the importance of in-group loyalty.

As these studies suggest, not all audience members are equally likely to appreciate sports in this sense. Viewers’ approach or orientation to the game can either intensify or temper this response. Two factors that previous work suggests are important, and which are investigated in this study, are affinity with particular athletes and involvement with the sport.

**Athlete Affinity and Baseball Involvement as Contributors to Viewers’ Responses**
As noted above, previous studies have found that spectators’ affinity with athletes contribute to hedonic enjoyment in the case of a win by increasing suspense. In their study of Formula 1 viewers, Hartmann et al. (2008) examined two dimensions of the viewers’ sense of connection to their favorite drivers. One was the strength of the viewer’s “virtual friendship” with the athlete and the other was “respectful interest,” which captures interest and admiration for the athlete rather than a sense of virtual, personal connection. Both were associated with evaluations of the race as suspenseful. The data collected in the current study allows for an attempt to replicate these findings by testing whether affinity relates to suspense.

H1) Athlete affinity will be associated with greater suspense.

The study uses Hartmann et al.’s (2008) measure of connection to athletes, which allows it to consider both aspects of athlete affinity.

Audiences’ affinity with athletes may also contribute to appreciation. The current study also considers this less-examined outcome. Several research perspectives argue that connections to a team or athlete can be gratifying. For example, Cialdini et al. (1976) suggest that being associated with winning athletes allows fans to “bask in reflected glory.” That is, they enhance their public image through their association with successful others. In addition, affinity with athletes may be associated with greater appreciation in ways not directly connected to winning, particularly in a media environment that increasingly focuses on high-profile sport celebrities. Other research suggests these connections with athletes offer gratifications by satisfying intrinsic psychological needs. An emerging line of study seeks to explain the appeal of entertainment media by applying Self Determination Theory to media selection and enjoyment (e.g., Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010). According to this perspective, individuals are motivated to satisfy a set of intrinsic psychological needs, one of
which is relatedness or feeling “connected with others” (Tamborini et al., 2010, p. 761).
Individuals use media to meet these needs and materials that are better at fulfilling them are preferred and sought out. Support for this is provided by research that has found feelings of relatedness to be associated with enjoyment of video games (Ryan et al., 2006, Study 4; Tamborini et al., 2010). If virtual connections to sports figures contributes to a sense of relatedness, audience members who feel these connections more strongly will feel greater appreciation for a game.

Previous work on media fandom also offers insight into how audiences’ engagement with sports and sports figures might contribute to appreciation. Although this work initially examined fan communities focused on television series, it is relevant to other types of media content, including sports franchises. Fandom is defined by Jenkins (1993) as a distinct form of engagement characterized by close attention, which contributes to a social and collaborative interpretive process that emphasizes the “playful, speculative, [and] subjective” (p. 278). Fans obviously receive hedonic enjoyment from what they watch. However, Jenkins (1992) suggests that fans’ approaches to media texts are distinctive in several ways that relate to appreciation. One is the mode of reception. Fans interpret their chosen texts with particularly close attention. Furthermore, they attend to different things and draw different connections than more casual viewers. Fans, for example, are more likely to focus on interconnections among different parts of their chosen subject. In the case of television series, this can be characterized by a focus on internal consistency. That is, fans look for links across episodes and therefore see meaning in elements more casual viewers might not. In the case of sports, and particularly a statistics-oriented sport like baseball where players have relatively long careers, this may take the form of following players over time and considering how their strengths and weakness contribute to the
performance of the team. This also suggests that a stronger sense of connection to athletes will contribute to appreciation. In addition, Jenkins argues that fans are particularly likely to link media content to their own lives and thus see the material as personally meaningful. This suggests that personal involvement with the sport in the form of playing one’s self, managing a fantasy team, reading news reports, and discussing the sport with others is also likely to be associated with appreciation.

H2) Stronger affinity with an athlete will be associated with greater appreciation.

H3) Involvement with the sport will be associated with greater appreciation.

