A Conceptual Framework of Year-Round Fan Engagement: The Role of Off-Season Fan Behavior

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Fan engagement, the substantial psychological connectedness to a specific club, team, or sport itself (Yoshida et al., 2014), is in a state of rapid transformation due to the growth of digital media (Booton, 2020). Recent technology innovations have allowed sport organizations to keep in touch with fans via various platforms throughout the year. To create and sustain fan engagement is critical for sport organizations to maximize team revenues, sponsorship interest, and media attractiveness (Cortsen, 2017). Considering fans behave differently depending on the season (i.e., in- and off-season), the use of the season distinction concept allows for a better understanding of fans’ attitudes and behaviors. However, there has been limited research identifying how to engage fans with their favorite franchises during the off-season. The purpose of this study is to provide a conceptual framework of year-round fan engagement by pursuing the following research questions: What are the antecedents of fans’ attitudes toward their favorite team online? What aspects are consisting of off-season fan engagement? What is the role of off-season fan engagement in inducing sport consumptions in a succeeding season?

The developed framework is underlain by three main elements: (1) provider-based factors of content, (2) dimensions of off-season fan engagement, and (3) connectedness to sport consumption next season. First, according to the elaborate likelihood model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1983), people form attitudes toward a certain object on the basis of the quality of the content as well as the credibility of sources. Because sport fans primarily consume sport-related content in an online environment during the off-season (Achen et al., 2018), they may show different attitudes toward their favorite team based on the experiences of consuming online content. For example, if a fan perceives the content as informative (e.g., draft news) and entertaining (e.g., behind-the-scenes), the fan is likely to have more favorable attitudes. Second, specific off-season fan engagement activities are classified based on the three-dimension of online consumer engagement: consumption, contribution, and creation (3Cs; Schivinski et al., 2016). Specifically, consumption represents participation in online activities passively, including watching legend games. The contribution denotes interactions with content providers (e.g., liking), and the creation represents producing content (e.g., best moments of teams). Third, positive attitudes subsequently contribute to a higher level of engagement as well as a high likelihood for more future positive fan behaviors (Hirschman, 1970). Thus, 3Cs during the off-season may trigger attendance of games and media consumption in a succeeding season. In other words, sport organizations can anticipate an increase in sport consumption in-season, which ultimately leads to generating year-round fan engagement.

The proposed conceptual model contributes to the literature in sport management and sport industry in several ways. First, this current study introduces a new perspective of fan behavior by applying the season distinction, especially for off-season fan engagement. Second, the year-round fan engagement framework stimulates empirical studies to examine distinctive factors that influence fans’ persistent consumptions. Third, the model can help sport organizations develop effective online marketing strategies during the off-season for sustainable growth.