Don't Believe the Hype

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Hype surrounding marquee entertainment events can be unavoidable and cause people to watch and do things they otherwise would not. Using nearly 8,000 survey responses, we examine costs and benefits of participating in hyped events. We find people are better off avoiding hyped experiences, though hype can benefit social well-being.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1022523/volumes/v44/NA-44

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In our second study, we examined whether it is possible to improve people’s experience with hyped events by drawing their attention to the social elements of the experience. This study was a three-part quasi-experimental field study, with data collected before, during and after a single hyped event: Super Bowl 50. The first survey occurred before the game started. We asked participants whether or not they planned to watch the Super Bowl. We randomly assigned participants who indicated they planned to watch the Super Bowl to one of two conditions, one featuring instructions to focus on the specifics of the game and another featuring instructions to focus on the social aspects of watching the game. We conducted our analyses using only participants who watched the game and thus, received our manipulation (N=485). Our analyses supported our prediction. A mixed effects model allowed for random effects of participant and time period during which the measure was taken revealed a significant interaction of the manipulation to focus on the details of the game or the social elements of the game and whether participants watched the game alone or with others (t (442.07) = -2.38, p=.02). Decomposing the interaction, we find that when participants watched the game alone, focusing on the social benefits of the game resulted in higher reported well-being than focusing on the details of the game (t(120.79) = 2.37, p=.02) while the manipulation had no effect when participants watched the game with others (t (20.09) = -0.6 p = .57). Analyses for each time point using a simple linear model revealed consistent results both using only half time responses (half time: interaction t (234) = -2.13, p = .03, condition simple effect among participants who watched alone t (234) = 2.28, p = .03, condition simple effect among participants who watched with others t (234) = -0.10, p = .71), and using only post-game responses (half time: interaction t (395) = -1.80, p = .07, condition simple effect among participants who watched alone t (395) = 1.61, p = .11, condition simple effect among participants who watched with others t (395) = -0.82, p = .41).

Hype is everywhere, but modern life also features a tremendous amount of choice over how we spend our time. Giving into the hype comes at a cost, most notably the opportunity cost of not pursuing other non-hyped, intrinsically motivating interests. Given the limited benefits of hype, our data lend themselves to a straightforward recommendation: unless you are alone and want to feel connected to others, don’t believe the hype.

REFERENCES

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Championships. Series finales. Award shows. Televised events that draw millions of viewers. Many viewers—even those without intrinsic interest—tune in because of the surrounding hype: intense, coordinated, multi-pronged, and exaggerated publicity efforts driven by commercial interests. Indeed, millions of people who care little about boxing, period dramas, or filmmaking watched Mayweather fight Pacquiao, the Mad Men finale, and the Academy Awards. We ask how consumers’ decisions to give in to the hype (or not) affect their well-being.

There are good reasons to believe that hype both helps and hinders well-being. On one hand, pursuing hyped events can expose people to novel experiences (Keinan & Kivetz 2011), allow them to bond with others through a shared experience (Bhargave & Montgomery 2013), or simply draw their attention to something that they otherwise might have missed. However, hype can also inflate expectations and lead to disappointment (Anderson, 1973; Oliver, 1980; Mellers and McGraw 2001). Social pressure to experience hyped events and a “fear of missing out” (aka fomo; Grohol 2011) might cause people to switch away from activities that are in line with their interests, goals, and values.

Our inquiry examines responses from nearly 7,000 people, across 16 hyped television events. We found that people who experienced hyped events reported less positive effects on their well-being than people who engaged in alternative activities. While the magnitude of the difference varied based on individual preferences, the effect persisted in all but the most extreme cases.

Although giving in to the hype did not improve people’s well-being compared to pursuing alternative activities, there was one exception: social well-being. Drawing from recent work in positive psychology demonstrating the importance of considering well-being as an evaluation based on multiple distinct dimensions (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky 2013; Seligman 2011), we examined effects on each dimension separately and found that engaging in hyped (versus alternative) events could benefit well-being by way of social relationships. This effect occurred primarily when participants’ experiences were solitary. It seems that when people are alone, hyped events offer a kind of shared experience that is socially rewarding. We find support for this effect using both correlational (Study 1) and experimental (Study 2) data.

The first study was a long-term field survey conducted across 15 hyped events. The first event occurred in February of 2015 (Super Bowl XLIX) and the last event occurred in November of 2015 (final game of the World Series). We recruited all participants (n= 6,406, Msex = 33.4, 60% male) on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) via study postings that specifically recruited people who had watched the hyped event or done something fun and entertaining for themselves in the previous 24 hours. We find that engaging in a hyped versus alternative activity has significant negative effects on well-being. This pattern of results is diminished but persists when hyped activities are social and alternative activities are not, and is diminished but never reverses when participants are general fans of the event or fans who “won.” However, hype does seem to offer unique social benefits for some people. When we analyzed the effect of engaging in hype on the distinct underlying dimensions of well-being, we found that solitary participants found hyped events to be more beneficial than alternative activities when it came to social well-being.

