What Causes a Fan to Attend the Game?: A Conceptual Framework on Sport Consumers’ Behavior in Disappointing Performance Situations

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Why do sports fans follow their teams even when the teams are not successful? It is the nature of sports that if there is a winning team, there is bound to be a loser, which also means roughly half the spectators may have a negative experience due to the game outcome. Furthermore, such feelings can be exacerbated by, for example, a blowout loss to a rival team and failing to qualify for the post-season playoffs. The aforementioned examples are frequent occurrences in sports and fans must cope with these negative outcomes. To answer the question about what causes a fan to attend the game, three key factors are identified which are hope, social interaction and curiosity.

The first factor is hope. Previous literature defines hope as a form of expectation (Leeuwen & Daniel, 2002). However other than the element of expectation, we should also consider the sport consumer's emotional aspect embedded in the concept of hope (Madrigal, 2008). According to the appraisal theory of emotion, hope is a positive emotion that arises from environments or outcomes characterized as being both goal-congruent and uncertain yet possible (Shaver et al., 1987). The desire to win the match can act as an external appraisal that leads to emotional responses and influence the sport consumer's goals (Madrigal, 2003) as hope can play an important role in developing and maintaining psychological well-being, improved coping skills, and positive emotional states (Snyder, 1994).

The second factor is social interaction. People are social beings and the complex and interdependent social interactions among those involved in a particular activity has the potential to explain much of sport consumers’ behaviors. The elaborated social identity model (ESIM) (Drury & Reicher, 2000), an extension of the social identity model, posit that people who share a social identity (e.g., sport fans) enjoy collective behavior. This enjoyment stems from the conscious and unconscious knowledge of belonging to a particular group that shares a common interest (Morris, 1981).

Lastly, we would like to suggest the concept of curiosity. One of sports’ appeals is the unpredictability of the outcome. We can make any amount of predictions considering various aspects of the game, but in the end, nobody knows how everything will play out. Curiosity is defined as “a desire to gain new knowledge and new sensory experiences that lead to inquisitive behavior” (Litman & Spieberger, 2003). No two sport matches are alike and each game proceeds differently and outcomes always change. This aspect of sports stimulates consumer curiosity.

Understanding the mechanisms behind sport consumption behavior, even when “my team” performs poorly, is an important aspect of sports that differentiates it from most consumption experiences. Furthermore, sport management practitioners can use this insight to develop effective marketing communications and build long-term relationships with their fans.