Hedonic Enjoyment, Appreciation, and Emotional Responses

Hedonic enjoyment and appreciation also have different implications for the types of emotions that viewers experience. Hedonic enjoyment is associated primarily with positively-valenced emotions, whereas appreciation is thought to be associated with a wider range of feelings, including both negatively-valenced emotions and feeling moved. There is a substantive amount of research supporting this in relation to narratives. Genres that tend to evoke appreciation, such as dramas, tend to be associated with feeling sad or moved, whereas those associated with hedonic enjoyment, such as comedies, tend to be associated with positive emotions (Bartsch, 2012a; 2012b). Furthermore, in a study of audiences’ responses to movies, Oliver et al. (2012) found that participants rating films they selected as “meaningful” were more likely to report feeling both negative affect and meaningful affect, as well as a combination of negative and positive emotions. Those evaluating films they selected because they were “pleasurable,” in contrast, were more likely to report positive emotions. The final goal of this study, therefore, was to expand upon these findings by exploring how these two entertainment-oriented media gratifications relate to emotional responses to baseball games.
H4) Hedonic enjoyment of the game will be associated with positive emotions.

H5) Appreciation of the game will be associated with positive, negative, and touched emotions.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

A sample of undergraduates was recruited to take part in the study from communication classes at a university in a city with a well-established, highly respected Major League Baseball (MLB) team over the course of approximately six weeks, from mid-September to the beginning of November. Game viewership tends to be highest when the local team is participating in post-season series and championships. The games are watched not only by dedicated fans, but also by casual viewers who watch only when the stakes or others’ interest is high. This makes it an ideal time to gather this sort of data, as it helps ensure that the sample is diverse in terms of athlete affinity and sport involvement. During this season, however, the local team was in close competition for a post-season berth, making it impossible to determine beforehand whether they would make it to the Division Series. Therefore, waiting to launch the survey until the teams eligible for post-season play were determined raised the possibility of gathering data after the local team was out of contention and viewer investment in the remaining games was low. The sampling plan sought to manage these uncertainties by collecting the data in stages. In order to ensure that at least some data was collected, students in an initial block of classes were invited to take part in the survey during the last two weeks of the regular season. The deadline was extended when the team won a slot in the Division Series. When the team made it to the Division Championships, students in another block of classes were invited to participate. The deadline was extended again when the local team went on to play, but eventually lose, the World Series.
Prospective participants were sent a link to the online survey. The initial page provided information about the study. After clicking through to indicate their consent to take part, participants entered the date and teams of the last baseball game they watched. They were asked to select a game that they saw “from at least the fourth inning through to the end” to make sure that they saw the majority of the game and knew its outcome. They were asked which team they favored, which team won, and several questions regarding the context in which the game was watched (i.e., whether they watched through the media or in person). This was followed by items measuring enjoyment, appreciation, suspense, and affinity for their favorite player. The survey concluded with questions about the participants’ involvement in the sport and demographic characteristics.

Three hundred and twenty-three people completed the survey. However, prior to data analysis, the dataset was limited to participants who reported on an identifiable, MLB game they had seen within the current season through the media. Data of participants who cited an older game, watched in person, cited a college or high-school game, did not know the game’s outcome, or did not provide enough information to identify the specific game were excluded. Furthermore, the survey contained an item asking participants to click on a certain value to “confirm their place in the survey.” Those who did not follow this instruction were assumed to have become inattentive to the questions’ meaning and their responses were also eliminated from the analyses. The final sample was 175, 66% of whom were female. The mean age was 25.96(SD = 7.64) with a median of 23. Seventy-five percent identified themselves as White, 18% were African American, and three percent were Asian. The remainder were either multi-racial, of some other race, or declined the question. One percent identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic.
Eighteen percent of the participants reported on one of the six World Series games that were played that season. Approximately half, 47%, reported on a Division Championship game and 18% reported on a Division Series game. Eighteen percent reported on a game that was part of the regular season. Comparisons of the date the survey was completed with the date the game was played indicated that 67% provided reactions to games they had seen within the previous two days, and 91% reported on games they had seen within the previous seven days.

