Word-of-Mouth Effectiveness in Sport Fan Acquisition: A Prototypicality Perspective

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Word of mouth (WOM) is an effective way for sports teams to acquire new fans and expand their fan bases (Asada & Ko, 2016, 2019; Fink et al., 2002). Previous research has shown that sports fans with strong team identification (Swanson et al., 2003) or pride (Chang et al., 2017) tend to engage in WOM. However, little is known about when WOM of such fans become influential to potential fans’ purchase decisions and why the effectiveness of their WOM may vary. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a recommender’s fan status (nonfan vs. fan) on the intention of potential fans to watch a recommended game.

Self-categorization theory posits that people tend to accept messages sent by in-group members because their messages inform group prototypes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The extent to which a group member embodies the group prototype is called prototypicality (Turner et al., 1987). In-group members with high prototypicality tend to be influential on the opinions and behaviors of other members (Kalshoven & Hartog, 2009). In the sports context, Asada et al. (2020) showed that the relative size of a fan community determines whether potential fans view existing fans as in-group or out-group members.

An online survey was conducted via Amazon Mechanical Turk (N = 278). In the survey, potential fans of a sports team imagined receiving a recommendation about the team’s game from either a nonfan or fan of the team. They answered survey questions regarding the relative size of the team’s fan community (Asada et al., 2020), the recommender’s resident prototypicality (Ward et al., 1992), and intention to watch the recommended game (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2009). The results of a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013) revealed a significant moderated mediation (the index of moderated mediation = .165, CI [.002, .400]). First, relative size moderated the effects of fan status on resident prototypicality (interaction effect = .528, p = .034), such that fan status does not have a significant relationship with resident prototypicality if the team has a small fan community (b = .381, p = .057) but it has a significant positive relationship with resident prototypicality if the team has a large fan community (b = .909, p < .001). Second, resident prototypicality showed a significant positive relationship with intention to watch the recommended game (b = .312, p < .001). In sum, potential fans perceive existing fans to hold high resident prototypicality if the team is supported by a large majority of the local residents, and potential fans tend to attend a recommended game if they believe the recommender is a highly prototypical resident.

The results suggest that sports teams with large fan communities should focus on enhancing the WOM among existing fans, whereas sports teams with small fan communities should encourage WOM among general consumers with high resident prototypicality. The current research offers unique theoretical and practical implications by revealing specific situations and a psychological mechanism by which existing fans become influential to potential fans’ consumption decisions.