The Mediating Role of Social Media Influencers in the Development of Awareness, Engagement, and Purchase Intention Towards Professional Sports

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Social media influencers play significant roles in their respective fields affecting the behaviors of consumers in the industry. Eric Lam, founder and CEO of an influencer marketing platform AspireIQ, commented that “influencer marketing is an effective strategy to increase brand awareness, sales, and brand affinity for businesses across the board” and “influencer marketing speaks to consumers in an authentic, personalized way” (Clementi, October 3, 2019). A recent report revealed that marketers are willing to raise budgets related to influencers (Nicholson, 2019). In the field of sports, former/current athletes, commentators, and other personnel in the industry are emerging as social media influencers.

A high level of sport involvement is intimately linked with consumer behaviors. Funk and James’s (2001) psychological continuum model explains how sport consumers psychological connection with sports or sport teams is developed. Ko, Kim, Claussen, and Kim (2008) evidenced that when consumers maintain a high level of sport involvement, such engagement will influence sponsor awareness, corporate image, and purchase intention. Hence, exposure to influencers’ content can enhance and reinforce audiences’ sport involvement as social influencers are involved in sport fans’ psychological connections to sport entities as third party media. From this point of view, social media influencers can play a mediating role in the development of cognitive and behavioral involvement.

Despite the rise of social media as a research topic, few researchers have attempted to address the relationship between influencers and professional sports. In the case of sport organizations, social media is an effective method to communicate and retain customers (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) investigated how professional athletes’ use of social media not only builds a personal brand but also develops sponsorship opportunities. Again, the impact of influencers was not scrutinized. Hence, the purpose of the present paper is to establish a model elucidating the role of influencers in professional sports consumption.

Using the influencer credibility factors (i.e., expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity) from the Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) model (Lou & Yuan, 2019), we propose the Sport-SMIV (S-SMIV) model. In this model, we add and highlight the role of authenticity. Authenticity is not only a critical point for building effective relationships in influencer marketing (Glucksman, 2017; Woods, 2016) but also the most valuable factor as modern customers’ demand for ‘truth’ is staggering within the era of false information and exaggeration (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Kim, 2018).

The S-SMIV model explains how appraisal of social media influencers mediates the relations between sport involvement and sport consumers’ awareness, engagement, and purchase intention towards professional sports. Furthermore, the concept of authenticity is included in the S-SMIV model, which adds to the existing literature. We will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the model by scrutinizing the role and factors of social media influencers.