Social Media as a Gateway to Sport Consumption: The Role of Virtual Parenting Communities on the Decision-Making Process of Sport Momsumers

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Professional sport teams design various strategies to target different market segments, with female sport consumers at the forefront of current practices. In addition to demographic targeting, the notion of the lifecycle segmentation approach highlights the potential impact of sport consumers' changing needs through various stages in their life. For family sport consumption, female sport consumers' perceived identity in the role of mother affects their sport consumption habits both individually and as a family. Given the role of social media and online communities in sport consumer decision-making, this work aims to explore the effect of virtual parenting communities (e.g., Facebook parent groups) on the mother's role in the family's consumption process regarding professional sport. A multi-method, qualitative approach was adopted, including a content analysis of both general/non-sport consumption and sport-related content on a family page on a social media site, a web-based open-ended survey ($N = 106$), and in-depth, semi-structured interviews ($N = 10$). The work identified three emergent themes: Attractiveness, Expertise, and Team as a Secondary Source. Both theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future studies are addressed.

Keywords: sport consumer behavior, strategic sport communication, online community, mothers, gender, segmentation, lifecycle marketing

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Introduction

Traditional motives for professional sport consumption have seemingly remained constant—a family tradition, love of the game, entertainment, and connectedness (Ridinger & James, 2002). Yet, the sport consumption decision-making process and the determinants of sport consumption decisions have changed over time (Qian et al., 2020). While consumers experience sport in different ways (e.g., regular vs. occasional game attendance, following games on media, merchandise purchases), they usually identify with a sport or sport object to meet a diverse range of personal needs (Funk & James, 2001). Today, the consumption of sport has been impacted by online platforms such as social networks of blogs, chatrooms, and websites (Li et al., 2019). As the use and reach of social media platforms have evolved, so too have how users both find and value information (Abeza et al., 2021).

The mother's role in the family consumer decision-making process has been investigated in various contexts, such as vacations (Baía, 2018), food (Flax et al., 2021), and communication patterns (Bakir et al., 2006). As the family market is an integral part of the sport landscape, understanding the role of mothers in their families as key decision-makers, including the determinants of their sport consumption, becomes vital (Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). Mothers, as moms and consumers (to whom we refer to as *momsumers* in this work), have many influencing factors, both internal and external, that drive their consumption decision-making. Braunstein-Minkove and Metz (2019) noted that mothers' decision-making in a sport setting is primarily driven by social factors. For momsumers, information from community members or parenting peers (i.e., other moms in their networks) is influential in their decision-making process. As attending sporting events provides similar social engagement opportunities, the role that family and friends play in this exchange will continue to be valuable to sport marketers. However, as we have yet to understand if social relationships and information in virtual social networks also influence sport momsumers, expanding these networks to a digital space should be explored.

With the evolution of Web 2.0 (i.e., participative and social web), social media has provided a platform to share knowledge, experiences, and opinions to a larger audience compared to the past (Abeza et al., 2021; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Additionally, social media allows individuals traditionally considered non-influencers to participate and, ultimately, shape their role (i.e., identity) in these online communities as they would in any other aspect of their lives (Lim et al., 2017). This study, therefore, examines the impact of online communities and community influencers on social media platforms on sport momsumers' decision-making.

Background and Overview of the Literature

Role of Momsumers in Family Sport Consumption

Sport consumption is dependent on a number of factors, including emotional attachment to teams, loyalty, and identity, which then link to a specific pattern of consumption, namely game attendance, television viewing, and the purchase of team merchandise (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Stewart & Smith, 1999; Wann et al., 2008). While unique in their own nature, sport consumption is a self-defining phenomenon (Stewart et al., 2003). The factors influencing female sport consumers have often been characterized as different from that of their male counterparts (Esmode et al., 2015). James and Ridinger (2002) compared sport consumption motives between female and male sport fans, reporting that the two consumer types significantly differ in the aesthetic appeal of the sport they follow.

