The Effectiveness of Word of Mouth in Spectator Sport: A Gender Difference Perspective

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Marketing Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-247 8:55 AM (Legacy South 2)

Word of mouth (WOM) has a great influence on sport viewership because subjective and evaluative information given by other consumers are more persuasive than factual information offered by sports organizations (Murray, 1991; Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003). Recognizing the positive effect of WOM in sport viewership, sports organizations engage in so-called WOM marketing which aims to enhance WOM and its positive outcomes, such as increased game attendance (Fisher, 2013; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). In the sport management literature, several scholars have offered numerous insights into WOM marketing by revealing predictors of WOM (e.g., game satisfaction; Yoshida & James, 2010). Nevertheless, prior studies have offered little information about the effectiveness of WOM on message recipients’ actual sport-watching behavior. Sweeney, Soutar, and Mazzarol (2008) argue that generating favorable WOM is not sufficient to acquire desirable outcomes; its recipient also needs to react favorably. Thus, further research is needed to investigate the impact of perceived WOM influence on actual sport-watching behavior. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine factors that affect the influence of WOM on sport-watching behavior.

Theoretical Background and Research Model

Based on source credibility theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) and Rhetoric theory (Aristotle, 1924), we identified four antecedents of perceived influence of WOM on sport-watching behavior: a message sender’s expertise, a message sender’s trustworthiness, richness of message content, and strength of message delivery. In addition, we examined gender differences in the relationships between perceived WOM influence and its antecedents. We selected gender as a potential moderator because prior studies have shown gender differences in the process of being persuaded (e.g., Putrevu, 2001; Sun & Qu, 2011).

Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a survey of U.S. residents who had received a recommendation to watch a professional or collegiate sporting event in three months preceding the data collection, and actually watched the recommended event. 433 participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk which is recognized as an efficient and reliable data collection platform (Mason & Suri, 2012). To measure research variables, the authors modified and adapted existing scales (e.g., Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Ohanian, 1990). A confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) was performed followed by a structural equation model (SEM) and multiple-group SEM.

Results

The results of CFA indicated a good fit of the model ($\chi^2$/df = 2.71, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .96, SRMR = .05; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). All factor loadings were significant and greater than .50. Construct reliability ranged from .81 to .94. The average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from .60 to .83. Thus, we concluded that the convergent validity was established (Kline, 2011). Correlations between variables ranged from .02 to .48. Every squared correlation was found to be smaller than the lowest AVE value. Thus, we concluded that the discriminant validity was also established (Kline, 2011). Next, the results of SEM suggested a good model fit ($\chi^2$/df = 2.71, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .96, SRMR = .05). In addition, the direct paths from trustworthiness ($\gamma = .11$, $p = .04$), richness of message content ($\gamma = .40$, $p < .001$) and strength of message delivery ($\gamma = .21$, $p < .001$) to perceived WOM influence were found to be statistically significant. To test the moderating effects of gender, a series of multiple-group SEM was conducted. First, a measurement invariance test confirmed males and females interpreted measurement scales in the equivalent manner ($\Delta \chi^2 = 16.21, \Delta df = 13, p = .24$). Next, a structural invariance test implied that there was a difference in causal links in the structural model between males and females ($\Delta \chi^2 = 33.79, \Delta df = 17, p = .01$). Finally, path analyses revealed statistically significant differences in the chi-square statistic between the unconstrained model and the models with a constraint on the paths of (a) trustworthiness $\rightarrow$ perceived
WOM influence ($\Delta \chi^2 = 7.16, \Delta df = 1, p = .01$) and (b) strength of message delivery $\rightarrow$ perceived WOM influence ($\Delta \chi^2 = 5.98 \Delta df = 1, p = .01$). Specifically for females trustworthiness ($\gamma = .39, p < .001$) had a significant positive effect on perceived WOM influence, but strength of message delivery did not ($\gamma = .08, p = .34$). For males, trustworthiness did not have a significant effect on perceived WOM influence ($\gamma = .01, p = .82$), but strength of message delivery did ($\gamma = .26, p < .001$).

Implications

The results suggest that male and female sport viewers are influenced by different aspects of WOM communication. Thus, sports organizations need to elaborate different WOM marketing strategies to approach male and female viewers. First, male viewers are influenced by emotive appeal of WOM. Since people prefer face-to-face communication to online communication for expressing their emotions (Rogers, Griffin, Wykle, & Fitzpatrick, 2009), sports organizations should enhance face-to-face WOM communication to improve male viewers’ perceived WOM influence. To provide unique giveaways and merchandise that catch people’s eyes and induce conversations is an option. On the other hand, female viewers tend to focus on trustworthiness of message senders. Thus, to approach female viewers, sports organizations should enhance communication between family members or close friends. Offering group ticket packages targeting female viewers might be a viable option. The authors discuss more detailed theoretical and practical implications at the conference.