

**Room for Growth in American Professional Sports: The Value of Appealing to a Diverse Audience**

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**Diversity**

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Over the past few decades, the United States has experienced a major transition to a population that is much more racially and ethnically diverse (O'Hare, 1992). In fact, the 2010 U.S. Census reported that approximately 36.3% of the population belongs to an ethnic or racial minority group. Gardenswartz and Rowe (1994) estimate that minority and ethnic groups will make up half of the U.S. population by 2050. As the minority population of the U.S. increases, so too does its purchasing power – specifically in the sports arena. For example, Silverman (1999) demonstrated that the average African American household spent double the amount of Caucasian households on sporting apparel. Likewise, African Americans spent \$585 million in aggregate for sports and recreation equipment that the same year and increased spending to \$1 billion by 2008 (Target Marketing News, 1999, 2008). With this increase in discretionary sports spending coupled with the “multicultural, universal appeal of sport” (Armstrong, 2001, p. 183), one would expect to see greater levels of minority spectatorship at professional sporting events; however, minority attendance remains largely anemic. Thus, additional insight is warranted as to why some minorities are increasing their sport consumption outside, but not inside the stadium.

While a great deal of research exists to explain Schofield's (1983) four categories of attendance drivers (i.e., economic, demographic, game attractiveness, and residual preference) (Baade & Tihen, 1990; Becker & Suls, 1983; Demmert, 1973; Drever & McDonald, 1981; Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Hill, Madura, & Zuber, 1982; Noll, 1974; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michauld, 1995), very little research has examined drivers of minority attendance. A notable exception is Armstrong's (2001, 2008) work in which she outlined four major drivers of and constraints to minority attendance: cost (price, promotions, and alternative uses of money), alternative forms of commitment (availability of games on television), family entertainment value (family appeal and entertainment value), and event culture (event culture and the presence of minority participants).

While Armstrong's work is vital to the study of minority sport spectatorship, a void still exists regarding potential drivers of professional sport attendance as well as the examination of specific minority groups. As Armstrong (2001, p. 201) points out, “more comprehensive research studies are needed that: (a) contain a representative sample of ethnic minorities, and (b) further explore a more exhaustive list of the multitude of factors that may infringe on ethnic minority... attendance.” Furthermore, she argues that “more qualitative studies are also needed to capture the breadth and depth of the sport spectating experiences of ethnic [minorities], and to identify ways of converting... generally favorable interest in sport spectating to... actual attendance” (2001, p. 201). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine drivers of minority attendance of professional sporting events, particularly amongst African American fans.

This research made use of qualitative research methods in which grounded theory was applied to semi-structured interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Participants included nine African American, self-identified “avid” male sports fans who originated from cities listed in the top 50 demographic market areas in the U.S. (as defined by Nielson Media). All participants felt that they had the ability to attend major league professional sporting events if they chose to do so and helped identify the factors that influenced their attendance therein. In an effort to reduce confounding minority and gender effects and to induct more nuanced theory, purposive sampling was used in which African American males were the focus of the current study. Males were chosen since they make up the majority of self-identified professional sports fans in the U.S. (Scarborough, 2010). Likewise, African Americans were selected since they typically represent the first or second largest minority group amongst self-identified professional sports fans in the U.S. (including the MLB, MLS, NBA, NFL, NHL, and NASCAR) (Scarborough, 2010).

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Results of the current study identified several attendance drivers and constraints that emerged from the data, including: performance/entertainment, cost, value, exposure/access to the sport, social nature of sport, image/identity, atmosphere, comfort and convenience, and alternative forms of commitment. These findings not only support prior attendance research (both general and minority-specific) (e.g., Armstrong, 2001, 2008; Schofield, 1983), but also add to existing theory of minority spectator attendance by offering six new attendance drivers: (1) performance, (2) value, (3) exposure/access to the sport, (4) social nature of sport, (5) atmosphere, and (6) comfort and convenience. Of these new attendance drivers, exposure/access to the sport (unique to both general and minority-specific findings) was consistently identified by participants early in the interview process as a major attendance driver. Thus, it is possible that this factor is unique to the African American sample used in this study. This is consistent with Armstrong's (2002) finding that cultural affiliation is a viable motive for African Americans' sport consumption. Therefore, it seems plausible that environmental or socialization processes play a larger role in African Americans' sport attendance and consumption.

Given the financial implications and importance of attendance to professional sports teams and leagues, alongside the growing buying power of diverse consumers in the U.S., it behooves sport managers to increase marketing efforts that target diverse spectators. The drivers identified in the current study are an important first step in helping sport managers reach out to a more diverse group of spectators to not only enhance the diversity in the stands, but the organization's bottom line as well.