Alongside the possible sport consumption differences between male and female fans, social and psychological needs for attending spectator sport have been noted (Trail et al., 2003), one of which is family motive. Sport spectators are satisfied with their sport consumption when the experience offers a pleasant environment to interact with family (Casper & Menefee, 2010). Noting that *family* is a crucial motive to attend spectator sport (Trail et al., 2003), it is essential to examine the role structures and the purchase influence of family members in the consumption of spectator sport. Traditionally, the wife was viewed as the primary force behind family consumption decisions across various product categories, including household products and food (Burns, 1992). The role structures of the modern family have changed, however, mainly due to the growing number of double-income families (Commuri & Gentry, 2000). Women (or mothers in families with children) exercise a more significant influence over family consumption decisions considering their social, emotional, and financial contributions to the family (Lee & Beatty, 2002). The role of mothers in family consumer decision-making has been extensively discussed in leisure studies as family has been considered the dominant social structure for choosing and experiencing leisure activities (e.g., Bae & Yeu, 2022; Carr, 2006; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2016,). In the sport consumption context, Harrolle and Kicklighter (2019) recently reported that cultural shifts have led to increased opportunities for female consumers to consume sport. However, the role mothers play in sport (consumer) decision-making, including the information search stage of the process, has yet to be extensively discussed. Following a recent study, indicating that mothers heavily rely on other mothers' opinions due to social influence, and that they display online herding behaviors when consuming leisure activities

(Bae & Yeu, 2022), the current study focuses on the mother's sport consumption decision-making for their family, especially in virtual spaces.

Online Community in Sport Consumer Decision-Making

People's choices, attitudes, and preferences can act as signals of identity perceived by others (Berger & Heath, 2007). Notably, social connectedness is considered as a trait of the self that indicates cognition of sustaining interpersonal intimacy with the social world (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012). Therefore, individuals who make their decision regarding sport consumption on behalf of their family and children may be influenced by those who are also a member of the local or virtual community (Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019), while others who impact their decision-making may be aspirational to them (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Unlike the influence of celebrity endorsers, which are characterized by the sharing of a predetermined and one-sided message, online communities allow for multi-directional communications among members who share common interests available on social media (Abeza et al., 2021). In other words, social media users can create, share and react to content that has the potential to impact consumption patterns (Achen, 2017). Given the reach, familiarity, magnitude, and extent of social media use, consumers can accumulate cultural capital by sharing information with members of their online communities.

With fans' strong interest and personal investment, sport is an industry in which social media strongly impacts consumer behavior (Watanabe et al., 2019). Social media information by other sport consumers in the online community has been noted as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), a spectator-initiated social behavior whereby individuals use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) to share their experiences (Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). Previous research examines the impact of social media on sport consumers' attitudinal outcomes (e.g., Du et al., 2020; Seng & Keat, 2014). Bae and Yeu (2022) recently discussed mothers' online herding behavior, which refers to their tendency to rely on the opinions and experiences of other parents, particularly other mothers, when making decisions about activities to engage in for their family's leisure pursuits. However, the influence of messages and information by peers in online communities on mothers' decision-making processes regarding their family's sport consumption habits has yet to be examined. As previously noted, this study aims to explore how momsumers gather and leverage information shared on social media, especially on Facebook parent groups, in their decision-making process to consume sport. Particularly, this study focused on family's consump-tion of professional sport as spectators. Particularly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Who is considered part of the momsumer's social structure during the sport consumption decision-making process for family?

RQ2: What characteristics of peers in online communities do sport consumers see as a credible source at the information-gathering stage?

