Understanding Student Attendance in College Football through the Hierarchical Relationships of Constraints

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Marketing Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2015-077 4:40 PM (Frontenac)

The need to draw fans to sporting events is critical to the success of any sport organization. During the past four years, Football Bowl Subdivision schools have experienced a decline in student attendance regardless of whether they had a winning season or not (Cohen, 2013). This trend can be a challenging issue for both the academic and athletic administrators as cultivating prospective season ticket holders and donors is associated with future financial support for an alma matter (Fulks, 2014). Thus, it is important to understand why a student would choose to not attend a football game.

Constraints are factors that limit, prohibit, or prevent someone from participating or enjoying a leisure or recreational activity (Jackson, 1997, 2000). The examination of constraints in regards to outdoor sports and recreation participation had its start in the early 1960s (Ferris, 1962; Meuller, Gurin, & Wood, 1962). This line of research continued and Crawford and Godbey (1987) conceptualized a model of constraints consisting of three categories: a) structural – factors that limit participation due to the situational and environment aspects, b) interpersonal – factors that limit participation as the result of relationships with others, and c) intrapersonal – factors that limit participation related to individual attributes. Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) also proposed the Hierarchical Model of Leisure Constraints (HMLC) clarifying hierarchical relationships among the three constraint categories. The HMLC contended that intrapersonal constraints interact with leisure preferences rather than play a role in mediating between preferences and participation while interpersonal and structural constraints have a direct impact on leisure participation. As a result, intrapersonal constraints of people are likely to determine “leisure objects as appropriate or inappropriate, interesting or uninteresting, available or unavailable and so on” (Hurd & Forrester, 2006, p. 20).

In the field of sport management, a plethora of research examined motivation to attend sporting events with specific scales developed to measure motivation for attendance. However, there has been limited research in regards to why people do not attend sporting events, especially those of student attendance in college football (Koo, Hardin, & Kim, 2014; Trail & Kim, 2011, Trail, Robinson, & Kim, 2008). Moreover, no research has reflected empirical evidence of hierarchical relationships among the constraint categories in the context of spectator sports although they appear to be hierarchically related. In particular, the HMLC has viewed intrapersonal constraints as an antecedent state associated with many people’s negative reactions to their desire and preference (Crawford, Jackson, & Codbey, 1991). This phenomenon may take place in the context of spectator sports while intrapersonal constraints, such as lack of interest and fanship, are the starting point of many spectators’ barriers which, in turn, result in progressive negotiations with other categories of constraints. In other words, the extent to which intrapersonal constraints are negotiated can be associated with interpersonal and structural constraints that directly influence on game attendance.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, two-fold: a) to examine whether differences existed in low and high intrapersonal constraint groups concerning the interrelationships between the aspects of constraints (e.g., interpersonal and structural constraints) and student attendance in college football, and b) to investigate if the selected constraint models would be appropriate in predicting attendance and/or non-attendance groups for the high and low intrapersonal constraint group groups, respectively.

For this study, data were collected from a major public university in the southeastern region of the United States via an on-line questionnaire. A total of 1,935 students was used in the data analysis concerning constraints while 974 (50.3%) were female and 961 (49.7%) were male students. The majority of students (80%) were between the ages of
18 and 25. To examine the purpose of the study, the classification of high and low groups was achieved by using a median split of intrapersonal constraints. Student group sizes were 924 (47.8%) for the high intrapersonal constraint group and 1011 (52.2%) for the low intrapersonal constraint group. Binary logistic regression analyses were employed to examine whether the low intrapersonal constraint group differed from the high intrapersonal constraint group regarding interrelationships between interpersonal and structural constraints and student attendance in college football.

Findings indicated that students in the low intrapersonal constraint group tend to be .433 and .816, times less likely to attend any of the games so far this season as a result of lack of communication and time conflicts, while they are .855 times less likely to attend due to their interpersonal constraints, controlling for other constraints. Another findings from the case of the high intrapersonal constraint group revealed that students tend to be .560 and .884 times less likely to attend any of the games due to lack of communication and time conflicts, similar to those of low intrapersonal constraint group, whereas travel difficulties are.859 times less likely associated with their attendance, controlling for other constraints. Both cases were better at predicting the student group who attended a game before because 95.5% attendees in low intrapersonal constraint group and those of 68.5% in high intrapersonal constraint group were predicted to attend. Constraints properly predict student attendance, particularly for those who have attended a game before and have successfully negotiated their intrapersonal constraints.

Especially, a comparison of results from both groups could support the hierarchical relationships of constraints as the significant impact of interpersonal constraints on student attendance only existed in the low intrapersonal constraint group. This phenomenon provides empirical evidence of a link between intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints, demonstrating that students who successfully negotiate with their intrapersonal constraints (i.e., low intrapersonal constraint group) are more likely to carry on their further negotiations with other categories of constraints. On the other hand, the less students unsuccessfully negotiate with their intrapersonal constraints (i.e., high intrapersonal constraint group), the more their attendance in college football is influenced by structural constraints related to the situational and environment aspects.

The information is valuable to sport managers because it shows environmental factors are important when trying to attract students with high intrapersonal constraints. These results show the amenities offered at sporting events are important in attracting the casual fan. The need for high-level customer service is always imperative but even more so for students with high intrapersonal constraints. Therefore, sport managers must be aware this constraint needs to be negotiated first via communicating attractive peripheral aspects of the game, and once at the event needs to offer a high-quality experience in terms of environmental factors and customer service. This could help this group become more likely to attend an event in the future.