**Measures**

**Game outcome.** Participants identified the team that won the game they were describing and which team they favored. If the favored team won, it was coded as a winning game. Seventy percent reported on a winning game.

**Athlete affinity.** Participants also identified their favorite player in the game and completed Hartmann et al.’s (2008) scale with responses options that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A factor analysis produced two factors with eigenvalues greater than one that accounted for 69% of the variance. However, all the items loaded on the first factor in the un-rotated matrix. When the two factors were rotated orthogonally, six items (e.g., “I think my favorite player is like an old friend,” “I feel like I know my favorite player very well”) loaded on the “virtual friendship” factor as in Hartmann et al. (2008). The mean of these items was used to construct the scale, $\alpha = .96$, $M = 3.04(SD = 1.58)$. The other six items (e.g., “I find my favorite player to be likeable,” “I look forward to watching my favorite player in the next game”) loaded on a second factor and their mean was used for the “respectful interest” scale, $\alpha = .92$, $M = 5.17(SD = 1.54)$. The two scales were strongly correlated, $r = .62$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the mean of all 12 items was calculated to create an overall athlete affinity scale, $\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.10(SD = 1.40)$. Initial analyses were carried out with the overall scale, and
follow-up analyses were carried out with the subscales to see if they could better explain the outcomes.

**Baseball involvement.** Participants were presented with a list of nine activities and asked to check all those in which they participated. The list included following the sport through several types of media, playing fantasy baseball, attending major/minor league games, attending local/college games, and playing oneself in a school or local league. The number of activities the participants checked was summed to create an index representing baseball involvement, $M = 3.64 (SD = 2.17)$

**Suspense, enjoyment, and appreciation.** A version of Oliver and Bartsch’s (2010) scales was used to measure suspense, hedonic enjoyment, and appreciation. The response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A factor analysis returned a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than one accounting for 67% of the variance. When the items were rotated into three factors, each item loaded most highly on its specified factor, suggesting that the different entertainment dimensions of suspense, hedonic enjoyment, and appreciation functioned as sub-factors within a larger concept of entertainment-oriented gratifications. Scales of the sub-factors were constructed by taking the mean of the relevant items for each dimension (suspense: “I was at the edge of my seat while watching the game,” “It was a heart-pounding kind of game,” “The game was suspenseful,” $\alpha = .96$, $M = 4.62 (SD = 1.82)$; hedonic enjoyment: “It was fun for me to watch the game,” “I had a good time watching the game,” “The game was entertaining,” $\alpha = .94$, $M = 5.67 (SD = 1.50)$; appreciation: “The game was thought provoking,” “I was moved by the game,” “I found the game to be very meaningful,” $\alpha = .86$, $M = 4.32 (SD = 1.83)$). As the initial factor analysis indicated, the factors were correlated with each other (see Table 1).

**Affect.** Participants indicated how much they felt a set of 15 discrete emotions during the
game on scales that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The items were drawn from
previous work (Oliver et al., 2012; 2013) that found them to sort into three factors representing
positive, negative, and meaningful affective responses. A factor analysis produced two factors
with eigenvalues greater than one. However, the eigenvalue for the third factor was .95. Given
how closely this approaches one and the previous findings regarding the measures, both the two-
factor and three-factor rotation solutions were considered. The three-factor model was the most
interpretable. Although three items that cross-loaded (emotional, meaningful, melancholy) were
discarded, the factors generally corresponded with previous research. Scales for each dimension
were constructed by taking the mean of the component items. The first factor was made of up
items relating to positively-valenced emotions (joyful, happy, upbeat, cheerful), $\alpha = .95$, $M =\ 5.13(\text{SD} = 1.78)$. The second was made up of items relating to negatively-valenced emotions
(sad, depressed, gloomy), $\alpha = .90$, $M = 1.94(\text{SD} = 1.56)$, and the last was made up of items
relating to feeling touched or moved (tender, inspired, compassion, touched, moved), $\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.15(\text{SD} = 1.63)$. As reported in Table 1, the positive emotion scale was correlated significantly
with the touched scale and the negative emotion scale. However, the negative and touched
emotion scales were not correlated with each other.