Method

A multi-phased, multi-method approach was adopted (Morse, 2003) to accomplish the purpose of the study, specifically, seeking to understand the impact of online communities on momsumers' sport consumption decision-making. The first stage of this assessment employed an informal content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Franzosi, 2004) of both the general/non-sport consumption and sport-related content on a "mom's group" page on a social media website (i.e., Facebook) with more than 2,000 members. The Facebook parent group provides parents and caregivers with a safe space in which they can explore and express the stumbles, successes, falsehoods, and realities of parenting. The parent group requires proof of family identification prior to being granted access to the group and provides a self-selected subset of sport consumers. While the focus of this group is not sport-specific, it is location-specific. It does provide a forum for discourse regarding local activities, including sport events and venues at various levels of competition. Additionally, given the intention of this work, a parent group focusing on women/mothers was selected for sampling. In the first phase of the assessment, we conducted a qualitative content analysis to derive the themes of sport consumption-related postings, then developed a web-based open-ended survey questionnaire, which remained open for approximately one month, to assess the respondent's usage pattern and motivation for accessing social media content, both in general and sport-specific. The survey also included a filter question, as participants were required to self-identify as professional sport consumers. A total of 106 group members completed the open-ended questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the participant's sport and social media consumption habits.

As a second phase of the project, participants were offered the opportunity to expand the conversation by engaging in semi-structured, in-depth 30-60-minute interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, 2012). This resulted in 10 in-depth interviews with individuals who participated in phase one, with prompts focusing on the impact of social media information, incorporating Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Model to investigate the characteristics of individuals (i.e., online community members) who have influenced their consumption decision-making. Data were recorded on multiple devices, transcribed, coded, and reviewed by two researchers to inductively identify and agree upon

emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in reporting.

On average, the survey participants were primarily 25-44 years old (90%), the majority of whom were 35-44 years old (76% of the total). Additionally, the group was predominantly white (94%), with the additional 6% being individuals who identified as multiple races, Black/African American, or those preferring not to indicate race. A total of 90% of the respondents were married, with an additional 7% divorced and the final 3% indicating their marital status as single. As each had at least one child, 83% had at least one male child, while 74% had at least one female child. Furthermore, this was a highly educated (61% earned a post-graduate degree, 35% earned a bachelor's degree) and high-earning (76% had a household income greater than $100,000) group. Interviewees for the second phase, a small sample of survey respondents, replicated these demographic characteristics, with the group being similarly homogenous.

Findings

The participant's level of social media consumption was high, with the majority (99%) using social media daily. The highest levels of usage were related to Facebook (97%), Pinterest (70%), Instagram (65%), and Twitter (38%), with other mentions for Snapchat, blogs, and other resources. When asked about their online community of interest, participants most frequently mentioned local and/or parent communities, such as local community/neighborhood groups, online mother's communities, personal-interest mother's groups (e.g., fitness, breastfeeding support, religious-based), sport teams, and Scary Mommy. The participants follow these groups for information (39%), entertainment (29%), advice (18%), and social interaction (10%). Regarding online parenting communities, in particular, information, advice, and social interaction were the primary driving forces, with 64% of the participants posting at least once a month and 18% identifying as lurkers, simply there to view the information provided by the community.

Grounded in the concepts addressed in the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990), the participants were asked whom they trust most for advice regarding family activities—both general and sport-focused. The majority noted word of mouth from family and friends (85%); however, they also pointed to online communities of a specific topic of interest (73%) and sport teams (60%). With this, convenience (54%) was noted as the primary reason to use social media for advice. The convenience factor was highly relevant when an individual needed to make a quick decision or reach out to a large group of individuals in a short period of time. When that advice is sport-specific, these respondents sought

out information from organization websites (80%), Facebook (74%), Instagram (13%), and Twitter (11%). Team websites and Facebook were noted as the most trustworthy site for information; this was also where respondents sought and shared advice and information.

