The (New) Family Market in Sport: A Modern Reexamination of the Sporting Family Construct to Eliminate Stereotypes and Meet Demand

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Introduction

"We're not just a sport event, we're a family entertainment experience!" An idea that grew in popularity from Bill Veeck's concept of sport beyond the core, truly enhancing the entertainment value (Veeck & Linn, 2001), this is often a primary claim that we hear in spectator sport. If this is true, and it often is, it is imperative that sport organizations allow their definition of family to evolve. Providing an entertainment experience that meets the needs of the current American family, and not one that reflects the family dynamic of the past (Oswald, 2003), is vital to continue to bring people out to ballparks, stadiums, and arenas. Accordingly, as result of the evolving family - in form, activity, and priority - sport entities must work to progress the sport consumption experience in order to tackle the "new" family market.

A family evolution in sport spectatorship means understanding that one potential piece of this puzzle – the female fan – is now more than just a consumer of sport merchandise. Female fans are now a permanent fixture in the bleachers and, as such, continuing down the same homogenous path marginalizes the role that they play in the landscape of sport consumption (Glass, 2014). Additionally, the sport "mom" might not be a mom at all, as the family unit can no longer be conceptualized as male-female partnerships (Banchefsky & Park, 2016). Thus when considering the family market, it is important to cater to the myriad ways in which family units can be defined including, but not limited to, same sex families, single parent families, and heterosexual two-parent families. In addition to the make-up of the family unit, the recognition of the role that children play in the experience for both themselves and their accompanying adult(s) can impact both current and future consumption and identification (Sharma & Sonwaney, 2014). Finally, the "family four pack" no longer meets the needs of the current American family (Krogstad, 2014). It is not applicable for families of two, three, five or six, and, from a very basic perspective, does not allow an organization to achieve promotional goals. In general, the American family unit has changed (e.g., Angier, 2013; Krogstad, 2014; Oswald, 2003) and, given its impact on sport consumption, it is imperative that the sport manager/marketer recognize this evolution in order to create an accessible and enjoyable experience for fans over the span of their consumption lifecycle.

Sport consumer behavior literature has continued to move forward regarding the internal (e.g., Gencer, 2015; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001) and external (e.g., Byron, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003) determinants of spectator decision making. However, the role of family, or place in the family lifecycle, is one area that has not been reassessed since the practitioner's "traditional formula" was set decades ago with the development of a "family four pack." At a time when a decline in attendance has been noted as the result of a change in priorities among younger fans, the high cost of tickets (pricing many families out of the market), poor in-venue experience, changes in viewing habits/media consumption and increased access to watch the game and receive highlights and analysis elsewhere (Scott & Masterson, 2014), this is vital. In a society where change is constant, and in a discipline where we pride ourselves on meeting the needs of not only our consumers, but our communities, it should be in our DNA to evolve. However, in regards to this particular market segment, change has been limited and slow to come. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to investigate aspects of the modern family market at this point in time, including: the role of the female fan/sport "mom," the make-up of the family unit, the role of children, and the size of the family unit. As such, the goals of this research are both theoretical and practical in nature.

Method/Results

As an initial investigation, the intention of this work is to begin to understand the form and function of this
important segment of the sport market. Therefore, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, including both qualitative (i.e., interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (i.e., demographic and consumption characteristics) assessments. Interviews with industry professionals (expected total N = 4) will take place through March 2017 and focus groups will be held in January 2017. The request for participation in the focus groups (expected total N = 30; 3, 10-person sessions) was posted on a family page on a social media website where proof of family must be provided to be granted access to the group. Participant recruitment will continue through the time in which the interviews and focus groups are completed. In addition to these tactics, all participants will be provided with a brief demographic and sport consumption questionnaire in order to assess descriptive and quantifiable consumption characteristics of the sample. We anticipate results and analysis will center on themes related to: (a) barriers to entry, (b) amenities, (c) cost, (d) organizational priorities (perceived and real) and (e) personal priorities.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research
While work has emerged regarding the changing characteristics of the family unit, as a whole (e.g., Angier, 2013; Banchefsky & Park, 2016; Krogstad, 2014; Oswald, 2003), it has not been addressed in relation to the sport market. Given the role of family in various aspects of sport consumption through the lifecycle, this assessment is vital for organizations moving forward. As such, this research provides a foundation from which both academicians and practitioners can benefit by beginning to provide a greater understanding of both the wants and needs of modern sport consumers. In general, this work is an assessment of an evolving market; however, it is also a call for social change, acknowledging the major shifts in the communities that have pledged their loyalty (often) for generations. Given this exploration is in its infancy, there will be a need for continued examination of various aspects of this segment of the sport market. Implications, limitations, and future studies will be expanded upon in the presentation.