Other variables. Several other variables that were not the focus of the analysis but that
previous research suggests contribute to audience responses were measured and included in the
analysis as control variables. They included information about the level of uncertainty regarding
the game’s outcome as indicated by the final score differential, which has been associated with
greater suspense and enjoyment (e.g., Gan et al., 1997; Peterson & Raney, 2008). The type of
game was also included as suspense, enjoyment, and appreciation could shift as the team moves
into post-season play and competition for the championship grows more intense.
Results

Correlations between the variables used in the study are presented in Table 1. These preliminary analyses found a strong, significant correlation between suspense and hedonic enjoyment. The Research Question asked whether the outcome of a game moderated this relationship. This was investigated by using the MODPROBE macro developed by Hayes and Matthes (2009) to test the significance of the interaction between the suspense scale and a dummy variable representing a win for the favored team in relation to hedonic enjoyment while accounting for the control variables (game’s point differential and type, baseball involvement). The interaction was significant, $b = - .36(SE = .09)$, $t = -4.22, p < .001$. Comparison of the conditional effects indicated that there was a significant relationship between suspense and enjoyment in the case of both wins and losses. However, the relationship was stronger in relation to losing games, $b = .75(SE = .07), p < .001$, than to winning ones, $b = .39(SE = .05), p < .001$. To clarify this finding, participants were split on the median into those reporting high and low levels of suspense and their reported levels of enjoyment were plotted for both winning and losing games (see Figure 1). The pattern suggests that when games generated little suspense, losses for the favored team were enjoyed substantively less than wins. However, in the case of suspenseful games, the difference in enjoyment of winning and losing games was smaller.

Previous research suggests that viewers’ affinity with the athletes would be associated with greater suspense. A hierarchal regression was carried out to replicate these findings. The control variables were entered first and the complete athlete affinity scale was added in the second step. As reported in Table 2, adding the scale increased significantly the variance explained by the model, supporting H1 by suggesting that athlete affinity explained variance in suspense that was not accounted for by the characteristics of the game and involvement with the
sport. In order to investigate which components of athlete affinity were associated with suspense, the regression model was rerun with the complete affinity scale replaced by its two component subscales, representing respectful interest and virtual friendship. The respectful interest subscale was a significant predictor of suspense, whereas the virtual friendship subscale was not.

The model suggested by these findings is one of moderated mediation. Athlete affinity contributes to enjoyment indirectly by intensifying suspense, and this relationship is shaped by the game outcome with the relationship between suspense and enjoyment stronger when the favored team loses. A more direct test of this model was carried out with PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). The analysis (Model 14) used 1,000 bootstrap estimates to construct 95% confidence intervals. These confidence intervals for the indirect effects estimates excluded zero in the case of both winning and losing games, indicating both relationships were statistically significant, coefficient\(_{\text{loss}} = .41(\text{SE} = .09)\), upper CI = .57, lower CI = .24; coefficient\(_{\text{win}} = .21(\text{SE} = .05)\), upper CI = .33, lower CI = .13. The interaction was also significant, reproducing the results reported above. There was not a significant direct effect of athlete affinity on enjoyment once the indirect effect and the control variables were taken into account, coefficient = .09(\text{SE} = .06), \(t = 1.42\), \(p = .16\).

