The Word of Mouth Phenomenon: Its Presence and Impact in a Sport Setting

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Throughout the United States, there are 3.3 billion brand impressions created each day via word of mouth (WOM) activity (Keller & Libai, 2009). The concept of WOM and its omnipresence within the business world has been important for a number of years, and has been acknowledged as a major influence on what people know, feel, and do (Buttle, 1998). The premise of WOM is that individuals share personal knowledge and experiences about a company with other people in a consumer-to-consumer format (Sernovitz, 2009). In doing so, organizations can be represented positively or negatively depending on the experiences of the individuals sharing the information.

The inclusion of WOM marketing in an organization’s marketing strategies relies heavily on relationship marketing, shifting from a traditional exchange paradigm to a customer-centric paradigm, emphasizing connections between organizations and consumers (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). The goal of shifting to a relationship paradigm is to build mutually satisfying, long-term relationships with key parties, while providing an opportunity for sport organizations to capitalize on relationships with consumers, sponsors, and other invested stakeholders through the retaining of current business (Kim & Trail, 2011). It is through the creation of these mutually beneficial relationships that marketers can utilize WOM communication as a source of brand information for consumers (Smith & Vogt, 1995).

This particular study utilizes WOM communication as a source of brand information, and explores consumers’ perceptions of brand associations prior to and following WOM activity. Within the sport setting, marketers are able to implement marketing initiatives to create favorable brand images, while also reinforcing positive brand associations that may already exist (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). Ross (2006) further elaborated on the importance of brand associations within the sport setting, suggesting that brand associations likely have significant impacts on excitement and levels of entertainment at a sporting event, the ability for a team to solicit revenue, the opportunity to develop brand extensions, and even team identification among consumers.

Team identification has been a focus of research by sport managers and academicians for a number of years (Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005), and has often been described as a psychological attachment that fans experience with respect to a larger social structure (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Research has found that fans with high levels of identification are more likely to attend games, purchase team merchandise, buy the products of team sponsors, and be willing to pay more for tickets (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Because of the importance of team identification in the consumption behaviors of fans, it is necessary to examine the effect of WOM on the identification of sport consumers.

The purpose of this study is to examine what effect, if any, the transference of personal experiences through WOM activity has on brand associations, team identification, and the behavioral intentions of college basketball fans. Through a survey conducted at a large Midwestern university, the following research questions will be addressed: (1) Does WOM activity affect the perceived brand associations of consumers? (2) Does WOM activity influence the team identification of consumers? (3) Are the behavioral intentions of consumers impacted by WOM activity? (4) Is negative WOM more powerful than positive WOM?

Surveys were distributed and completed by 224 students in a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses. Once the students received the surveys, they were asked to complete the first section of the survey before stopping to watch a video and then completing the remainder of the survey. The short, two-minute video contained information about a recent experience at a collegiate basketball game at a large Midwestern university. Two versions of the video, one discussing a positive experience and one discussing a negative experience, were randomly assigned to participating classes. Following the viewing of the assigned video, subjects were asked to continue filling out the remaining sections of the survey. A filler activity, which instructed respondents to match a picture of a mascot with its correct university, was included in the survey just after the video viewing. The purpose of using this matching...
exercise was to account for any biases between the first part of the survey, the video, and the second part of the survey.

Paired-samples t-tests using SPSS 19.0 were utilized to examine the differences between pre/post responses among groups receiving the positive and negative WOM messages. The paired-samples tests showed significant changes in pre-video responses and the post-video responses for both positive and negative WOM messages. However, the results indicated more changes between pre and post-video responses for those respondents exposed to the negative WOM message as compared to those exposed to the positive WOM message. These results suggest that although the positive WOM video did have an effect on the responses of the study participants, the impact of the message was not as strong as the negatively positioned message.

Duplication of this study would address three important limitations of the current study. The first limitation is a lack of diversity among the sample. Specifically, the respondents for this study only represent a narrow range of ages enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses at a single university. As such, the sample lacks a variety of respondent types, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research must replicate this research in other settings, with other respondents, in order to verify the results. Second, the WOM video messages used for this study only portrayed the experiences of a male consumer. Previous research in sport marketing (Ross, Maxwell, & Walsh, 2007) has demonstrated some differences in the information processing mechanisms between female and male spectators. In other words, consumers may respond differently to the message based on the gender of the speaker, and given that the speaker in this study was a male, results may be impacted. As such, future research could address this limitation by examining consumer responses to both female and male video messages. A final limitation of the study is directly related to the source of the WOM message. Previous research suggested that effective WOM occurs in the everyday conversations of people in social situations through friends, family, and coworkers (Carl, 2008). In this study, however, the source of the message was someone with whom the participants had no social relationship. While the results of the study illustrate a significant relationship between WOM activity and the measured variables, future research should address the personal relationship between the WOM communicator and the message recipient.