Mommy Bloggers, Inc.: The Role of (Personal and Professional) Social Influencers and Influencer Marketing in Family Sport Consumption

Jessica Braunstein-Minkove, Towson University
Jennifer Metz, Towson University

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Introduction Traditional motives for professional sport consumption have seemingly remained constant – family tradition, love of the game, entertainment, connectedness (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000) – and yet, the process prior to sport consumption has changed considerably. Traditional social influences, or external driving forces (Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003), have morphed into technologically aided social networks of blogs, chatrooms and websites (Laucella, 2014). As our social networks have evolved so too have the ways in which we both find and value information (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). Core to this shift is the role of social influencers, or individuals that drive "followers" to take action by sharing their experiences, ideas, information and recommendations via social media (Gillin, 2009). Organization’s realization of the power of social influencers, and their reach, has led to greater instances of influencer marketing, allowing for opportunities to move beyond the (costly) star power of (athlete) endorsers alone to drive consumption (Noyan, 2017). As such, it is vital for sport entities to do what they can to find these influencers and employ strategies that focus on a natural link to the sport consumption, and personal, lifecycle (e.g., Fan ID – Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000, Self-Brand Connection – Escalas & Bettman, 2003 and Sports Interest Inventory – Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger; 2002) for the market at hand.

As the family market is an integral part of the sport landscape, understanding the role that the mother plays in the decision-making process has remained vital in reaching this group. Braunstein-Minkove and Metz (in progress) found the primary motive for moms to consume professional spectator sport continues to be socially driven. Therefore, as the female population shifts in their (consumer) lifecycle, including families and children, the individuals who influence them change as well. As a result of the previously mentioned evolution in (social) media, we see individuals, both professionally and personally, sharing knowledge, experiences and opinions to a larger audience (Gillin, 2009). While these individuals may have influenced a small group in the past, access to social media has provided a larger platform for influence. Additionally, this format allows non-influencers to participate and, ultimately, shape their role (i.e., identity) in these groups as they would in any other aspect of their lives (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The Boston Red Sox employed this method by connecting with a group of mommy bloggers (i.e., social influencers) as brand ambassadors, exchanging greater access to the team/ballpark and special programming for the access to their online communities via posts regarding their experiences (Fisher, 2015). For practitioners, this is a low-cost method to reach a highly-coveted market (Noyan, 2017).

As such, a vital step in investigating the mother’s role in the family sport consumption process, is to begin to understand the impact that social influencers (both personal and professional) have on this segment of the market. Therefore, this investigation is intended to provide greater depth to this conversation and provide both academics and practitioners with a platform to reach moms and, ultimately, their families via influencer marketing.

Method/Results The intention of this work is to further understand the impact of social influencers on this particular segment of the market. Therefore, a multi-method, qualitative approach will be adopted for investigation (Morse, 2003). The first stage of this assessment will employ a content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Franzosi, 2004) of both the general non-sport consumption-based and sport-related content on a family page on a social media website. The "family page" requires proof of a family identification prior to being granted access to the group and provides a self-selected subset of sport consumers. While the focus of this group is not sport-specific, it is location-specific and does provide a forum for discourse regarding local activities, including sport events and venues at various levels of competition. Next, the investigation will focus on semi-structured, in-depth, 30-60-minute interviews and focus groups (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, 2012). Interviews and focus groups (expected
combined total N = 30) will take place through May 2018 with participants being recruited through the same 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) social capital linked to social groups (b) individual perception of the role of social groups, in their lives, (c) individual perception of one's role in social groups, (d) consumption behavior linked to social identity and group membership, (e) impact of personal versus professional influencers and (f) personal priorities.

Implications, Limitations, And Future Research While work has (re)emerged regarding the role of female consumers in sport (e.g, Toffoletti, 2017; Johnson, 2016), we have not yet assessed the role that social (media) groups (real and perceived), social influencers and/or influencer marketing play in their consumption behavior. As sport organizations are looking for ways to maintain, or grow, their fan base, understanding the way female sport consumers use these reference groups and, ultimately, how to reach these groups and leverage them as part of the decision-making process. For example, the Disney Parks Moms Panel has been established in order to use social media moms that are visible on multiple platforms and have the potential to influence travel and entertainment planning of other mothers (Richwine, 2015). As the primary source of information shifts from the organization to other consumers, disseminating new and correct information in new ways is vital in the success of reaching these groups and maintaining relationships. As such, this research provides a foundation from which both academicians and practitioners can benefit by beginning to provide a greater understanding the role that these factors play in reaching and influencing consumption patterns of the modern family. Given this exploration is in the early stages, 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.