The Dynamics of Sensory Stimuli, Social Interaction, Sense of Community, and Social Consumption among Racing Spectators

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A great challenge for motorsports across the nation is finding a way to halt the decline in its number of spectators (Dexheimer, 2016; Tuchman, 2015). Such a decline is evident particularly at local racetracks. Local racetracks at one time brought economic benefits to their surrounding areas as well as provided locals with social opportunities. The detrimental effects of this sport’s decline as well as that of its infrastructure are thus felt especially hard in areas where the sport used to be very popular and where its subcultures flourished (e.g., in the Southeast). Therefore, revitalizing these tracks concerns not only motorsport development but also the quality of life in the community nearby. Finding strategies that are useful for the marketing of racetracks would be beneficial for local racing tracks that have been struggling with few resources for attracting more spectators and expanding their fan base.

Sporting event attendees are alive to an event’s sensory stimuli (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010; Uhrich & Koenigstorfer, 2009). Using their sensory organs (see, hear, smell, taste, and touch), event attendees perceive a variety of stimuli generated by either the sport itself or its ancillary products (Chung, Ryu, Green, & Kang, 2015; Chung, Ryu, & Lee, 2016; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Green, 2012). Using the model of Stimulus-Organism-Response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Chung et al. (2015) identified, in the context of a Formula One (F1) event, the various types of spectators’ sensory stimuli and examined how those stimuli affected spectators’ emotions and behavioral intentions. The study found that olfactory stimuli played a unique role of in spectators’ behavior by affecting their arousal and satisfaction simultaneously. In addition, Chung et al. (2016) found the dominant impact of visual stimuli when in-the-moment sensory stimuli combine with F1 spectators’ recall of past experience. In this study, however, olfactory stimuli were found to have relatively little impact on spectators’ behavior.

Another approach to examining spectators’ sensory experience is sorting out the stimuli by the subject that produces such stimuli (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010, 2012; Uhrich & Koenigstorfer, 2009). In fact, these studies suggested that stadium atmosphere consist of game-induced, organizer-induced, and spectator-induced stimuli and examined that how these stimuli affect spectators’ consumption.

While sensory stimuli affect event attendees’ behaviors by shaping emotions, the stimuli also have an impact on sociability-related outcomes among those who perceive the stimuli positively (Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010, 2012). The homogeneous demographics of local racetrack attendees and their distinct interests in racing and community make for an affable environment where attendees are open to sharing common interests with fellow attendees. Stimulated event attendees are more likely to interact with others at the sporting venue (Fairley & Tyler, 2012). Yet we do not know which specific types of stimuli would facilitate the attendees becoming more socially oriented at racing track.

A number of studies have found that event attendees’ social characteristics influence such behaviors as revisiting the venue, purchasing souvenirs, and paying for concessions (Melnick, 1993; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Xing, Chalip, & Green, 2014). These are add-on experiences that spectators enjoy with others. Xing et al. (2014) referred to sociability-related consumption as “social spending” behavior motivated by a sense of community. A considerable volume of consumption occurs before, during, or after the event; it is thus vital to the racetrack’s marketing and to the health of the local economy to know how racing spectators’ consumption before, during, and/or after a race might differ according to their live sensory experience.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find the impact of each sensory stimulus on social interaction and sense of community among racing spectators of local racetracks. The study also aims to identify how attendees’ consumption
(e.g., food, beverage, gas, souvenirs) differs according to their sensory stimuli.

Regarding spectators’ sensory stimuli, 17 questions were drawn from previous studies in terms of spectators’ racing-related, service-related, and spectator-related stimuli (Chung et al., 2015, 2016; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010). Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to ascertain the factor structure of these items. Based on their reactions to such sensory stimuli, spectators answered six questions, three each, pertaining to social interaction and sense of community (Xing et al., 2014). Every item of each construct was asked using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Spectators’ social consumption was measured via seven open questions (Xing et al., 2014).

The data of spectators’ sensory stimuli were entered to K-means clustering in order to create three groups (high, middle, low) in terms of how much they respectively perceive racing-related, service-related, and people-related stimuli. These groups of each dimension of stimuli were then used for finding differences of motorsport spectators’ social interaction, sense of community, and social consumption in a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Three MANOVAs were conducted. For significant multivariate effects, follow-up univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to find more specific group differences. Post-hoc comparisons were made.

Data collection was made, during the 2016 season, at a local racing track located in America’s Southeast. The entire grandstand area was divided into two sub-areas for the investigators to cover. To reflect the spectators’ in-the-moment perception of sensory stimuli, two investigators distributed the self-administered questionnaires to the spectators of each sub-area during a race. Investigators were available to answer any questions as spectators completed the survey. The sample consisted of 129 males (54.4%) and 108 females (45.6%). The mean age was approximately 39 years old.

All MANOVAs resulted in significant multivariate effects of the three groups on spectators’ social interaction, sense of community, and their consuming behaviors; for example, those designed factors were different according to the degree of racing-related stimuli, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .49$, $F(14, 456) = 14.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$. More statistics will be shown at the presentation.

This study theoretically contributes to the previous literature regarding how sport consumer’ sensory experience is compatible with sport-related, service-related, and spectator-related stimuli. In addition, the effects of sensory stimuli on consumers’ social experience have yet to be feasibly tested in a sport context (Fairley & Tyler, 2012). In responding to this claim, this study identified the dynamics of sport consumers’ sensory stimuli and its social experience. More theoretical implications and specific marketing strategies will be discussed at presentation.