Given these preliminary findings, we agreed it was essential to investigate further via in-depth interviews to determine how these respondents perceived the role of parenting peers in online communities on their sport consumption habits. As a result of the in-depth interviews, three primary themes emerged: Attractiveness, Expertise, and Team as a Secondary Source. The former themes (i.e., Attractiveness, Expertise) are consistent with the work of Ohanian (1990) and other literature that has evaluated and supported the model's integration in sport context since (e.g., Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2011). However, the latter theme (i.e., Team as a Secondary Source) is a more recent revelation in sports literature. Likely due to the more recent investigation with regard to the social media space, it is supported by the work of Abeza et al. (2017). The scholars noted that managers in the four major sport leagues in the US believe that fans are more likely to listen to peers (i.e., other parents) in online communities.

Attractiveness

While Attractiveness might represent the physical state in some circles, it aligns with characteristics such as similar to me, familiar to me, and likable with regard to source credibility (Ohanian, 1990). Therefore, this theme does not (necessarily) relate to being attracted to the individual but to being attracted to their characteristics in a familiar and comfortable way. This was the most prevalent finding in our first phase, as well as the supporting themes that were identified from our interviews in phase two, noted in 90% of interviews. These individuals spoke to Attractiveness as a result of groups that had things in common, whether they met in a virtual space or not. Specifically, Samantha (35-44 years old, married, two children) noted that "an infant and toddler playgroup … has been very valuable. It is local moms with their personal experiences, and I value that a lot. We connect both in person and through social media." Similarly, it is the information that they receive from these groups providing access to more refined details, per Erica (35-44 years old, married, two children):

> [I find that] online community/city websites seem to give you more applicable info [than team websites]. I then bounce that off friends/family and formal online communities to get a feel for more nuanced things. Making an informed decision that's best for my family requires more than one outlet of information.

Expertise

According to the research participants, expertise in the social space is different than with traditional endorsers, as influential individuals in Facebook parent communities do not rely on formal power or prestige. Instead, their perceived expertise comes from traits and values that come from their relatability, accessibility, and intimacy displayed through the reliable content that responds to the needs and interests of their digital community (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). As noted by 70% of the interviewees, a key component of Expertise in this space is that this will be different based on the needs of their community members at that time. For example, according to Jennifer (35-44 years old, married, two children):

> We use [a local mom's group] for information for what is family-friendly, where to sit, eat, pre-game activities, etc. For special events, we use websites and social media. For tickets and specials, we use word of mouth from friends and family and the team website as well.

This was seen as many of the participants noted that they may search an organization's website for "facts;" however, they are more often looking for advice for how best to experience the event with children. This information is obtained through informal sources, mostly local or mom's groups. As Sarah (35-44 years old, married, two children) notes, this is "to get more of a real-life perspective on it, I guess. Yes, how easy is it to take the kids to [the local] arena or things like that for this game or that game. So, yes, I definitely go to [a local mom's group] for a real-life perspective of attending events."

Team as a Secondary Source

Team as a Secondary Source, or not the primary point of reference for sport consumers, may not present itself in the source credibility or endorser literature; however, it does align with current trends in social media consumption, as opinion leaders use online communities to create their content in order to respond to the needs and interests of their digital community. As such, their followers consider them both sources and guides (Khamins et al., 2017). Liv (35-44 years old, married, two children), among the 60% of interviewees who spoke of information acquisition in this way, highlights this by noting that "I will [first] see it on a different social media platform/group, and then I will go to the [official] website [to obtain details]."

While more traditional social media influencers (e.g., celebrity/athlete influencers) may not have been noted as playing a significant role in decision-making, the role of friends, family, and "parenting peers in a virtual community" may take place through these same outlets (e.g., local mom's groups or community boards). For various reasons, in these spaces, individuals often feel most comfortable and

consider these "others" not as social media influencers but more like friends or neighbors upon whom they can rely and trust. This is most relevant as some of these individuals, particularly in local online communities, may bridge the gap between the physical and virtual divide. Some of these individuals may also be members of their actual/physical (i.e., not virtual) community as well. More specifically, this digital village has evolved to provide a support structure to the philosophical physical "village" that helps raise a child. In this, online communities serve as a sounding board, or virtual ear, to guide familial decision-making, including sport consumption. As Emily (25-34 years old, married, one child) noted, "If I see something mentioned in the Facebook group, I'll check the team's page on Facebook or their website for more information. I usually see it elsewhere first, and if I'm interested, I'll look up more info." This speaks to the general sentiment of our participants. While they value the information provided on the organization's main site—or extension outlets—it is not their first source for general or, as previously noted, more nuanced information or advice they may be seeking.

