An Untold Story: Investigation into Fan Attendance at Collegiate Rowing Events

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Introduction
The world of collegiate rowing is one filled with stories of driven individuals, international interest, and glory beyond compensation. Yet, research into audience motivation at rowing events – in particular, collegiate rowing – is sorely lacking, despite the abundance of models for attendance at other sporting events. Ranging from studies on Olympics (Funk, Filo, Beaton, Pritchard, 2009), to mainstream North American sports – football, baseball, basketball, and hockey (Kim & Trail, 2010; Howard & Crompton, 2004; Cunningham & Kwon, 2003). However, during preliminary research, there were few academic inquiries to be found regarding rowing – or, more accurately, low revenue – sports. In terms of framing the research, international and Olympic caliber scenarios (Funk, et al., 2009; Neirotti, Bosetti, Teed, 2001) constituted the most specific field research. Additionally, literature on motivation and constraint studies provided the theoretical foundation for the research. The research focused on non-elite [eg. Olympic] caliber, which amended the research position, embracing the constraint aspect of motivation theory, specifically regarding altered, rather than absent, fan behavior (Henderson, 1997; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997, Son, 2008). Constraints, defined as determining an individual’s preferences rather than restricting attendance or participation (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997) set forth the foundation for the research questions under investigation. This study seeks to determine what factors could lead individuals to attend a collegiate rowing event? To experience – firsthand – the stories being created.

Method
The data collected for this study was done through a series of in-depth individual interviews. For consistency, initial questions were outlined so that each participant was prompted in the same manner. The researchers were permitted to continue to discuss points of interest with participants if they felt that something was mentioned but not discussed in detail.

The variables used for analysis included participation, constraint, negotiation and motivation. Participation was considered an independent variable. As mentioned previously, each of our participants had attended at least one (1) outdoor Olympic classification sporting event. They were chosen in order to understand what lead to their participation and why they would attend again or why they would not. Questioning began with understanding what the motives for going to the event were. Participants are probed to discuss what aspects of the event they liked and disliked and were then asked what changes they would make. Following this, participants were asked if they would attend again and if there is anything that holds them back from attending or attending similar events more frequently. Finally, a short discussion revolves around what would make events like this more appealing to them as a customer. Data was analyzed through a three-tiered coding process. Open source coding identified key words and phrases during the interviews – such as cost, travel, connection, support, and informal. This was followed by axial coding wherein connections and themes were established – such as intimate environment and inaccessibility. Finally, through the selective coding process, the established themes were connected to the theoretical foundation – inaccessibility connected to constraint and intimate environment to motivation.

Six individuals – both through convenience and market specific factors (eg. those who have known or personally attended an outdoor sporting event). One-on-one interviews lasted, on average, ten minutes per person. Subjects ranged from 22 to 34 years of age, with the average age of 28. All the participants possessed a college education with over half in possession of an advanced degree (either Masters or Doctorate). The advantage of engaging with familiar interview subjects was a lessened resistance and more open conversation in the one-on-one interviews, which will be noted further in the methodology section below. The intimate, personal, open discussions provide the small-scale data sampling which strengthens the support for the above research question to be continued through
Findings
For analysis, the variable constraint was broken into 3 subsections: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The variable negotiation was assessed in 4 categories: Time management, financial, interpersonal coordination, and structural coordination. Results found that consumers experience all types of constraints when considering the attendance of an outdoor, Olympic style sporting event. Intrapersonal constraints included their mood, interpersonal constraints included whether they had someone to attend and structural constraints ranged from conflicts with other hobbies, obligations with work, the entertainment value of the event. Said one of the female interviewees “There aren’t a lot of regattas that go on locally [Pullman, WA]…I would have loved to go to NCAAs, but it’s in California…it is too expensive.” Motivations to attend the event included the personal connection spectators had with competitors, the intimate environment created, and the type of entertainment offered at said event. The intimate environment and absence of barriers between competitors and spectators was the strongest recurrent theme, as expressed through one of the male interviewees, “You are able to go and talk to competitors whom you know and get close to the action. It’s not quite a segregated as a professional sporting event. No tickets or barriers in the way, so it’s a lot more relaxed.” Individuals negotiated through financial considerations, their perceptions about the quality of entertainment (competitiveness, venue set-up, weather etc.), their relationship with participants, their relationship with other spectators and available time.

Discussion
The intent of this study is to use the alternative constraint-effects-mitigation model outlined by Hubbard and Mannell to identify sources of constraint affecting the attendance of rowing events. With the results generated, organizing committees will be able to enhance their events by offering a wide variety of services that entice people to attend. A secondary application of the results is a means to create ideas for revenue generation at such events. For example, access to an area with big screens showing various areas of the course is another way to generate fan engagement. Through an emphasis on the unique athlete-spectator relationship present in collegiate rowing, the opportunity to create a fan experience unlike any other in collegiate sport lays before us. Looking forward, an increase in social media awareness to generate general pre-event interest combined with educational and informative event-day experience would help to mitigate the lack of sport-specific knowledge constraint. The story these collegiate rowers have to tell is as varied as exists in sport. By capitalizing on the lack of fan-competitor barriers present in traditional sport – their deserving stories can be more widely embraced.