Exploring the Motivations of KU Basketball Campers

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Marketing - Consumer Behavior (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2017-162
Friday, June 2, 2017
11:20 AM
Room: Wilson

Attending a sporting event is oftentimes much more than simply watching the game itself. Many different events surround the game and can have a great impact on fans attendance or enjoyment of the game. Ritualistic behaviors involving sporting events have been found to improve the overall entertainment of the game as well as increase attendance and merchandise purchasing (McDonald & Karg, 2014). A ritualistic activity can have a major impact on a fan base, one example being Texas A&M’s yell practice, where thousands of people gather the Friday before each football game to practice their chants in the stadium (Texas A&M University – Yell Practice, n.d.). Rituals around games may be incredibly important for sport practitioners to learn more about, especially considering that an event like Texas A&M’s yell practice can bring thousands of fans out late the night before a game and can also give fans an outlet to celebrate their fanaticism.

There is a phenomenon at the University of Kansas called “KU basketball camping” and it involves students attending a lottery at 6:00 a.m. following each game and then having at least one member of their group sit in Allen Fieldhouse all day up until the next game. KU basketball camping was put in place because many students were camping outside for days prior to big games, and this system was formed by students to make camping a more fair and safe process. The goal of this study was to explore what motivates students to participate in camping by conducting an in-depth, qualitative examination of their reasons for engaging in this ritualistic behavior. Additionally, the author hoped to find the most prevalent themes in this particular setting so qualitative research was appropriate.

The literature that most accurately framed this study was centered around sport fan motivations to attend events (Trail & James, 1999; Wann, 1995) and the research on rituals around sporting events (McDonald & Karg, 2014) specifically a couple studies on motivations to tailgate (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009; James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001). This literature was deemed most appropriate as it was comparable in setting and focus of the research, additionally research on ritualistic behavior in other settings (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004; Kapitany & Nielsen, 2015; Vohs, et al., 2016; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991) supplemented the literature review.

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 different students who were participating in KU basketball camping. The goal of the interviews was to discover the most prevalent motivations to participate in this event. Interviews were conducted while students were camping, in a room near the hallway they camped in to avoid distractions and to allow a clear recording of the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and coded to search for themes, and three themes emerged.

The results from the interviews revealed three prominent themes of motivation for camping: the game itself, upholding tradition, and identity. Most obvious was the fact that students wanted to participate in camping so they could be a part of the student section atmosphere, and more generally they were motivated by attending the game and obtaining good seats in the student section. Additionally, students were motivated by upholding a tradition, KU basketball camping was seen as an aspect that aided in the great tradition of basketball at Kansas. Further, there was a feeling of KU basketball camping as a “student tradition,” and it was apparent that these students were motivated to camp because they felt it was a part of being a student at KU. Lastly, identity emerged as a common motivation for participating in camping. The students who camp see themselves as highly committed and identified fans, and because of this they feel they needed to take part in camping. To the author’s surprised, the need for social interaction or the connection to the camping group itself did not emerge as a theme. This is likely due to the setup of camping, as you do not actually camp with your group. The fact that students are motivated to participate in camping, yet social interaction is not a motivating factor, appears to be unique as social interaction has been found as a strong motivating factor for attendance as well as to tailgate (Drenten et al., 2009; Funk, Mahony, Nakazawa, & Hirakwa, 2000; James et al., 2001; Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008).
There are numerous areas of practical importance to this study and other studies on ritualistic behaviors of fans. First, McDonald and Karg (2014) found that because ritualistic behaviors improve the experience of a game they may lead to increased attendance and merchandise purchasing. The KU basketball campers considered this ritual to be an important part of the game day experience, and it kept the upcoming game at the forefront of their mind all week, therefore in essence getting them “pumped” for the next game. If rituals around a game can have a positive impact on attendance and merchandise purchasing, therefore impacting revenue, sport managers should be aware of what motivates participation in these rituals. There is also the possibility that rituals around a sporting event can in fact deepen the connection fans have to their team, and this was apparent in this study as KU basketball camping creates an obvious psychological distinction among not only KU fans and other college team fans, but also campers and non-campers. Additionally, it is important to understand why a ritual like KU basketball camping lacks motivation involving social interaction, as it has been found to be an important factor in the related studies (Drenten et al., 2009; James et al., 2001; McDonald & Karg, 2014). Discovering what motivates fans to participate in these rituals would be very beneficial for sport marketers and managers for the reasons mentioned above.