Discussion

This study attempted to address two primary research questions, including (a) who is considered part of a sport momsumer's social structure during the sport consumption decision-making process, and (b) what characteristics of peers in online communities do sport momsumers see as the credible source at the information-gathering stage. The study findings informed us that sport momsumers are using both physical and digital villages as resources, with some overlap (e.g., local community groups that may contain individuals they know "in real life"). The aforementioned themes align with the athlete endorser literature highlighting areas such as an individual's expertise and attractiveness (e.g., Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Braunstein- Minkove et al., 2011), indicating that these character traits may be what is valued, regardless of the source. In this study, attractiveness was mentioned, highlighting a connection with those with similar or familiar characteristics or circumstances and who were likable (Ohanian, 1990). This aligns with previous literature that mothers value the opinions of other moms, particularly those who have children of similar ages or who share similar values or lifestyles (Mansour & Francke, 2017). Interestingly, this study uncovered that sport teams were found to be a secondary source of information, rather than the primary source, for the majority of the participants. According to study participants, while they trust organizations, they use other communities (e.g., mom's groups) for more nuanced information to assist with the consumption of spectator sports (e.g., advice regarding the availability of nursing spaces, kids' activities, accessibility, stroller parking, etc.). Mothers may feel uncertain or overwhelmed by the many choices available via official

channels (e.g., team website, social media platforms) for family consumption and, as such, may turn to others in their online community for guidance (Asada & Ko, 2019; Bae & Yeu, 2022). Additionally, this community insight may also take into account the budgetary constraints that families face when they make their consumption decisions (Hamilton, 2009). Although the sport organization sheds light on the positive aspects or benefits of attending their games, mothers might be more selective about which family activities to invest in, or prioritize cost-effective options. In this case, other sport momsumers' testimonials based on their own experiences would be viewed as more reliable or helpful as the primary source. While our findings did not point to any high-level impact by online opinion leaders, this could very well be due to the age range of the self-selected participants. Due to newer "levels" of influence (e.g., nano) and additional apps that provide greater access to different types of influencers (e.g., Instagram and TikTok), there is the chance that this could shift as a younger demographic becomes the sport momsumers of the future.

Theoretically, this adds to the sport consumer behavior literature in a number of different ways. Specifically, it expands the literature beyond that of the generalized female consumer, accounting for the personal/family lifecycle. As we have seen in the past, many investigations have focused on female consumers as secondary in the sport landscape; however, as noted by several scholars (e.g., Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Wenner, 2012), the time has come to change that perspective. Highly identified female consumers are dedicated to their athletes, teams, and sports in the same way that male consumers are (Crawford & Gosling, 2004), and they do not see themselves as "female fans" but as fans (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). These are individuals who want to be seen as part of the fandom and, as such, deserve to be understood in a much more nuanced way. Given the changes that come on in various stages of the family lifecycle (e.g., full nest with young children versus full nest with dependent teenagers), it is important to understand the differing needs of individuals within that construct—particularly mothers—at these times (Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). Therefore, the intention here is to understand not only the female fan as just a fan but also the other factors that impact (and influence) their lives through the various stages of the family lifecycle.

In addition to the theoretical implications, there are significant practical implications associated with this work. In general, this provides a preliminary glimpse into this particular segment of the sports market and, importantly, how to reach it. While younger segments of Gen Y and older Millennials may dwell on different social media platforms than their younger counterparts (e.g., Facebook and TikTok versus Instagram and Twitter), it is essential to know that

they are reaching out to communities in these spaces for information regarding sport consumption. While it might be challenging to hear that the team resources themselves are seen as secondary, it is an important point. Without this knowledge, professional sport organizations may continue with their tried-and-true practices, missing out on a pivotal market segment.

