Using FCS Tailgating to Increase Student Attendance: An Exploratory Examination of Product Attributes Influencing The Decision to Attend Both Tailgating and Football Events

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Intercollegiate athletics is becoming increasingly costly for universities as expenses (eg. scholarships, coach’s salaries, facilities) continue to rise. The need to increase and expand revenue streams is vital for the long-term success of the athletic department. A key demographic for intercollegiate athletic departments providing long-term revenue streams is the current student body. Students represent not only current attendees to athletic events, but also future fan consumers. The importance of student attendance at athletic events could be argued to be more important to institutions that do not have strong revenue potential (eg. media rights, conference revenue sharing, smaller seating capacities). This would be true of institutions in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) who often have to compete for fans of more highly profiled Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions. Understanding factors influencing student preference and behaviors is critical to understanding sport consumption decisions. Therefore, athletic departments of FCS institutions should have an understanding of the product attributes influencing the decision-making of the student body to attend FCS athletic events.

Ancillary events have often been used to add value to the sport product in an effort to promote and increase attendance. One such ancillary event that has become synonymous with sport experience is tailgating. While tailgating events have become an integrated part of the sport event, little is known about the influential attributes effecting the decision to attend by students of FCS institutions. Fredrick (1999) examined the connection between tailgating and intercollegiate football as characterizations of the American festival concept. This study provides evidence that attributes of both tailgating and the football event may be shared. Understanding the collective attributes of both tailgating and football events among FCS students, is necessary for establishing a successful marketing campaign aimed at increasing the attendance of students.

Prior studies have shown consumers perceive the overall sport product through a collection of product attributes (Edwards & Barron, 1994). Due to the complexity of the sport product consumers use a combination of attributes to position the product in the mind of the consumer for consumption decisions (Keller, 1993). This multiattribute approach to decision-making is ultimately influenced by the sport products perceived utility. The attributes relating to the purpose a sport product has for the consumer, the more likely the consumer will consume (Dubas & Strong, 1993). Analysis of multiattribute attitude theory has shown to have high levels of predictive validity (Silk, 2006). For this reason it is important to understand consumer perceptions of all potential attributes as they may predict student attendance.

Prior studies related to intercollegiate tailgating have focused on either the establishment of tailgating policies (Miller & Gillentine, 2006; Steinbach, 2003) or the attribute of alcohol consumption (Haun et al., 2007; Oster-Aaland & Neighbors, 2007). However, few studies have actually examined the attributes of tailgating from a global perspective (Drenten et al., 2009; James, Breezeld, & Ross, 2001). Further, no study has examined the tailgating experience within the FCS setting as an influence on the attendance at FCS football events. As mentioned above, attendance by students at an FCS institution can be critical to the long-term financial success of the athletic program. FCS marketing departments should understand influencing attributes shared by both the tailgating experience and the football event. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to explore the attributes influencing student consumption of both tailgating experiences and the football event within the FCS. The study also aims at identifying attributes that are predictive of both tailgating and football event consumption among students.

The methodology of the present study was divided into two stages. The first stage identified attributes relevant to the decision-making process of students to attend both tailgating and football events. To identify these attributes, data was collected from a group of 66 undergraduate students enrolled in the recreation and sport management program of a midsized southeastern university. Students were selected from three courses within the recreation and sport management curriculum representing a variety of grade levels. Since the purpose of the study is to explore only student attitudes, the use of only students, as subjects for collection of these attributes is appropriate. Students were asked to answer four open-ended questions relating to attributes they found both attractive and influenced
their decision to attend both tailgating and football events. Prior studies have used open-ended questions to gather exploratory data as this approach allows the researcher to gather salient attributes (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004; Greenhalgh et al., 2011; Greenwell et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 1995). Researchers collected and summarized data from the open-ended questionnaire collapsing similar responses. The summarized list of attributes was then coded, using suggestions by Keller (1993) to reduce the number of attributes to those relating to consumption of tailgating and football. Results of this stage yielded 53 football attributes and 45 tailgating attributes influencing student’s decision to attend.

The second stage of the present study was used to determine which attributes influenced attendance decisions among students. Surveys were administered to the general student body of a midsized southeastern university as students were the aim of this study is to provide intercollegiate marketers data supporting attributes effecting decision to attend by the entire student population, rather than just select targets within the student population (eg. Greeks, Seniors, Business students). Students were asked to rate their level of agreement on how each item influenced their decision to attend (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree). An exploratory factor analysis was used to identify the structure of the attributes for both football and tailgating. The researcher examined the loading factors of the attributes to identify themes of the factor loading. Finally, a regression analysis was used to determine which factors most influenced attendance among students. A four-item questionnaire measuring the student attendance intentions was used as the outcome variable for the regression analysis.

Implications on the perceived attributes of both tailgating and football will be discussed. A focus on intercollegiate marketer’s ability to adjust current marketing ploys or create new marketing campaigns that focus on communicating influential attributes of both events as a means of increasing student attendance at football games. Finally, suggestions for future research on student attributes influencing the consumption of tailgating and football events will be discussed.