


Chapter 14

Sport Fan Consumption: Contemporary Research and Emerging Trends

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ABSTRACT

Sports fans are individuals who are interested in and follow one or more sports, teams, and/or athletes. These fans reinforce their identity as a fan by engaging in supportive and repetitive consumption behaviors that relate to the sport or team they are so passionate about. This chapter will provide an overview of the history and cultural heritage of sports fandom, discuss the significance and functions of fandom, underline what motivates individuals to consume sports, examine the consequences and results of fandom, and highlight contemporary research and developmental trends. This chapter would allow for a good understanding of where research on sports fandom is headed and the important issues affecting sports fans.

INTRODUCTION

This is a true story about a sport fan. Wertheim and Sommers (2016) noted the experience of Dennis Doyle, a season ticket holder for the 2014-15 New York Knicks:

A thirty-something recovering lawyer, Doyle left his job, withdrew \$25,000 from his savings, and devoted the next year to attending every New York Knicks game. Not every home game. Every game. That meant venturing as far as London to watch his team. ...The Knicks weren't merely bad. They were putrid, wretched, miserable...Doyle endured it all. The blowouts and the blown leads. The thousands of shots that clanged off the rim. The missed defensive switches. The failure to grasp the Triangle Offense. He dutifully watched every moment of every game (p. 4).

This chapter is about sport fandom and the aforementioned anecdote is a typical story of a sport fan — a loyal, enthusiastic, but somehow understandable admirer — who spends a significant amount of his or her time and money on following a sport, a team, or athlete. Understanding sport fans are important because of the large role sports play in modern society and consuming sports has become a part of the American way of life. Compared to the early 1900s when professional sports began to rise, people now have more discretionary money and time to spend on leisure activities and commercial sports have steadily attracted more and more fans. With the availability of sports via television and the Internet, sport fans can watch different kinds of televised sport games or follow their favorite teams and athletes from anywhere in the world. As sport fandoms grow, the money generated from advertising, sponsorship, and sporting good sales has increased considerably. A prominent example of this economic growth is the rising cost of advertisements during the NFL's Super Bowl. In 1967, a 30-second commercial for the first Super Bowl cost a measly \$42,000. That amount broke the \$1 million barrier in 1995 and hit a record high of \$5.3 million per commercial on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 2019, which equals to \$176,667 per second (Calfas, 2019).

The evolution of sport fandom is closely related to the changes in the contemporary sport industry. Despite the amazing growth in production of modern sports, nowadays fans are harder to reach, attract, and retain because fans are today provided with an array of sport and non-sport options like never before that are competing for consumer discretionary time and resources (Rein, Kolter, & Shields, 2007; Watanabe, Gilbert, Aman, & Zhang, 2018; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Jambor, 1997). Sports are increasingly in danger of losing their fans. Dominant sport leagues like the NFL, NBA, and MLB are under pressure to maintain market shares because a wide range of emerging sports, leagues, and competitions are gaining new fans and fragmenting the marketplace even further (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2013; Kim, Byon, Yu, Zhang, & Kim, 2013; Qian, Zhang, Wang, & Hulland, 2019). As the global marketplace becomes more accessible, sports that were formerly national or regional in scope are now seeking opportunities to conquer new overseas markets. In a market so crowded with sport and entertainment options, why and how sport fans connect, disconnect, or reconnect to a sport is often overlooked (Zhang, Pearson, Qian, & Kim, 2018; Zhang, Pitts, & Kim, 2017). Thus, it is important for researchers and practitioners look deep into the realm of sport fandom. The huge economic and cultural impact has led many people to wonder: Who are these people and why are they so passionate about sports (Mastromartino, Chou, & Zhang, 2017)? This chapter examines who sports fans are, what their consumption patterns are, and what motivates them to continuously consume sports. As well, we further delve into some of the unique elements that make up a sports fan, the ways in which sport fans engage in their fandom, and how sport

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