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Using FOMO to Promote Sports Events: Exploring Technology Usage and Involvement Effects

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Reports results of a multi-year FOMO study imbedded in a sports marketing effort at a university in the southeastern US to expand student attendance at the ESPN “Gildan Charleston Classic” Basketball tournament. The tournament is an ESPN Events annual, televised event hosted by a local university. Every four years the host university’s team competes in the tournament. Student attendance has remained poor. Cognitive involvement with the event (home team participation) and technology/social media usage were hypothesized to mediate FOMO effects in the promotion.

“Fear of Missing Out”, commonly referred to as FOMO, has proliferated as a sport marketing communications tool (Larkin and Fink 2016). FOMO, has been defined as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent” (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan and Gladwell 2013, p. 1841) with the belief that this fear of missing out is, in effect, a personality trait (Burak 2014). There are indications that “High FOMO” individuals exhibit higher usage of social media (Przybylski et al. 2013). Recent research suggests people who are heavy users of technology (social media/email) are prone to FOMO (Przybylski et al. 2013).

Data was collected from students at the host university who responded to a questionnaire after reviewing one of two flyers promoting the ESPN Tournament with or without a FOMO statement (operationalized as “Don’t miss out!”). After viewing the promotional flyer respondents indicated their interest in learning more about the event, interest in attending the tournament and interest in inviting friends to the event on 7-point Likert scales. Respondents also indicated the extent to which they use social media. Data was collected for three years of the tournament: one year with the host university’s basketball team playing and two without home team participation to provide an involvement surrogate variable.
It was hypothesized that all three interest measures would be higher among participants in the high-FOMO condition that included the “Don’t Miss Out” message. A MANOVA including the three dependent variables (interest in learning more about the event, interest in attending the event and interest in inviting friends to the event) results in a significant interaction between gender and involvement for interest in learning more about the event (with males substantially more interested) and a significant three-way interaction between gender, social media usage and ad format (“Don’t miss out” vs. “Join ESPN”) for interest in attending the event. Among males, the format of the flyer does not appear to have substantially influenced interest in attending the basketball tournament. It should be noted, however, heavy social media user males that saw the low-FOMO appeal (i.e. "Join ESPN") were substantially more interested in attending than were light social media user males that saw this same appeal.

In contrast, the high-FOMO appeal flyer (i.e. with "Don't miss out") appears to have had a detrimental effect on interest in attending among some female participants. In particular, examination of post-hoc means comparisons suggests that observed interest in attending was substantially lower among light social media user females who viewed the “Don't miss out” appeal than that of the light social media user females who viewed the appeal that just read "Join ESPN" as well as that of both groups of heavy social media user females.

Since social media usage in this study was conceptualized as a proxy for "connectedness" and as a correlate of one's own sensitivity to missing out, it would be interesting to see if these results hold in a study that more specifically measures FOMO as an individual personality trait. It is possible in the context of a service product category of a sporting event such as a basketball tournament, for males at least, one's own propensity to be concerned about missing out is a better predictor of interest, and appeals designed to highlight what may be missed will have little bearing.

Further, future research should also include a specific measure of product category involvement. Improved measures of both involvement and FOMO as a personality trait could help further tease out the conditions under which appeals that incorporate a “Don't miss out” appeal can be optimally applied or, as this study suggests, for some target audiences should probably not be utilized since the impact of the FOMO messaging strategy was in some cases the opposite of the intended direction. In addition, as reports suggest the pandemic has created a whole new segment of “hyper-connected” consumers with increased technology usage affecting their preferences and behaviors (Solis, 2020), a post-pandemic follow-up will likely produce helpful new insights as well.

In a research review, Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) addressed the profound impact of social media on sport management across multiple perspectives citing its importance in cultivating relationships. One’s level of technology and social media usage as social behavior may indicate the need (or lack thereof) to be part of a group participating in or attending a sports event and effect promotional effectiveness. Social media use presents a multitude of opportunities as well as challenges to sports marketing.
REFERENCES


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