The Determinants of Word of Mouth Influence in Sport Viewership

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In the field of sport management, word of mouth (WOM) has been examined as an outcome of other focal constructs such as game satisfaction (Kuenzel & Yassim, 2007), team identification (Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003), relationship quality (Kim & Trail, 2011) and corporate social responsibility (Walker & Kent, 2009). However, none of prior studies in the sport literature focused on the effectiveness of WOM from the receivers’ perspective. Since the primary reason why business entities pay attention to WOM is its impact on consumption behavior of message receivers, more scientific inquiry should focus on the influence of WOM on their consumption behavior (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reigen, 1987; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). In particular, people engage in WOM regarding sporting events in various occasions (Kotler & Shields, 2006), it is meaningful to examine factors that determine the influence of WOM on sport watching behavior.

Accordingly, the present study was conducted to identify the determinants of WOM influence and examine their impacts on sport watching behavior. First, a conceptual framework was developed using the WOM impact model proposed by Sweeney and colleagues (2008). In this framework, eight constructs were identified under four categories;

1. Message sender’s characteristics: expertise in a sporting event and trustworthiness
2. Message receiver’s characteristics: involvement in a sporting event and susceptibility to social influence
3. Message characteristics: richness of message content and strength of message delivery
4. Interpersonal factors: tie strength and homophily between a message sender and receiver

First, we investigated the role of message sender’s and message characteristics in predicting perceived WOM influence on message receivers’ watching behavior. Then, we also tested the moderating roles of message receiver’s characteristics and interpersonal factors on the relationships between perceived WOM influence and its predictors (i.e. message characteristics and message sender’s characteristics).

A total of 452 participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online consumer database maintained by Amazon. Participants were people who had received WOM recommendation about watching a sporting event in the past three months and actually watched the event. SPSS 20.0 was used for descriptive statistics and AMOS 20.0 was used for confirmatory factor analyses (CFA), a structural equation model (SEM), and multiple-group SEM.

The results of CFA indicated a good fit of the model ($\chi^2/df = 1.893, \text{RMSEA} = .055, \text{CFI} = .973, \text{SRMR} = .055$). All factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$; ranged from .54 to .93). The Cronbach’s alpha (ranged from .76 to .94), the average variance extracted (AVE; ranged from .56 to .85), and composite reliability (ranged from .79 to .94) indicated that convergent validity and reliability were established. Also, every squared correlation between constructs was smaller than the AVE value implying that discriminant validity was established. After refining constructs, we analyzed the structural model. Overall, the model showed good fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2 = 202.598, df = 107, \chi^2/df = 1.893, \text{SRMR} = .055, \text{RMSEA} = .055, \text{CFI} = .973$). The direct paths from trustworthiness ($\beta = .180, p = .011$), richness of message content ($\beta = .250, p = .001$), and strength of message delivery ($\beta = .209, p < .001$) to perceived WOM influence were significant. In addition, the significant moderating effects of involvement and homophily were found.

This study revealed several unique characteristics of WOM in sport viewership. First, a message sender’s expertise did not significantly influence the receiver’s watching behavior. In previous studies, message sender’s expertise has been found to influence positively the receiver’s decision making because people regard the information from
Experts as being valid and accurate (Clark, Wegener, Habashi, & Evans, 2012; DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Tobin & Raymundo, 2009). Experts in sporting events, however, cannot always provide reliable information about the quality of the event because the results of sporting events are usually unpredictable and the value of watching sporting events is subjectively evaluated by each individual. Moreover, the results of multiple-group SEM showed that when message receivers perceived low level of homophily (similarity) with the message senders, expertise has a negative effect on perceived WOM influence. It can be assumed that message receivers identify the senders as out-group members when the receivers perceive low similarity with the senders (McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Turner, 1994; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and the categorization results in negative perception of the communication (Stephan, 2014). In addition, among four antecedents of perceived WOM influence, richness of message content played a significant predictive role of perceived WOM influence across all conditions tested in this study. Therefore, sports teams should provide information and experiences that make WOM messages richer to increase their influence on other potential consumers’ watching behavior.