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that athlete affinity and baseball engagement, respectively, would be associated with appreciation. As shown in Table 3, adding the athlete affinity scale and baseball involvement index significantly improved on the variance explained by the control variables. Both affinity and involvement were associated significantly with appreciation, suggesting that each made an independent contribution to appreciation and providing support for H2 and H3. To follow up on the findings related to affinity, the overall scale was replaced with the virtual friendship and respectful interest subscales and the regression analysis was rerun. In
contrast to the findings relating to suspense, it was the virtual friendship scale that accounted for
the association. It was significantly correlated with appreciation, whereas the respectful interest
scale was not.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted that hedonic enjoyment of the game would be associated
with stronger positive emotions, whereas appreciation would be associated not only with positive
emotions, but also with negative and touched emotions. Regression analyses were carried out for
each form of emotional response. The independent variables of interest were hedonic enjoyment
and appreciation, but the game’s point differential, type, and outcome were included as control
variables along with suspense, athlete affinity, and baseball involvement. As shown in Table 4,
hedonic enjoyment was significantly associated with positively-valenced emotional responses, as
predicted by H4. In addition, it was associated significantly and negatively with negatively-valenced
emotions. Greater hedonic enjoyment was associated with reports of less negative
affect. It was not associated significantly with touched emotions. Appreciation, in contrast, was
associated significantly and positively with all three responses, as predicted by H5.

Discussion

The study replicates previous work in finding that suspense is related to hedonic
enjoyment in the case of a positive outcome. However, it also found that suspense was even
more closely related to enjoyment in the case of a negative outcome, when the game ended with
a loss for the favored team. In these circumstances, suspense seemed to fill a compensatory
function. A suspenseful game could be enjoyed even when the outcome was negative, whereas a
losing game that presented few thrills had little appeal. These results contrast with previous
studies comparing the role of suspense in happily resolved versus unresolved narratives, which
have tended to find that the impact of suspense is stronger in the case of positive endings.
However, they are consistent with Madrigal et al.’s (2011, Study 3) findings in relation to simulated races. The findings are not fully explained by excitation transfer models that posit that suspense contributes to enjoyment because the excitement it generates intensifies the positive feelings that are evoked by happy resolutions. This suggests there are other reasons that suspense makes watching a sports game more gratifying.

Future research should consider what these reasons may be. Several potential explanations are suggested by the finding that suspense was associated with appreciation, even after hedonic enjoyment was taken into account (see Table 3). Although this was not specifically predicted, the result makes sense in retrospect. A potential explanation for the association is that the tension associated with suspense intensifies feelings of connection with players or other spectators, helping to increase the sense of human connection associated with appreciation. Another possibility is that suspenseful games have characteristics that viewers tend to invest with meaning. Suspenseful games tend to be close, for example, which can bring attention to particular plays that change the game’s lead or momentum and thus are more likely to be seen as meaningful or emblematic.

The study also found that athlete affinity played a role in both hedonic enjoyment and appreciation of sports games. The effect on hedonic enjoyment was indirect. Athlete affinity enhanced suspense, which, in turn, enhanced enjoyment. In this case, it was respectful interest, rather than a sense of virtual friendship, that was most important. When the two dimensions’ relationships to suspense were considered simultaneously, it was only that of respectful interest that was large enough to be statistically significant. This is pattern is consistent with Hartmann et al.’s (2008) findings. Although both dimensions contributed significantly to suspense in their study, respectful interest was the stronger predictor. The current
study provides further evidence that athlete affinity contributes to suspense and expands the generalizability of previous findings by investigating this in the context of a team sport.

In the case of appreciation, affinity had a direct effect that held even when the impact of suspense was taken into account. Furthermore, virtual friendship made an independent contribution to this outcome that was not accounted for by engagement with the sport or interest and knowledge of the player. This suggests that part of the meaning audiences derive from games might come from their sense of having a personal connection with players.

The findings regarding athlete affinity suggest two lines of inquiry. One has to do with the implications of different types of connection to athletes. This study replicated Hartmann et al.’s (2008) findings that viewers’ connections to athletes are multidimensional and that different dimensions have different implications. Developing a better understanding of the nature and implications of specific dimensions of athlete affinity would be timely and beneficial, particularly given changes in the media environment that suggest the relative importance of these dimensions are shifting. As many have pointed out, sports coverage is increasingly focused on headlining, “celebrity” athletes (Raney, 2003; Hartmann et al., 2008). Furthermore, the growth of social media like Twitter allows fans nearly unprecedented access to at least a cultivated view of the personal lives of the athletes. Both trends seem likely to facilitate a sense of virtual friendship. If its salience increases, the effects that this form of athlete affinity has on audiences’ responses, including appreciation, could increase as well.

