Exploring the Sense of Community among Football Tailgaters

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Introduction

Sport can be seen as a venue for casual sociability in reaction to a shift in the locale of social connectedness (Melnick, 1993). Highlighting this shift, research has linked the social aspect of the sport experience to motives for attendance (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003), and this social connectedness has been highlighted as a key motivation to participate in tailgating (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009). Research has suggested that the social aspect of sport, and especially tailgating, could be used to increase spectator satisfaction (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Drenten, et al., 2009).

The notion of tailgating, meeting with family and friends to socialize prior to the game, is a phenomenon often associated with NCAA Division I intercollegiate football. Tailgating has been a part of the college football atmosphere for many decades (Gumprecht, 2003) and seems to be intertwined with the culture of what has become college game day (James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001). Despite the key role that tailgating plays in sport socialization, only a few studies have examined the tailgating phenomena directly. A few examples include a socio-demographic piece by James, Breezeel and Ross (2001), a study using Stebbin's (1982) notion of Serious Leisure (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002), and an ethnographic approach to the motivations to tailgate (Drenten, et al., 2009). To better understand the role of social connection through sport further investigation into the sport experience, especially the tailgating experience, is needed.

One way to examine the connectedness of individuals in a social setting involves examination of the “community” surrounding the phenomenon. The concept of psychological sense of community (PSOC), what people feel about their community, their level of attachment, etc., has remained a focus of research for over 25 years (Obst & White, 2004) and has been conceptualized to include four main dimensions: 1) membership, 2) influence, 3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and 4) shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The Sense of Community Index (SCI) was created to tap into the four dimensions of PSOC proposed by McMillian and Chavis (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986).

To further explore the social nature of the sport experience, the purpose of this study was to examine the feelings of connectedness and belonging amongst tailgaters at a major NCAA Division 1 college football game through the use of the Sense of Community Index.

Methods

Data was collected from individuals tailgating prior to a football game at a NCAA Division 1 university. Respondents were contacted on-site prior to two conference rival games during the month of November. Parking areas were stratified by fee level, primarily focusing on the pay versus free lots to provide diversity in the respondents.

Individuals and groups were approached by members of the research team and solicited for their willingness to participate at which time email addresses were collected. At the time of intercept, potential respondents were told their participation in the survey would register them to win one of four footballs signed by the head coach of the football team. Of the approximately 600 individuals approached, 539 email addresses were supplied. Two waves of emails containing the link to the online survey were sent out one week and two weeks after the final contact with potential respondents. Of the 483 emails delivered (56 addresses were either nonexistent or had fatal errors), 376 visited the online survey and 321 completed the instrument. The adjusted response rate was 66.6%.

Respondents, utilizing a 5-point Likert type scale (1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree), indicated their level of agreement with the 12 SCI statements. The SCI statements were nearly identical to those used by Obst and White (2004) with only minor word changes to make the statements applicable to tailgating. Statements included both
positively and negatively worded phrases. Analysis was conducted using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the structural equation modeling software EQS.

Findings

Results of the CFA procedure show only a marginal fit between the original structure of Obst and White (2004) and the covariance structure in the data (x2=137.9; CFI=.870, RMSEA=.078). Further analysis supports a four factor model, and when the structure is modified, the fit increases significantly (x2=65.3; CFI=.972, RMSEA=.037). Two factors remain similar to the original SOC scale. First, the membership dimension contained two statements pertaining to recognition and knowledge of persons that tailgated around them. Second, the influence dimension contained statements of influence and action. The remaining two other factors did not match the original scale. First, the concept of rootedness was seen in four statements that pertained to returning to the same spot to tailgate. The final factor contained concepts of social congruence and was seen in four statements pertaining to shared values and goals, and cooperation with nearby tailgaters.

Conclusions

This research sought to examine social aspects of the tailgating phenomenon using the Sense of Community index as presented by Obst and White (2004). Our research indicates that although the concept of community is structurally unique in the tailgating context, there is a shared sense of “community,” albeit temporary in nature. These findings support the notion that a major motivation for sport attendance is social interaction (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Drenten, et al., 2009; Melnick, 1993) and suggests that temporary feelings of “community” are present. This sense of community may be especially true of instances where tailgaters experience consistent “neighbors” game after game.

One interesting finding is the reorganization of items in the four dimensions in the Sense of Community model. The factors that emerged suggest that a tailgater’s sense of community might be a phenomena pertaining to a specific site as portrayed by the importance of the specific tailgating location. The responses to the tailgating area statements show a strong tie to the spot (rootedness) which is separate from the people (membership). This finding calls into question the global application of the SCI as suggested by Obst and White (2004).

Implications

The most direct application of these results is the knowledge that a sense of community is a drawing factor for fan attendance. Marketers should strive to create a sense of comfort and a relationship between persons that might otherwise not have a common link. Additionally, managers of sporting events that include tailgating as a pre or post game activity might benefit by using a method of parking spot allocation to ensure that tailgaters can have a consistent community in which to tailgate from game to game.

References


