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The NASCAR experience: Examining the influence of fantasy sport participation on ‘non-fans’



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ABSTRACT

While NASCAR has traditionally been among the most watched sports in the US, the brand has suffered due to economic conditions and waning interest. As a result, NASCAR has focused its promotional efforts on new marketing and revenue-generating strategies to raise awareness of the sport. One way to increase awareness is through fantasy sports, which have seen a marked uptick in global popularity. However, using fantasy sports to activate involvement among self-described non-fans of a particular sport remains a relatively unexplored area. The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of fantasy sports on attitude and certain behavioral factors using a mixed-method, comparison group design. Employing the path analytic model to examine relationships among variables, results indicate significant differences between study conditions and regression analyses show how patronage intentions were influenced. Focus group data buttress the quantitative results and support the use of fantasy sports as a way to convert self-identified sport non-fans into involved fans.

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1. Introduction

Since its formation in 1948, The National Association of Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) has been among the most watched sports in the United States, ranking second only to the National Football League (Amato, Peters, & Shao, 2005). This level of interest has resulted in a sport with a fan base of over 75 million (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2008). While NASCAR has worked to overcome its niche stereotype (Elliott, 2013), the sport has not been immune to a sluggish economy and waning fan interest. For example, viewership was down 5% between 2011 and 2013 and actual race attendance figures showed a 5% decline during the same period (SBR.net, 2013). Additionally, NASCAR has been struggling to address the ever-changing cultural and ethnic landscape of the United States (Elliott, 2013).

To combat these declines, NASCAR has been growing its brand outside of its typical fan base, which has primarily consisted of older, primarily White consumers (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011). In July 2012, NASCAR partnered with the advertising agency, Ogilvy and Mather Worldwide, to advance efforts toward stimulating long-term growth among younger, urban demographics (Elliott, 2013). One of NASCAR's efforts to reach these groups has been the Drive for Diversity (D4D), designed to attract women and minorities to positions within the sport. Research on the program illustrated that NASCAR was mildly successful in attempting to reach those on the periphery of fandom (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011). Minorities and females

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aside, the majority of NASCAR's efforts have been focused on better connecting with the 18–25 year-olds, through NASCAR's Kinetics: Marketing in Motion' program designed for US colleges and universities (NASCAR Kinetics, 2011).

In addition to these efforts, heavy emphasis was placed on urging viewers and fans to participate in fantasy offerings (Elliott, 2013). This attempt is interesting since fantasy sports are one area of consumer behavior shown to facilitate interest and consumption among fan segments (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2010). The fantasy sports business is estimated at approximately \$1.7 billion, which consists of nearly 33 million participants in the US and 3.1 million in Canada (Dwyer & Drayer, 2010). The average fantasy sports participant spends upwards of \$100/year on league related costs, consumes fantasy sport roughly 8.5 h/week, and consumes other sports roughly 18 h/week (FSTA, 2013). Dwyer (2011) maintained that while limited scholarly literature on fantasy sports exists, research and industry data has shown that a sizeable portion of the media-dominated sport population is fueling robust purchasing as a result of fantasy participation. If fantasy sports spur attitudes, involvement, and consumption among existing fans, it is possible that participation by a non-fan should yield similar outcomes.

Given the ubiquity of fantasy sports offerings and the mass-appeal to sport enthusiasts, makes the professional sport industry an ideal context to examine the outcomes associated with fantasy sports participation. In addition, demonstrating if fantasy sports spur enough involvement to facilitate positive affect and patronage intentions makes this study especially salient. The purpose of this investigation was to test how attitudes, identification, and involvement develop among a self-described sample of non-fans of NASCAR participating in a fantasy league. To conceptually frame the investigation, the path analytic model (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998) aided the researchers in determining the influence of fantasy NASCAR league participation. To serve this purpose, the following research question was developed:

RQ: Will a fantasy sports intervention spur information transfer to activate positive attitudes, personal involvement, identification, and patronage among a sample of non-fans?

1.1. What is a fan?

Spectator sports are different from other entertainment products because they evoke higher levels of emotional attachment, referent group associations, and community acculturation and socialization (Lock & Filo, 2012). These affective attachments help a psychological connection to a sport product develop, which research has shown can influence consumption, behavior, and loyalty (Heere & James, 2007; James & Ross, 2002; James, Walker, & Kuminka, 2009; Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). In addition, spectator sports contribute to consumer socialization by offering opportunities for engagement, camaraderie, symbolism, and traditions that engage individuals with a sport, team, or other sport-related product (Heere & James, 2007). Those who consume sport can be segmented into three distinct categories: (1) those who watch, (2) those who visit sport-related attractions, and (3) those who participate in sport-related activities (Mueller, 2011). However, the phrase "sport fan" refers to someone who has a felt, and often internalized, psychological connection to a sport or team (Funk & James, 2004).

Alternatively, a sport non-fan possesses characteristics that distinguish them from fans. While fans can be defined as enthusiastic devotees to sport object with some level of attachment and psychological association (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010), sport non-fans fail to display any such attachment or interest. Smith (1988) distinguished fans from sport non-fans by stating, "... a fan accepts the illusion that the result of a contest matters, while the non-fan is indifferent to the result" (p. 55). Despite this difference, research has yet to definitively define the sport non-fan, holistically examine the reasons for lack of engagement, or identify forces that catalyze a sport non-fan into fanship. To provide the proper context for this study, we define the sport non-fan as someone who exhibits no interest (e.g., involvement), no attachment (e.g., identification), and no emotional connection (e.g., attitude) toward the sport product – in this case, NASCAR.

Intuitively, sport non-fans should not support professional teams or events, since they possess no affiliation or affect toward them (Drayer et al., 2010). This is typically the case because fan attachment and loyalty are socially constructed phenomena, formed at a young age, with parental support, which increase throughout one's life (James, 1997). These results align with the early work of McPherson (1976) who posited six characteristics that define a typical sport consumer: (1) investing time and money for sport involvement, (2) possessing knowledge of sport, (3) emotional involvement with sport, (4) experiencing mood states while consuming sport, (5) engaging in sport conversations, and (6) leisure time structured around sport. Later, Crawford (2004) pointed to the internalized nature of being a fan, maintaining that "... personal identity, memories, thoughts and social interactions" (p. 4) underpin sport fan involvement. In light of these attributes, we assume the absence of them should characterize a sport non-fan. As support, Drayer et al. (2010) posited that sport non-fans are those who are not highly engaged in a sport activity or with a sport product.

Based on the above commentary, NASCAR was selected as the research context for two reasons. First, the sport offers a non-fan of NASCAR something other sports leagues cannot – a non-geographically bound, driver-oriented professional sport from which to learn, follow, and participate without prior knowledge. Second, many NASCAR sponsors are highly recognizable brands, with equally recognizable products that have loyal followings. The high profile nature of these sponsors help consumers engage with the sport, drivers, and teams and further provide a reciprocal level of attachment and patronage. Therefore, a fantasy NASCAR league was used as the quasi-experimental intervention to determine its influence on attitude, personal involvement, identification, and patronage intentions among a sample of sport non-fans.

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