Motivation Behind Watching Korea Baseball Organization Games Amongst U.S. Baseball Fans During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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COVID-19 has caused major disruption in everyday life particularly causing a significant change for sport fans. Starting in March 2020, all sport competitions in the U.S. such as, Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA) have suspended or delayed their season (Zucker, 2020). Due to the lack of live sport competitions to be televised in the U.S. during the pandemics (May-June 2020; Cwik, 2020), the Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) league have been broadcasted to the U.S. through Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) platforms since the opening day. However, the KBO may have difficult time gaining fans in the U.S. because of several challenges (e.g., quality of performance, unfamiliarity). In order to attract and sustain new fans in the U.S., the KBO should understand the different needs of the new targets.

This study aimed to explore the motivational factors behind watching KBO games amongst U.S. sports fans by applying the Motivation Scale Sport Consumption (MSSC; Trail & James, 2001) into the unique situation. The current study recruited 275 individuals in the U.S. through Amazon Mechanical Turk (M-Turk). The data collection started after two weeks when the first broadcast of the KBO league began in the U.S. and ended in the middle of June 2020. During this time frame, the KBO was the one of the few available options for live televised sports in the U.S. Questionnaire included seven motivational elements (e.g., vicarious achievement, drama), watching involvement, and future intention.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement model in our data set and indicated satisfactory level of Goodness-of-fit indices (i.e., S-B $\chi^2$/df = 487.29/288 = 1.69, RMSEA = .052, SRMR = .049, TLI = .931, and CFI = .943). Simultaneous multiple regression tests were conducted to predict watching involvement and future intention based on the seven motivational factors. The results revealed that vicarious achievement, novelty, aesthetics, and online social interaction were salient predictors for watching involvement, $R^2 = .55$, $F(7, 246) = 45.38$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, it was found that drama, escape, novelty, and physical skills of the athletes significantly predicted future intention to watch the KBO games after the pandemic is over,$R^2 = .11$, $F(7, 246) = 5.67$, $p < .001$. The novelty element was unique to both constructs.

With a better understanding of how sport fans’ media consumption shifted under the pandemic in the U.S., the current study suggests important marketing information to not only the KBO league but other new sport leagues (who want to expand their businesses into the U.S.). For instance, in order to create and support a newly developed fan base, marketing practitioners should strategically highlight motivational factors related to novelty, aesthetic, vicarious achievement, and online social interaction. To sustain the fan base, promotional campaigns utilizing video clips emphasizing dramatic elements and high-performance aspects of the game could be very effective. The novelty aspect of a new foreign league would be a major factor to attract and sustain a new fan base.