They Play but Do They Watch? An Examination of Tennis Consumers

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Spectator sport organizations (e.g., professional sport teams and tournament organizers) continuously make an effort to retain and increase their fan base. The fan base may consist of various segments, such as males, middle aged adults, and high income, which could be target consumer groups. How about individuals who currently participate recreationally in the same sport they watch? Since these individuals are involved with the sport already, it is more likely they would be a potential fit of a spectator sport organization. A remaining question is whether those organizations know how to properly market to participants within respective sports.

To date, a number of segmentation studies focusing on sport fans have been conducted, which attempted to examine different characteristics of potential segments in respective markets (e.g., Greenwell et al., 2002; Kahle et al., 2001; Kennet et al., 2001). For example, Greenwell et al. (2002) examined group differences in fans' perception on service elements of the game and found fans with higher incomes were less critical of the service personnel and fans with higher team identification were less critical of the facility. Findings from such studies are useful providing marketers with practical implications, including how to better market to a specific segment. However, these studies used sport fans in general as their study samples. Minimal attention has been directed toward examining characteristics of sport participants as sport fans, a viable potential segment. Accordingly, the present study focused only on sport fans who also currently play sports, and tennis was selected as the case sport.

Tennis participation is booming in the U.S. A 2008 study indicated tennis participation has grown to 27 million participants, the highest figure in 15 years (TIA, 2008). The study also showed frequent players (more than 21 times per year) increased to 5.6 million in 2008 up 23% from 2003. Marketing campaigns by the USTA, such as Tennis Welcome Centers, QuickStart Tennis for kids 10 and under, and infrastructure development in schools and public parks, have assisted this growth (Robson, 2008). As for tennis viewership, the US Open continues to thrive from a business perspective. A record 721,059 spectators attended the 2009 US Open making it the highest attended annual sporting event in the world, and a total of 14 million viewed the men's singles final on television (USTA, 2009). One area tennis might be struggling is attendance and television ratings of professional tournaments outside the US Open. Casual sport fans can be attracted to the US open, but maybe not smaller events. There are 27 million tennis participants who could be core consumers for those minor tournament organizers. Thus, tournament directors should consider how to better attract tennis players to consume professional tennis tournaments.

Two variables were a focus of this study, consumer motivation and psychological commitment. Shank (2002) defined motivation as “an internal force that directs behavior toward the fulfillment of needs” (p.157), implying motivational factors strongly impact consumers’ decision-making process. Researchers indicate motivation to be a key in understanding consumers (Kahle et al., 2001; Trail et al., 2000; Wann, 1995), suggesting that knowing motivation of targeting consumers helps develop effective marketing plans. Psychological commitment, a psychological state representing the desire to continue consuming a product (Scanlan et al., 1993), has been widely examined in consumer research and its importance has become obvious. An important notion is that heavy users do not necessarily equate to truly loyal consumers unless they are psychologically committed to the product (Day, 1969). Thus, psychological commitment is the key condition to determine true loyal consumers. Therefore, the present study aimed at examining what motivational factors are important for tennis participants to watch tennis matches, which predicts level of commitment to watch tennis.

Study participants were adult recreational participants, members of a local tennis association located in the Midwestern region of the US. A total of 222 players responded with usable surveys. Of those 222 individuals, 205 indicated they also watch tennis at a moderate level or higher (92.3%), who were the final study participants. The Motivation of the Sport Consumer instrument, assessing multiple dimensions of motivation (Milne & McDonald, 1999), was used to measure motivation to watch tennis. Psychological commitment to watching tennis was measured with items used in the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan et al., 1993). To examine which motives predicted commitment to watching tennis, multiple regression was performed with 11 motives as predictors and level of commitment as the dependent variable. Since the literature indicates a significant relationship between motivation and level of sport involvement, a construct reflecting personal importance of sport (Shank & Beasley, 1998), analyses were conducted by the high (n = 101) and low (n = 104) tennis involvement groups. Level of tennis involvement was measured with the Sport Involvement Inventory (Shank & Beasley, 1998).

A relatively large amount of variance in commitment was explained by the 11 motives for both the high (Adjusted R² = .522, F
(11, 89) = 10.942, \( p < .001 \) and low (Adjusted \( R^2 = .510, F (11, 92) = 10.729, p < .001 \)) tennis involvement groups. Of the 11 motives, three (aesthetics, competition, and stress reduction) for the high and four (self-concern, achievement, affiliation, aesthetics) for the low involvement groups respectively were significant in relation to commitment at the .05 alpha level. Thus, these motives are good predictors of commitment, meaning individuals motivated by these factors tend to be more committed to watching tennis.

The present study revealed important motives of tennis participants for watching tennis. Tournament directors could tailor marketing strategies to tennis participants accordingly. Aesthetics, for example, was an important motive to watch for tennis players regardless of level of involvement. Few could argue the inherent artistic beauty of professional tennis players on the court, the attractive surroundings at most events, and classy image of the sport. Tournament directors can invite participants to come view such artistry on the court and promote the tournament facility as an escape. A media marketing campaign focusing on the high level of play, physical attractiveness of the players, and the amenities of the tennis facility could help attracting participants to the tournament. Tournament organizers could plan trips to showcase the facility in the weeks leading up to the event and give tennis participants the opportunity to play on the courts the pros will play on. It is also important to note different marketing plans are more likely to be necessary for the high and low tennis involvement groups, since the findings demonstrated different motives for the respective groups. By satisfying tennis participants’ needs to watch, tennis participants may start more committed to being tennis spectators. Lastly, a future study should examine whether there are significant differences in watching tennis behaviors between tennis participants and tennis spectators without tennis participation.