Numerous studies have attempted to develop a better understanding of sport consumers’ decision-making process leading to sport spectatorship as well as other sport consumer behaviors (e.g., Byon, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010; Kwon, Trail & James, 2007; Trail & James, 2001). The increasing research interest in sport consumer behavior can also be seen in the context of professional women sport but there still remain a dearth of literature (Armstrong, 1999; Zhang et al., 2003). A majority (99%) of the revenue of U.S. spectator sport is generated by only four prime sport leagues – the NHL, NFL, NBA, and MLB (Ripley, 2011). Female professional sports, including the most successful league, the Women’s National Basketball League (WNBA) shared merely 1.0% of the total revenue generated by all U.S. spectator sports (Jose, 2013). It is evident that the WNBA has not received enough recognition from consumers, nor from media coverage and sponsorships. Women sport leagues are currently facing the daunting challenge of becoming a successful standalone entity. To ensure the future success of women sport leagues, and particularly the WNBA, it is imperative that more research attention be given to developing a better understanding of consumers of women’s sports.

Further research on understanding consumers of the WNBA is greatly needed for both the survival and success of women sports. A clearer picture depicting WNBA consumer decision-making process would be helpful to assist league administrators and marketers in developing strategies to build consumer interest and a loyal fan base. Research has shown that the process through which consumers make a purchase decision is a multi-stage mechanism starting from their recognition of a problem or a need to the actual consumption behavior (Kerin, Steven, & Rudelius, 2012). However, previous studies often failed to recognize this multi-stage nature; instead, single-stage studies have been the primary norm. On one hand, studies on consumer motives (i.e., internal needs) treated motivation as the direct determinant of sport consumption (e.g., Byon, Cottingham, & Carroll, 2010). Many of them assumed that consumer needs would directly lead to consumption without considering whether offerings of game events could actually satisfy consumer needs or not; on the other hand, studies on the market demand of core product offerings (i.e., external demand) have presumed that high product quality would automatically generate consumption (Zhang et al., 2003). What is certain is that regardless of the product quality, event attendance would not occur if consumers do not experience a deprived need state that have to be satisfied. Thus, simultaneously studying the co-effect of consumers’ internal needs and external demand of core product quality on sport consumption appear very necessary. To the best of our knowledge, this inquiry has not been investigated in sport marketing literature.

The purpose of this study was to test a conceptual model including the multiple stages of sport consumer decision-making that incorporated motivation (internal needs), market demand (external needs), overall satisfaction (mediator), and sport consumption (dependent variable). Based on a review of literature and a test of content validity by a panel of five experts in professional women’s basketball marketing, a survey instrument was formulated that included sections on fan motivation, market demand, satisfaction, sport consumption, and demographic information, which were adapted from such scales as the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) (Funk et al., 2001; 2002) and Scale of Market Demand (SMD) (Byon et al., 2010). To measure consumers’ overall satisfaction, the current study adapted items from Brady et al. (2005) and Yoshida and James (2010). Sport spectator consumption was measured with repatronage intentions, word of mouth, media consumption, and licensed product consumption. Spectators (N = 628) attending six home games of a WNBA team during a recent season responded to an on-site survey.
Carrying out the procedures in M-plus Version 6, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure the psychometric properties of the scales. Based on the initial CFA results, six items were dropped, leaving 77 observed variables under 18 latent factors. The modified model fit the data well ($X^2/df = 5120.357/2926 = 1.89$, RMSEA = .038, CFI = .929, and SRMR = .036). Following the CFA, the proposed structural model was tested. A structural equation model (SEM) analysis was conducted to examine the structural relationships among motivation, market demand, overall satisfaction, and sport consumption. The findings revealed that the model fit the data well ($X^2/df = 7027.35/2817 = 2.49$, RMSEA= .049, CFI = .91, and SRMR = .0964). All path coefficients were significant with the exception of the relationship between market demand factor and word of mouth and between market demand factor and media intention. Analyses of mediation effects revealed that both market demand and satisfaction significantly ($p < .05$) mediate the effects of motivation on all consumption behavior variables.

Findings of the current study contribute to the existing literature on WNBA consumer behaviors by developing a multistage consumer decision-making process. Most importantly, this study confirmed the theoretical pathway that consumers’ internal needs can be satisfied through integrating with their evaluations of core product features to form affective (satisfaction) and conative loyalty (sport consumption). By conceptualizing internal motivation as an antecedent of the multistage consumer decision-making process and analyzing the subsequent stages, a much deeper understanding of the sport consumers’ decision-making process has been obtained. To be more specific, this multistage model argues that before sport consumptions can actually take place, a potential sport consumer should realize internal needs that drive him or her to seek and evaluate external attractions associated with a sporting event. These experiences would lead the sport consumer to form an overall satisfaction toward the sporting event features, which would eventually lead to event attendance. How best to nurture, channel, and sustain a consumer’s internal needs for WNBA products and how best to develop, communicate and adjust core product features to satisfy consumer demands would be intriguing topics for future investigations.