The Great Divide: How Younger Generations are Disrupting the Sport Consumption Landscape

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The sport industry is at a unique juncture, where organizations are catering to four separate generations - Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each of these generations uphold different preferences towards consumption, and different preferences towards the sports they favor (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2012). In the current sport landscape, companies such as Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter are acquiring the rights to stream live sport content. In turn, traditional broadcasters must reimagine their live content delivery to stay relevant with younger generations, while at the same time trying to vie for the attention of older generations. To compete in this new digital space, media entities must now consider which sports are being consumed, the platforms by which they choose to consume, and how various generations will interact with these platforms. As such, a deep understanding of generational fandom in the current digital age is vital.

While a considerable number of studies have focused on the consumption motives, avidity, and identity of fans (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2011, 2012; Heere & Newland, 2013; Wann, 2008), few studies have provided an in-depth, comprehensive explanation of generational differences. According to a recent industry study, Gen Z differs from previous generations in terms of social priorities and subsequently, sport consumption habits (Whistle, 2018). These new consumption patterns, especially those of Gen Z, are notable because they may be disrupting the traditional delivery of sport content. In turn, this may induce industry leaders to alter the ways in which they present content. There is a call, therefore, to investigate any shifts in sport consumption preferences across generations. Additionally, there is also a need to investigate the motives driving such consumption practices, and how they may impact live viewership.

The current research group commissioned a study to investigate sport consumers across all four generations. The objectives were to not only understand the differences in fan avidity and consumption motives across generations, but to also understand the reasons behind changing consumption preferences (i.e., how and why fans prefer to consume sport). With the intention of advancing knowledge on generational sport consumption habits, the research team partnered with FOX Sports to develop a comprehensive understanding of the consumption patterns of U.S. sport fans. A nation-wide survey was conducted with sport fans spanning the four generations. Developed from the sport management literature, the survey instrument measured motives for fandom, as well as identity, avidity, passion, consumption patterns and preferences, and demographic information. Respondents in the sample represented all four generations. While the study is in progress, it will be completed by the NASSM conference. The symposium will revolve around the study’s findings and will include narratives on how these fan segments are disrupting traditional notions of fandom and consumption. Representatives from our research team and FOX Sports will engage in a lively discussion to further explore the findings, the implications of the generations’ influence on sport business and media, as well as future research ideas.