Additionally, as younger fans transition to different sports, focusing on less mainstream and more virtual, catching them at a young age may impact that decision. Therefore, knowing who momsumers trust for advice and/or information is a great starting point. While they might see a celebrity influencer as inauthentic or unattainable if they are promoting an experience at a sporting event that is of a VIP nature, they will likely accept the feedback of a moderator/opinion leaders among members in a local mom's group on Facebook who tells them that the local team is very family-friendly with clean changing areas, nursing stations, and a variety of activities for kids of all ages. Therefore, it will also be important to understand how an organization's fans choose to interact with them via social media. Are they drawn to humor on the team's social media and follow the team whether they are local or not? Or are they simply waiting for the team to announce special family-friendly activities so they know they can bring their family to an event? Perhaps they are not even interacting directly with the team and are simply having these conversations in different groups (i.e., parenting peers) on social media. How can sport organizations reach out to opinion leaders in online communities? Consider the integration of mom panels that can serve as advisory groups to the team and online opinion leaders to those in their personal and virtual communities, as they will likely be seen as compelling, sincere, and reliable by their communities. This is consistent with the preexisting literature (Lim et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

Given that this exploration is in the early stages, there will be a need for continued examination of various aspects of this segment of the sport market. Specifically, limitations exist as a result of the platform that was used to deploy the survey and recruit for interviews. While participants could share the opportunity via other social media outlets (e.g., Twitter and Instagram), the initial distribution was through Facebook only. As such, this likely skewed our participants' age and/or usage. Additionally, due to shifting practices with Facebook algorithms, the number of potential views may have been altered/limited. Finally, while the population with access to the survey and subsequent interviews was large and diverse, the self-selected sample was both small and homogenous. As a result, these findings are useful but not generalizable to all sport momsumers and their experiences.

While the limitations are ample, our findings provide an interesting view of this aspect of the social media phenomenon. As a result, we think this work lays a strong foundation for continued research in the area, specifically regarding differences in the role of community influencers and consumption outlets used based on the consumer's age. Producers may see a shift in habits with (sport) momsumers from the physical to the digital village due to generational characteristics, including the result of evolving social media experiences and the increased usage of various types of influencers (e.g., celebrity, macro, micro, and nano). As noted, perhaps integrating more authentic and impactful influencers with a smaller number of followers is the new "village" they are looking for? Additionally, it will be valuable to examine further the role of social media influencer marketing in sport and the shift from the well-conceived role of athlete endorser to the more encompassing idea of community influencer. This should be assessed from both the industry and influencer's perspective, also taking into consideration the moderating role of these influencers on consumption.

Conclusion

While work has (re)emerged regarding the role of female consumers in sport (e.g., Johnson, 2016; Simmons et al., 2016; Toffoletti, 2017), we have not yet assessed the role that virtual communities, peers on such virtual communities, and/or influencer marketing play in the consumption behavior of the sport momsumer (Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). As sport organizations are looking for ways to maintain or grow their fan base, understanding how female sports consumers, more specifically mothers, use these virtual reference groups and, ultimately, how to reach these groups and leverage them as part of the decision-making process is vital. For example, the Disney Parks Moms Panel has been established in order to use social media moms that are visible on multiple platforms and have the potential to influence the travel and entertainment planning of other mothers (Richwine, 2015). As the primary source of information shifts from the organization to other consumers, disseminating the correct information in new ways is vital to the success of reaching these groups and maintaining relationships. As such, this research provides a foundation from which both academicians and practitioners can benefit by beginning to provide a greater understanding of the role that these factors play in reaching and influencing the consumption patterns of the modern family.

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