Don’T Kill the Suspense: the Duality of Suspense in Entertainment Consumption

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In this paper, we propose a duality of suspense and show that the relationship between these two forms of suspense varies by context, in turn, affecting the nature of suspense and viewing decisions. Our findings contribute to an increased understanding of the drivers of suspense.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Numerous research studies and anecdotal evidence reveal that sports programs are much more likely to be watched live than other types of programs (e.g., Bernoff 2004; Nielsen 2010). Why do consumers prefer to watch sports events live vs. taped? To answer this question, we examine the nature of suspense more generally and when outcome knowledge (or spoilers) reduces suspense and consequent consumption enjoyment. While we focus on this question largely within the context of sports viewership, we note that our findings have implications for any experience that is engaged in due to suspense or excitement and which is repeated over time, such as effectiveness of television advertisements (Elliott 2013), use of reruns, and gift-giving.

Drawing on suspense literature (e.g., Duckworth 2012), we argue that lack of knowledge about an outcome is primarily limited to the cognitive processing of information related to estimating the probabilities of various outcomes, including the preferred one. However, a reader/viewer can continue to experience suspense and the resultant tension via an emotional pathway. That is, one is able to now focus more on the unfolding of the event and follow it in great detail since one need not invest any resources in predicting the outcome. We refer to these two types of suspense as “outcome suspense” and “process suspense” respectively. Specifically, outcome suspense refers to anxiety caused by what an outcome is, while process suspense refers to anxiety about how that outcome came to be. We propose that spoilers (outcome knowledge) spoil (reduce enjoyment) only in situations in which outcome suspense and process suspense are highly correlated (high outcome-process dependency). Further, we propose that the relationship between outcome suspense and process suspense varies by program type, and show how process suspense impacts consumer preferences for time-shifting TV entertainment consumption.

Study 1 shows that outcome-process dependency varies with program type, and program type influences preferences for real-time vs. tape-delayed viewing. Eighty participants were asked how likely they would be to watch their favorite sport or their favorite program (non-sport) television program at different times (live or after 1 day, 2 days, 3 days, 1 week). Consistent with our hypotheses and real-world data (cf., Bernoff 2004), participants were significantly more likely to watch sports events broadcast live ($M_{\text{sport}} = 5.6$, $M_{\text{tv}} = 4.5$, $p < .003$). They were also willing to pay (WTP) more to watch sports events broadcast live ($WTP_{\text{sport}} = $11.09, $WTP_{\text{tv}} = $6.81), and this WTP drops sharply for sports, but not for TV programs after one day ($WTP_{\text{sport}} = $1.39, $WTP_{\text{tv}} = $4.76). Overall, 79% of participants show decreasing WTP patterns for sports compared to 38% for TV ($p < .0001$). In addition, when asked to explain how watching sports live differed from watching it after its original airing (N=32), 72% of participants mentioned the likelihood of learning the outcome if watching the game late and that this knowledge would ruin the experience.

Having confirmed differences in real-time viewing by program type, studies 2-3 explicitly test our argument that the underlying level of suspense explains consumers’ likelihood of watching taped events. Study 2 (n=55) used a 2 (program type: sports event, TV series) x 2 (outcome knowledge: present, absent) between-subjects experiment. Participants imagined knowing or not knowing the outcome of a sporting event or television program. They then indicated how likely they expected to feel during the flow of events and how the episode/game would end. Consistent with our hypotheses, participants were more likely to watch a program when they did not know the outcome ($M_{\text{knowledge}} = 6.00$, $M_{\text{knowledge}} = 4.91$ p < .05). This relationship was mediated by process suspense, but not by outcome suspense (indirect effect for process suspense: 95% CI [-3.20, -3.3]; and indirect effect for outcome suspense: 95% CI [-.95, 1.38]). In other words, outcome knowledge negatively influenced the likelihood of watching the program only when it diminished the process suspense. Furthermore, we found that the relationship between outcome knowledge and process suspense was moderated by program type such that outcome knowledge diminished the process suspense only for programs with high correlation between outcome and process suspense (taped sport event), and not for programs with low correlation (taped TV show; indirect effect for interaction: 95% CI [.03, .57]).

Study 3 (n=56) provides additional evidence that the differences observed in viewership preferences relates to the relationship between outcome process suspense and, not just differences in genre. Participants viewed one of four sports scenarios according to a 2 (outcome-process dependency: low [snowboarding], high [ice hockey]) x 2 (outcome knowledge: yes, no) between-subjects design. Similar to Study 2, we again find that process suspense (and not outcome suspense) mediates the relationship between outcome knowledge and likelihood to watch (indirect effect for process suspense: 95% CI [-.20, -.19]; and indirect effect for outcome suspense: 95% CI [-.19, 1.41]). In addition, the type of program moderated the effect of outcome knowledge on process suspense such that outcome knowledge had a bigger impact on process suspense for sport events with high outcome-process dependency (ice hockey) compared to sport events with low outcome-process dependency (snowboarding; indirect effect for interaction: 95% CI [-.65, -.42]).

Thus, across three studies, we find that outcome knowledge reduces enjoyment only in situations in which outcome suspense and process suspense are highly correlated, a situation which characterizes many sporting events. Further, we show that the impact of spoilers on felt suspense helps explain consumer decisions not to time-shift viewing.

This research contributes to an increased understanding of the nature of suspense and offers an explanation for the “paradox of suspense” in entertainment consumption. Suspense acts as an important driver of consumer decisions to watch or re-watch shows as well as whether to watch those shows live or time-shifted (i.e., via DVR, online, etc.). By better understanding the factors that create suspense, marketers can choose more effective marketing messages and can better target their entertainment offerings to consumers.

REFERENCES