

Transforming into Active Spectators: Examining College Basketball Literacy for Spectatorship

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Spectators in the United States are spending nearly \$56 billion annually attending sporting events (O'Brien, 2017). The increasing importance of spectator involvement provides an incentive for sport marketers to develop marketing strategies resulting in higher levels of recruitment and retention. The majority of previous research efforts have attempted to discover reasons influencing spectators' consumption behaviors such as motives (e.g., Kim & Trail, 2010) and team identification (Katz, Ward & Heere, 2018; Funk et al., 2016), but the emphasis has tended to be on the affective aspects, with little attention paid to the nature of cognitive framing. The current study proposes an operationalized definition of "sport literacy" for spectators based on a comprehensive literature search: an understanding of procedural and contextual knowledge as well as the ability to read, analyze, and interpret sport games and play in a form that deepens the spectating experiences. Solomon (2014) indicated that sport knowledge affects individuals' consumer behavior, where the level of sport knowledge affects decision-makings and consumption behaviors, improving both the quantity and quality of understanding sport. Being "sport literate" contributes to increasing interest and motivation for spectating and corresponding behaviors. Affective-cognitive consistency theory supports this relationship in which new knowledge or information positively changes the affective dimensions and vice versa (Millar & Tesser, 1989). Although this connotation seems straightforward, there is little empirical evidence toward understanding how knowledge or literacy associated with viewership in sport (even if it is admitted that what we know and what we should know when watching sports) is an essential factor to understand flow of sports and interpret game situation, and communicate with companions. This study discovers the relationship of college basketball literacy and the likelihood of students' intention to watch or attend the college basketball games, and explores how the level of the college basketball literacy differ by student characteristics (e.g, gender, grade, and sport experience). The following research questions guide this study:

RQ 1: How is sport literacy associated with intention to watch or attend college basketball games and team identification?

RQ 2: Is there a statistically significant difference on sport literacy by various student characteristics e.g., grade, gender, and sport playing/spectating experience.

Methods

Our research team developed and validated an assessment, the College Basketball Literacy Assessment (CBLA), which consists of 40 multiple choice items including seven themes: (1) Rules; (2) Skills and Drills; (3) Strategy (4) Terminology; (5) History and Culture; (6) Statistics; and (7) Marquee Event. A total of 382 college students from a public research university in the Southwest were administered the CBLA. All student test responses were collected by a web-based Qualtrics system. 224 (58%) were males and 158 (42%) were females. All raw scores were converted into logit scores in the Rasch model. Using correlation analysis, Mann-Whitney test, and Kruskal-Wallis H test, we observed a number of significant findings with sport marketing-related implications. Bonferroni correction was employed by dividing the critical p-value (α) of 0.05 into the number of group comparisons.

Results

The level of sport literacy was significantly correlated with the intention to watch a NCAA College basketball game ($r = 0.458, p < .001$) and their school team identification ($r = 0.359, p < .001$).

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There was a significant difference by student gender in the mean scores of the CBLA, $U=8387$ ($p < .001$), indicating the mean of male students ($M=2.09$) was higher than female students ($M=0.61$). Performance on the CBLA differed significantly across grade levels ($\chi^2(4) = 31.772$, $p < .001$), with a mean CBLA score of 0.99 for freshmen, 1.26 for sophomores, 1.63 for juniors, and 2.19 for seniors. Post-hoc tests revealed that seniors performed much better than freshman ($U=2223$, $p < .001$), sophomores ($U=1643$, $p = .003$), juniors ($U=3841.5$, $p = .003$).

We have four groups based on basketball experience: (1) Spectating/Participating (SP) group (students who watched college basketball and played basketball); (2) Only Spectating (OS) group (students who only watched college basketball, but have not played basketball); (3) Only Played (OP) group (students who played basketball, but have not watched basketball); and (4) Non-spectating and non-playing (NSNP) group (students who have not watched college basketball nor played basketball). There was a statistical difference in CBLA scores among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 89.458$, $p < .001$. The SP group had a higher value than the OS group, OP group, and NSNP group at alpha level .001 ($U=4190$, 1053, and 250, respectively). In addition, the OS group was significantly higher than those of the OP group ($U=502.5$, $p = .001$) and NSNP group ($U=126.5$, $p = .005$). However, no significant difference was found between the OP group and NSNP group.

Marketing Implications

The current study identified the relationships between sport literacy and intention to watch a game, as well as the relationship between sport literacy and team identification. The results imply the importance of being literate in sport as an important factor in understanding the sport consumer behaviors, including fanship, and further for effectively recruiting and retaining spectators. The finding of male students' higher literacy than female students is consistent with prior study results regarding the gender difference in self-perceived sports knowledge (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Lee et al., 2011). In order to encourage female spectators to fill stadiums, buy season tickets and licensed merchandise, and continue watching games, we suggest a positive loop model of earlier exposure to sports leading to improved literacy and resulting increased recruitment and retention rates. The results of the progression of sport literacy during the college years also support the importance of longer campaigns utilizing the seven (7) CBLA themes. The lower literacy level of the OP group and NSNP group in comparison to other groups provides insights into sport marketers regarding what necessary components of sport literacy should be emphasized to increase their literacy, which will be used as an informative tactic to drive potential spectators to watch sport games.

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