Identifying Critical Factors Associated with Millennial Sport Consumption Behavior

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The millennial generation has recently received much attention from marketers due to their population size, consumption power, and influence on other consumers' decision making (Fromm & Garton, 2013). The sport practitioners have recognized that attendance at college football games among the millennial sport fans has decreased (Rovell, 2014). As a result, sport marketing practitioners have begun to emphasize the importance of millennial consumers and to insist that sport organizations prepare themselves to meet the needs and desires of millennial sport consumers. Nonetheless, only little research has been conducted on millennial sport fans, so we have only a small number of data about this sport consumer group. Even among the few studies about millennial sport consumers (e.g., Bennett, Sagas, & Dees, 2006; Braunstein & Zhang, 2006; Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006) the millennial generation has been treated as the “younger” sport participants group, the study context are only limited to action sports and extreme sports. However, millennials are not just “younger” people; they are a cohort with generation-specific characteristics that distinguish it from previous generations even as they mature (Bolton et al., 2013). Their unique consumption behavior is not due to age (Smelser, 2001), and their unique characteristics as a cohort are not likely to fade with time.

There are various research gaps existing in sport management literature. First, there has been no agreement as to how to define millennials in sport, leading to inconsistent generation categorization. For example, Bennett et al. (2006) categorized Generation Y as people born later than 1982 while Cianfrone and Zhang (2006) defined that group as people born between 1975 and 1992. This inconsistency raises questions about whether we can generalize the study findings. Another gap is uncertainty about the unique millennial traits that may influence their consumption behavior. To fill the gaps, the purpose of the current study was two-fold: (1) to define the sport generational cohorts and (2) identify critical millennial consumption variables by examining differences in sport consumption behavior among distinct generations.

Through a literature review, Markert’s (2004) standard (Baby Boomers: 1946-1965; Generation X: 1966-1985; Millennials: 1986-2005) emerged as the most appropriate for sport fan generation study. With the 20-year increments between each generational cohort, he accounted for the generational categorization standard that has been used in many previous studies, and the size of each generation became comparable, making generalizability more feasible. Furthermore, Markert included the cohort approach that can distinguish intra-generational subgroup differences in consumption behavior. This fine-tuned distinction better distinguishes the attributes within a larger generation group, a practice that is crucial to target marketing in sport (Weinstein, 1994).

To identify the critical factors that influence on millennial sport fan behaviors, the triangulation method (Greene, 2007) was used. First, extensive literature review revealed five important traits of millennial consumption: (a) community-driven (e.g., Barker, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013), (b) emotional (e.g., Kumar & Lim, 2008), (c) peer pressure-influenced (e.g., Kim & Jang, 2014), (d) adamant that their voices be heard (e.g., Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012), and (e) technology-driven (e.g., Herbison & Boseman, 2009). Next, following Tynan and Drayton’s (1988) suggestion, three focus group interview sessions were conducted with a total of 18 participants. The participants, recruited from a large public university represented the millennial generation of sport fans. Krueger’s (1998) systematic process for analyzing focus group interviews was used to analyze the data. Through the thematic analysis, five themes for millennial sport fan consumption emerged: (a) technology usage, (b) peer pressure and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), (c) social interaction, (d) emotional consumption, and (e) wise consumption (rational choice + desire to be comfortable). Among these five themes, four have shown high validity compared to the findings from the literature review; wise consumption is identified as the unique dimension in the current study. One trait found in previous studies but did not emerge was “adamant that their voices be heard”. Although the focus group participants
did not directly engage with sport organizations by providing comments, they showed some level of engagement behavior through social media to support their team. Therefore, this trait was used in the ensuing survey research. Finally, a survey study examined the sport consumption patterns of millennials and compared them to Baby Boomers and Generation X.

Data were collected from the general consumer population via a crowd-sourcing web service (Amazon Mechanical Turk). One hundred respondents were collected from each generation group, totaling 300 sample size. Descriptive demographic statistics revealed that the three samples were similar except for average age: Baby Boomers (59.5 years), Generation X (40 years), and Millennials (26.8 years). The technology-driven behaviors were measured according to the most prevalent themes found in the literature review and focus group interviews. Community-driven sport consumer behavior was measured using a modified item from Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) and an item from Bagozzi, Dholakia, and Mookerjee (2006). Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, and Gladwell (2013) FoMO scale was adapted to measure the peer pressure and FoMO. To measure emotional concerns during sport fan decision making, Bagozzi, Baumgartner, and Pieter's (1998) goal-directed emotions were used. Yoshida, Gordon, Makoto, and Bieskia's (2014) scale was adapted to measure engagement behavior. Descriptive statistics revealed that Millennials showed consistently higher scores for the five dimensions than the other generations. Series of ANOVA tests found statistically significant differences between Millennials and Baby Boomers in all five dimensions. ANOVA revealed that Millennials showed significantly higher technology-driven behavior (F (2, 297) = 10.670, p < .001), community-driven behavior (F (2, 297) = 6.550, p < .01), peer pressure-influenced behavior (F (2, 297) = 5.514, p < .01), emotional consumption behavior (F (2, 297) = 7.389, p < .001), and engagement behavior (F (2, 297) = 4.984, p < .01) than the older generations.

The current study has several theoretical and practical implications for sport marketers. First, it is the first of its kind to establish a categorization standard for sport fan generations. Second, this study empirically explored millennial sport fan behavior outside the action sport context and extended the generalizability. Third, the current study identified the important traits that might be related to millennial consumption behaviors. Lastly, the current study used a triangulation mixed method (Greene, 2007) to examine the phenomenon using different research tools. The use of this rigorous methodological approach certainly enhanced the convergent validity and reliability of the study findings. As for practical implications, this study suggested the generational categorization for the market segmentation and revealed some fundamental generation characteristics that may be informative to sport marketers. Finally, the five millennial consumption traits could be applied when deploying marketing strategies. Identifying factors is important because by triggering or framing those relevant factors, sport marketers can increase preferable behavior and enhance fan experiences in ways that promote the success of the organization.