Effects of Stadium Stimuli and Local Image on Fans’ Sensory Experience in a Sport Stadium

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Extant research shows the impact of the sensory experience on sport fans’ satisfaction with the stadium experience (Lee, Heere, & Chung, 2015; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Green, 2012). It is, however, not entirely understood how the different types of sensory experiences might be enhanced in the stadium space. In effort to create a competitive advantage, sport stadiums are beginning to offer unique services that stimulate one or more of the human senses. One of the ways in which some stadiums are approaching sensory marketing is to utilize inimitable region-based characteristics. Sport stadiums are considered landmarks of the cities or regions in which they are located. Each city or region has its own peculiarities that influence society and culture for those individuals in close proximity (Dinnie, 2011). For instance, New Orleans is famous for jazz music, Chicago is well known for thick pizza, and New York City is famed for visual arts. It is not surprising, then, to have stadiums feature unique sensory experiences as a means to capitalize on local fans’ sense of home, and affect non-local fans’ perceptions of the stadium and destination (Ballouli & Heere, 2015). Visual designs, music, and food selections are all sensory factors that can be incorporated within the sport stadium experience, whereby local culture can be featured and introduced to old and new audiences alike. As such, we propose a conceptual model to help sport marketers better understand how stadium stimuli and perceived local image may enhance the stadium experience.

Conceptual Framework

Many researchers have investigated the impact of image congruence on customers’ behavioral responses to brands (e.g., Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Hogg, Cox, & Keeling, 2000; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989; Sirgy & Samli, 1985). The fundamental premise of image congruence is cognitive dissonance theory, which states individuals aspire to seek out congruence between their beliefs and behavior for the sustainability of self (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals have views and feelings regarding an object that are inconsistent or in conflict with each other. Hence, if the image an individual has of a product or brand is congruent with his or her preconceptions, he or she will experience less cognitive dissonance, and thus, form positive attitudes. Accordingly, the greater the match between sports fans’ image of a local area where a stadium is located and the sensory experience within the sport stadium, the more likely fans are to have a favorable attitude toward their overall stadium experience. Previous scholars consider sport stadiums to be popular landmarks of local regions to which individuals attach identity and shared values (Lee et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2012). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that fans’ beliefs about a specific city or region might be associated with expectations they have regarding a visit to the local sport stadium. For example, fans who attend a Philadelphia Eagles game may expect to eat local food such as a Philly cheesesteak, whereas fans who attend a Houston Astros game may find that a mechanical bull enhances their cognitive concurrence in the sport stadium. In other words, fans who perceive fit between stadium stimuli—that which appeals to the visual, auditory, and gustatory senses—and their preconceived image of the local area will have greater overall satisfaction with the stadium experience. We, therefore, propose our first proposition:

Proposition 1: Stadium stimuli/local image fit has a positive effect on the fan’s sensory experience in a sport stadium.

Stadium visitors gain knowledge about a stadium and the local area from their experiences and through constant search (Bloch, Sherrell, & Ridgway, 1986). That information is stored in their long-term memory and, as a result, existing knowledge structures become shaped (see Bettman, 1979; Ratchford, 2001). Existing knowledge assists individuals’ evaluation of a sport stadium’s attractiveness by retrieval of information linked to its qualities and attributes (Ratchford, 2001). To this end, fans might link a particular image of the local area with the sport stadium, and may come to expect an experience complemented by specific stadium stimuli. If their experiences in the stadium match their image of the city or region based on existing knowledge, then fans may exhibit a higher degree of stadium stimuli/local image fit. However, if visitors do not have such existing knowledge regarding the city or
region, it would not be plausible for them to formalize any associations or fit between the stadium and the local area. As such, the extent to which fans’ sensory experience is influenced by stadium stimuli/local image fit might depend on how much they know about the local area. Hence, we propose our second proposition:

Proposition 2: Existing knowledge of a local area moderates the relationship between stadium stimuli/local image fit and the fan’s sensory experience in a sport stadium.

Scholars have shown that sensory experiences can be a factor in affecting consumer satisfaction (Hultén, Broweus, & Dijkstra, 2009; Lindstrom, 2005; Schmitt, 1999). The sensory experience in a sport stadium is especially important because it can mitigate the adverse effects of a team’s poor on-field performance (Hill & Green, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Sensory marketing literature supports the notion that branded sensory experiences (e.g., foods and music that reflect the local culture) play a vital role in the brand experience, such that organizations can significantly affect consumer behavior equally through all five of the senses (Hultén et al., 2009; Lindstrom, 2005).

On the grounds that sensory experiences are enhanced by a greater overall stadium stimuli/local area fit, a more positive sensory experience might also lead to greater levels of satisfaction with the overall stadium experience. Based on the aforementioned studies, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: The fan’s positive sensory experience in a sport stadium will result in higher levels of satisfaction with the overall stadium experience.

The ways in which local and non-local fans perceive the local area and sport stadium, and thus the sensory experience, might be different even if they are at the same place. It is reasonable to assume, then, there are two distinct mechanisms of how sensory experiences might affect one’s satisfaction with the overall stadium experience. On one hand, local fans might feel a “sense of home” by attending the sport stadium and experiencing a heightened sense of their own culture (Giulianotti, 2004; Moore, 2000). On the other hand, non-local fans might want to experience a stadium that features stimuli different from their local culture. As such, non-local fans consume sport events equally as fans and tourists, whereby they can only have an “authentic experience” amid different surroundings (Sims, 2009). We, therefore, offer the following propositions:

Proposition 4: The relationship between sensory experience and stadium experience is mediated by a “sense of home” among local fans.
Proposition 5: The relationship between sensory experience and stadium experience is mediated by an “authentic experience” among non-local fans.

Few studies in sport marketing have examined the formative role of stadium stimuli in affecting sport consumer behavior. As such, the field seemingly lacks theoretical direction in dealing with stadium stimuli as a means of effective marketing communication. Research is needed to inform academics and practitioners about the appropriate use and potential outcomes of stadium stimuli, especially as they relate to the local image of the city and/or region. In this presentation, we will review current literature on sensory marketing and propose a conceptual framework for utilizing visuals, music, and food in positively impact the stadium experience using classical and modern theoretical approaches.