Furthermore, in considering athlete affiliation and baseball involvement, this study addressed only two of many possible elements of individuals’ engagement with sports. Woo, Trail, Kwon, and Anderson (2009) identify multiple points of potential psychological connection to sports, including not only players and the sport itself, but also the team as whole, and, in the
case of college sports, the educational institution. In the case of professional sports, affinity with the city a team represents could also be a factor. In addition, Reysen and Brandscome (2010) distinguish between “fanship,” or degree of interest, and “fandom,” or identification with other fans. The current study’s focus on individual players and baseball involvement made sense in that these forms of engagement relate to the feeling of relatedness and the consistency-seeking viewing orientation that are thought to contribute to appreciation. However, further research should consider how other forms of engagement relate to audiences’ responses. It would also be worthwhile to see how different forms of involvement relate to each other. In the current study, athlete affinity and baseball involvement were correlated with each other, but had independent effects on appreciation in that they were each significant predictors while controlling for the other. However, the relationship between baseball involvement and suspense was not significant when athlete affinity was included in the model. This suggests that it was connection to the specific players on the field, rather than interest in the sport in general, that enhanced suspense. Future research should consider how these different forms of engagement might build upon each other.

Finally, the results suggest that appreciation and hedonic enjoyment have different emotional footprints. Hedonic enjoyment was associated with positive emotions and a lack of negative ones. Appreciation, in contrast, was associated with both negative and positive emotions, as well as with feeling touched. These findings lend further support to the developing conceptualizations of entertainment-oriented gratifications as multifaceted and linked to a complex network of discrete emotions of varying valences.

A limitation of the current study is that it used retrospective reports. This has the potential to reduce the validity of the measures in that factors such as exposure to other media and
decreasing excitement can change viewers’ perceptions of their responses. The influence of these factors tends to become greater as the time between the point the game was watched and the point it was recalled increases. Furthermore, as time passes viewers may forget less suspenseful games and while recalling, and thus reporting on, more exciting ones. Since the data for the current study was gathered at the end of the season when interest and viewership was high, most participants reported on games they had seen within a few days, which helps allay some of these concerns. Furthermore, follow-up analyses found the length of time between when the game was watched and the survey completed was not associated with hedonic enjoyment, appreciation, or suspense. Participants did not seem to be selectively recalling “good” games. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial to use more immediate measures that are less subject to the biases of retrospective estimates. One promising possibility would be to have participants report on a game as they watch either online or through a mobile device, allowing for both the ecological validity of a field study and the measurement validity of real-time measures.

Sporting events, like narrative drama, offer viewers more than a rush of good feelings. Although disposition theory and theories regarding “basking in the reflected glory” of athletes do a good job of explaining the gratifications sports media offer viewers when the team they are rooting for is successful, these perspectives are less relevant to situation in which a favored team loses. By exploring how viewers’ connections to athletes, viewers’ involvement in the sport, and the outcome of the game shape feelings of suspense, hedonic enjoyment, and appreciation, the current study helps paint a more comprehensive picture of the gratifications sports can offer and how these gratifications are evoked.
Works Cited


Table 1

*Correlations between Study Variables*

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*p < .08; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*
Table 2
Regression Analyses Predicting Suspense

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\(^1\)Games played during the regular season were the excluded, comparison category.
± \(p < .06\); * \(p < .05\); ** \(p < .01\); *** \(p < .001\)
### Table 3

*Regression Analyses Predicting Appreciation*

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1 Games played during the regular season were the excluded, comparison category.

± $p < .08$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$
Table 4

*Regression Analyses Predicting Emotional Responses*

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<td>Appreciation</td>
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<td>.62***</td>
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$R^2$                              | .67***                | .54***                | .60***               |

$^1$ Games played during the regular season were the excluded, comparison category.
$^\dagger$ $p < .06$; $^*$ $p < .05$; $^{**} p < .01$; $^{***} p < .001$
Figure 1

Interaction between suspense and game outcome in relation to hedonic enjoyment.