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An Examination of Consumers' Psychological Attachment to an Athlete in Fantasy Sport: The Moderating Effect of Social Anxiety

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(including questions)
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The Internet is quickly becoming one of the most widely adapted tools for sport managers, academicians and fans, alike. As a result, scholarly work has tried to examine sport consumers and their adoption of electronic and online media as an additional outlet to consume the sports they love. Research conducted by Ballouli, Hutchinson, Reese and Cattani (in review) looked to understand fantasy sport consumer motives through qualitative research. Further research on fantasy sports examined service quality perceptions of fantasy sport websites (Suh and Pedersen, 2010). Fantasy sport's extreme popularity (to the tune of 32 million people and over 4 billion dollars spent in 2011, FSTA 2011) warrants that research be done in an attempt to understand the reasons why fantasy sports have attracted so many people and how it can be utilized as a potential marketing tool in the future. Although consumer behavior has been studied in the sport context for some time with extensive studies completed by researchers, newer still is the research of consumer behavior variables in the online context.

The purpose of this study is to test a research model that incorporates selected key consumer variables that influence psychological attachment in a fantasy sport participation context. Furthermore, the moderating effect of Social Anxiety on the link between the psychological attachment to an athlete and draft intention will be examined. Research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are the antecedents of psychological attachment to an athlete?, and (2) Does consumer social anxiety moderate the relationship between psychological attachment to an athlete and draft intention?

While Attachment has received much attention in the literature, an attempt to explore independent variables that contribute to the formation of fantasy sport consumer attachment to an athlete has yet to be undertaken. Additionally, examining Social Anxiety as a moderator will garner a more complete understanding of this construct's interplay in the fantasy sport world as it affects players and their interactions within the game. In addition, identifying a set of attachment antecedents could have great spillover effects and create new research leads for other segments of the sports community in product endorsement, athlete representation, athlete image creation and maintenance, among others.

Fantasy sport has created a new niche of fan, which identifies more with the individual athletes of the fantasy roster more so than his/her favorite team. Consequently, there is great utility in understanding fantasy sport consumers beyond their socio-demographic factors (Bernhard & Eade, 2006).

Attachment – The concept of attachment comes from the developmental psychology literature. Through original work examining parent/child relationships, Bowlby (1988) concluded that attachment is, "an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object." Researchers such as Collins and Read (1990; 1994) and Aron and Westbay (1996) have found that psychological attachments span a continuum of relative strength and that stronger attachments tend to lead to stronger connections to referent objects. Various works in the field of marketing have shown attachment to celebrities (O'Guinn, 1991) and sports teams (Babad, 1987).

A few studies have been conducted in the domains of consumer psychology, personality and marketing to assess antecedents to attachment, but this research examined antecedents to non-sport entities such as consumer brands (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011) and celebrities (Thomson, 2006). In the field of sport marketing, Kwon and Armstrong (2004) said that points of attachment reflect a "psychological connection" toward a focal object. While antecedents to attachment have received research attention in different relational contexts and academic disciplines, in-depth examinations into the antecedents of attachment have yet to be researched (Park et al., 2006).

Social Anxiety - According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000), social anxiety is characterized as an

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intense fear of being evaluated by others. Fear of negative evaluation has been found by cognitive-behavioral theorists (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) to be a component factor in social anxiety. In support of Gilbert's (2001) social anxiety model, Maner, Miller, Schmidt and Eckel (2008) found that social anxiety was related to submissiveness in competitive social situations. Weiser et al. (2010) surmised that social encounters in the virtual world tend to be avoided by individuals with high levels of social anxiety because of the fear produced by the potential evaluation of the other party.

Method

Following extensive focus group data collection, five distinct antecedents to psychological attachment to an athlete emerged. These antecedents were then researched to identify items for empirical testing: athletic expertise (three items from Arai & Ko, 2009), credibility (three items from Arai & Ko, 2010), popularity (four items from Chang & Ko, 2012), external team factors (three items from the focus group analysis), and physical fitness (three items from Arai & Ko, 2009). Additionally, the researchers modified and used four items from Trail et al. (2003) to measure Attachment, three items from Cattani and Ko (in review) to measure Draft Intention, and eight items from Norton et al. (2004) to measure Social Anxiety. Data were collected from a national sample of fantasy sport consumers (n = 363).

Results

Reliability tests and a confirmatory factor analysis were performed to establish the reliability and validity of the measurement scale. The measurement model yielded an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1603/753 = 2.1$; RMSEA = .056; CFI = .92; TLI = .91 and SRMR = .04). Cronbach's alpha estimates ranged from .65 (external team factors) to .92 (credibility).

To test if there was a significant structural difference between those fantasy sport consumers who registered high and low levels of Social Anxiety, multi-group SEM was conducted using AMOS 18.0. The critical chi-square for $df(11)$ at the .05 significance level is $\chi^2 = 19.68$. The difference between the unconstrained and measurement model chi-square statistics for Social Anxiety was non-significant (Social Anxiety: $\chi^2(11) = 15.08$) therefore, the factor structure between the respondents from the high scoring group and the general scoring group can be assumed to be invariant.

The link between Attachment and Draft Intent was highly non-significant for the highly socially anxious group ($p = .46$) and was significant for the generally socially anxious group ($p = .04$). This finding signified that social anxiety altered how generally social anxious fantasy sport consumers evaluated athletes with which they had preexisting attachments with in relation to drafting these athletes to their fantasy rosters, but had no effect on respondents with high social anxiety.

Discussion

The authors believe that this model will contribute to the body of knowledge of Attachment and fantasy sport consumer behavior. As of yet, the moderating role of Social Anxiety has not been investigated in the context of fantasy sport consumer behavior. Consequently, a deeper theoretical understanding of fantasy sport consumer behavior will make both scientific and practical contributions. Research and practical implications will be discussed.