The RV Tailgater: Motivations of This Unique Lifestyle

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Each fall, college football fans travel to locations across the country to watch their favorite team compete on any given Saturday. Campuses are alive with activity on game day as people gather with family, friends and other fans to take part in the college football traditional of tailgating. However, some fans take this to the next level and arrive days prior to game day and enjoy a weekend of festivities in addition to the game. These are the RV tailgaters. The fans located in the recreation vehicle (RV) parking area are a unique group of tailgaters as they possess a mobile accommodations set-up unlike any other tailgater.

Ajzen’s (1985, 1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is comprised of three components: (1) attitudes, (2) subjective norms and (3) perceived behavioral control. Each of the three components work together “to predict the intentions to engage in a specific behavior” (McCullough, 2013, p. 148). Ultimately, these intentions can predict the action of the individual and in this study, will they decide to travel to a college football game via the RV (Conner & Armitage, 1998; McCullough & Cunningham, 2011; McCullough, 2013). The RV tailgater must determine if it is “worth it” to travel to the game via RV compared to travel by automobile and securing hotel accommodations for the weekend. Pressure from friends and family that want to experience the pre-game activities together, but not all attend the game might lead someone to purchase the RV for game day purposes. The ease or difficulty in someone becoming part of the RV tailgating group will ultimately determine if the individual purchases or rents the RV for future games and college football seasons.

The RV tailgater falls into the broader category of sports tourist. Sport tourism has been defined by Hinch and Higham (2001) as “sport-based travel away from the home environment for a limited time, where sport is characterized by unique rule sets, competition related to physical prowess and play” (p. 49). When compared to tourism, sport tourism is when the tourist is traveling to a specific destination with the intention of experiencing some sport related activity either through participating or attending. In the area of college sports, thousands of fans travel to college towns each week during football season to attend a college football games. While the stadium may only hold 80,000 fans, many more are participating in the pre and post game tailgating activities. Little research has been done on those fans that travel to the game via the RV. Gibson, Wilming, and Holdnak’s (2003) study utilized fans in RVs primarily as a categorization for the study, but didn’t look at the group in any detail.

Fans are motivated to attend sporting events for a specific college team for a number of reasons. Each fan or group of fans is unique in the reasons to be motivated to travel to and attend sporting events. For example, fans often become loyal to a certain college or university because they either attended or someone in their family attended that institution. The goal of this study is to understand the motivations of fans that travel to college football games via RV.

Existing scales were adapted to examine the motivations of why people travel via RV to college football games. The Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS), the Motivation Scale for Sports Consumption (MSSC) and Schofield’s (1983) study were the basis for the instrument (Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995). The motivations tested included (1) eustress, (2) escape, (3) self-esteem, (4) entertainment, (5) knowledge, (6) group affiliation, (7) family, (8) achievement, and (9) game attractiveness (Schofield, 1983; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995).

The data for this study was collected at four Southeastern Conference schools during the 2014 college football season. A paper-and-pencil survey was administered to all members of the RV tailgating party at the designated institutions. Each institution’s athletic department has designated parking areas for RVs. Only RV tailgaters in these designated areas were asked to participate in the study. The RV designated parking areas open to RV tailgaters at different times of the day and week prior to home college football games. All data was collected on a Friday before
the home football game so as not to interfere with any game day activities. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine which of the motivations tested actually represent the college RV tailgater.

It is important for the community and university to understand this unique form of tailgater. The RV tailgater has the flexibility to extend the trip and engage in additional recreation and sight-seeing activities. By understanding this population, specific marketing efforts can be made to enhance the stay of the RV tailgater.