The Effects of Liminality, Communitas, and Fan Identification on Spectator Attendance

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Recently, the importance of transcendental experiences based on liminality and communitas has been recognized in sport consumer research (Chalip, 2006). These experiences provide sport consumers, particularly sport participants or mega-event visitors, with a basis for something special that transcends the sport by transporting patrons to a different, sacred or magical world (Handelman, 1990; Hopkinson & Pujari, 1999). Despite the importance of transcendental experiences, little attention has focused on the effect of the transcendental experiences on sport consumer behavior in the context of spectator sports. A few insightful studies have been conducted in the context of participation sports (e.g., Kemp, 1999), sport tourism (e.g., Green & Chalip, 1998) or mega-events (e.g., Chalip, 2006). But comprehensive research regarding the effect of the transcendental experiences on spectator behavior is still needed. The purpose of this study is to explore empirically the linkages among liminality, communitas, and fan identification and their effects on spectator attendance.

As reviewed in the literature, liminality, communitas, and fan identification have been identified as potential variables affecting sport fans’ intentions to attend their team’s games. Yet the three variables seem inextricably related. Liminal or liminoid spaces, in which ordinary social roles are suspended, tend to produce a strong sense of communitas (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Turner, 1969). Thus, liminality seems a precondition to facilitate sport consumers’ communitas. In support of a direct effect of liminality on game attendance, a few researchers suggest that the liminal nature of sport events make them attractive and fun (Chalip, 2006; Kemp, 1999). It is not unreasonable to posit a resulting increase in spectator attendance. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that liminality may be an important predictor of spectator attendance. In addition, liminality involves a reconstruction of identity in such a way that a new identity is meaningful for individuals and their community (Beech, 2010). In other words, a liminal space inside a stadium may facilitate sport consumers’ identification with their team. Hence, liminality is expected to facilitate sport consumers’ fan identification. The literature also suggests that the sense of community among spectators is essential in building fan identification (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Sutton, McDonald, & Milne, 1997). Holt (1995) suggests that the sense of community is an important autotelic drive for baseball consumption by communing and socializing with other fans. A significant number of studies have shown that fan identification is an important predictor of game attendance (e.g., Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Kim & Trail, 2010; Wann & Brancombe, 1993). Hence, the research model hypothesizes a positive effect of fan identification on spectator attendance.

Taken together, it is hypnotized that sport consumers’ perceptions of liminality will positively influence their communitas, fan identification, and intention to attend their team’s games. Sport consumers’ feelings of communitas are expected to positively influence their identification with the team and intention to attend their team’s games. Finally, sport consumers’ fan identification is expected to positively influence the fan’s intention to attend their team’s games. Consequently, a total of six paths will be examined in the main study.

The data for this study were collected via a questionnaire of minor league baseball fans in central Texas. Two separate sets of data were collected for the pilot study and main study. The pilot study ($n = 92$) had a demographic of 64% males and ages from 15 to 81 years old ($M = 41.5$). The main study ($n = 211$) consisted of 59% males and the ages ranged from 11 to 85 years old ($M = 40.7$).

To test the proposed model, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main study to generate a pool of items for liminality through a review of relevant literature (Chalip, 2006; Kemp, 1999; Turner, 1969) and to test the distinctiveness of the concept from other two variables (i.e., communitas and fan identification). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the structure of the three variables. All measures were rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Three components were extracted based on eigenvalues greater than one. The 3-component extraction accounted for 81% of the total variance. Item loadings ranged from .760 to .909 on their respective factors. Furthermore, EFA exhibited very strong internal consistency, ranging from .894 for liminality to .926 for communitas and .919 for fan identification. The pilot study revealed the eleven item, 3 dimension scale is a reliable measure for the main study.

In order to test the relationships among liminality, communitas, fan identification, and game attendance, the main study was performed with structural equation modeling using AMOS. The same three scales that were used in the pilot test were utilized to measure liminality, communitas, and fan identification. The researchers utilized a two-step process to test the proposed research.
model. First, a measurement model was tested to signify the conceptual distinctions among latent variables and to establish construct validity. All scales were deemed reliable, with Cronbach’s alpha scores ranging from .88 for liminality to .92 for communitas. The measurement model shows a reasonable fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.581$, CFI = .958, RMSEA = .087, SRMR = .0566; Hu & Bentler, 1999). All items loaded significantly on their respective factors ($p < .001$), and factor loadings ranged from .71 (liminality 1) to .92 (fan identification 3). The measurement model provided strong evidence of both convergent and discriminant validity among the latent variables (cf. Kline, 2005).

Once the measurement model was confirmed using confirmatory analysis, the structural model was established. The hypothesized relationships among liminality, communitas, fan identification, and game attendance were tested through SEM using AMOS and showed an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.581$, CFI = .958, RMSEA = .087, SRMR = .0566). Five of the proposed six paths were significant while the path from liminality to game attendance was not significant. The structural model indicated that liminality explained 20.8% of the variance in communitas and that liminality and communitas predicted 35.9% of the variance in fan identification. It also showed that liminality, communitas, and fan identification explained 52.6% of the variance in game attendance.

This study empirically demonstrates that intention to attend a sport team’s games is a function of perceived liminality, a sense of communitas, and fan identification. Although the impact of fan identification on intention is much greater than that of communitas, it is important to note that both variables have significant impact on fans’ intention to return. Further, the study shows that transcendent factors such as liminality and communitas play a substantial role in the formation of fan identification. In addition, the nature of a liminal state largely contributes to the creation of communitas. The significance of the study is that liminality and associated communitas have not previously tested as significant factors in the context of spectator sports because there are no reliable scales to measure them. Their impacts happen indirectly via fan identification that is already well established as a predictor of intention while communitas has a direct impact on spectator attendance. The inclusion of liminality and communitas in the model may enable sport marketers to consider transcendent aspects of sport consumption as significant factors in building their fan base.