A New Player in Town: Fan Consumption Behavior Factors within a Recently-Competitive Market

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For more than a century, Americans have filled ballparks across the country to experience America’s pastime. One of America’s first professional sports, baseball has become as synonymous with summer as apple pie, hot dogs, and—according to the popular commercial—Chevrolet (Rummel, 2016). While baseball long maintained complete control of the summer sports landscape, in recent years, other sports have joined baseball. One such sport is Major League Soccer (MLS).

Since its inception in 1996, MLS has expanded to more than 20 teams throughout North America (Sports Business Journal, 2015). MLS has gained popularity largely due to its unique event experience that consists of fan communities that foster energetic atmospheres, with many standing and chanting throughout games (Haden, 2018). This juxtaposes with the MLB experience that draws spectators with its ability to socialize, escape, and enjoy entertainment (James & Ross, 2002; James, Fujimoto, Ross, & Matsuoka, 2009).

With consideration to the parallel seasons of these two sport leagues, Funk and James’ (2001; 2006) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) is employed—with its four stages of psychological connection—as a framework of inquiry to explore motives and constraints that lead individuals toward MLB and/or MLS team fandom. Ultimately, this study seeks to understand the unique motives and constraints for how individuals become fans of a team from one league versus the other—or fans of both.

Method/Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with individuals who live in geographic proximity to Atlanta, GA and identify as supporters of both the Atlanta Braves (MLB) and Atlanta United (MLS). Study participants must have attended at least one game for each team in the past year and reside within 75 miles of downtown Atlanta.

Atlanta was chosen as the context for this exploratory study since it possesses an established MLB team and a relatively new MLS team—with a strong attending fan base—that recently completed its third season. While all contexts differ, the characteristics found in Atlanta facilitates the examination of fan progression through the PCM over the past three years with a new market entrant, and its impact upon the established team’s fan base.

Viable study candidates will be recruited by research team members using existing, interpersonal networks, with data collection pursued until saturation is achieved. Data will then be independently analyzed and coded by each member of the research team, followed by consensus coding to ascertain existing themes.

Discussion/Implications

Results from this study are anticipated to provide both theoretical and practical implications. By examining fan progression through the PCM, key factors for encouraging psychological connection with teams will more accurately be delineated, allowing practitioners to engage in strategic marketing campaigns that promote those factors while avoiding the inclusion of any study-identified, fan consumption constraints. Further, there is scant research that considers a competitive fan consumption environment between teams within these two professional leagues. Findings from this study should assist in the development of future studies that would likely yield additional findings, both theoretical and practical, for the established MLB and nascent MLS.