More than Just Donations: University Alumni Association Clubs and Gamewatch Parties

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Intercollegiate alumni associations have become vital for colleges and universities nation-wide because of their ability to strengthen the relationship between a student, university, and athletics department after graduation. Although recent graduates may not stay in the same proximity as their university, their strong ties to their alma mater endure the distance. This occurs, in part, because of the alumni association’s gamewatch parties, which allow fans to stay connected and participate in collective behaviors on game days. These specific sites, located across the country, offer communal settings where fans can interact with like-minded individuals and bond over their alma mater’s televised game (Kraszewski, 2008). Even though the connection between alumni associations and athletics has received some empirical attention, these studies routinely narrow in on the impact of donations and giving levels (Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

While this financial focus is valid because “few constituents are more important to an institution than its alumni” (Bakal, 1979), a current void exists in the literature surrounding the impact alumni association clubs and watch parties have on the individual members. Although the impact of alumni associations and gamewatch parties on identification has not been studied, past literature has shown the benefits of high levels of identification not only for fans, but for organizations as well. Schmitt (2014) suggests that, “Beyond the intrinsic benefits to the individual (e.g., higher self-esteem, well-being, etc.), the behavioral outcomes from highly identified fans (e.g., increased game attendance, increased investment of time and money) will be directly realized financially by teams” (p. 33). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine how identification with various points of attachment (team, fan community, university) differs based on the level of involvement with the alumni association and their attendance at affiliated gamewatch sites. Additionally, how this involvement impacts member responsibility (Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015) and positive word-of-mouth was also investigated.

Working with the President and CEO of the Alumni Association of a large Midwestern Division I university, a survey was emailed to a sample of individuals with alumni association affiliation (n = 179). These individuals lived in close proximity to at least one of the active alumni association clubs and gamewatch sites located throughout the country. The greatest representation came from the state of Texas, accounting for 22.35% of participants (n = 40), with Houston (n = 21) having the greatest participation. The participants were primarily male (n = 105), married (n = 119), and white (n = 161). The variables of interest in this study included the following: team identification, university identification, fan community identification, member responsibility, and positive word-of-mouth. Team identification was measured with seven items adopted from Wann and Branscombe’s, (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). University identification consisted of an adapted 6-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Fan community identification had four items from Yoshida, et al.’s (2015) measure. Member responsibility was measured by a three-item scale from Yoshida et al. (2015). Additionally, positive word-of-mouth was measured via three items from Yoshida et al.’s (2015) work.

A one-way MANOVA was conducted whereas attendance at gamewatch events acted as a nominal-level independent variable creating two groups among the survey respondents. First, we examined the significance of the overall model (with all five dependent variables included). The results of the one-way MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate main effect for gamewatch attendance (Wilks lambda = .792; F (5, 143) = 7.53, p< .05; partial eta squared = .208. Power to detect effect was .999). Therefore, it was determined that gamewatch attendance had a significant impact on team identification, fan community identification, university identification, member responsibility, and positive word of mouth.

Given the significance of the overall test, the directionality and differences between dependent variables was
ascertained via a series of independent samples t-tests. Independent samples t-tests are appropriate when making mean comparisons between two groups only and in this case, our grouping variable was attendance at Alumni Association gamewatch parties. Due to the unequal sample sizes between groups, Welch’s t test statistic was utilized since equal variances between sample groups cannot be assumed. Besides unequal variance, no other assumption regarding the data (i.e. normality, independence of observations) and the utilization of this t-test procedure were violated. Significant differences between gamewatch party attendance were found for team identification ($t_{58.153} = 3.069, p<.05$), fan community identification ($t_{68.654} = 5.367, p>.05$), university identification ($t_{152} = 3.438, p>.05$), member responsibility ($t_{152} = 4.342, p>.05$), and positive word of mouth ($t_{60.821} = 5.394, p>.05$). In each case, those who indicated that they attended gamewatch parties had a significantly higher score on each of the dependent variables.

The results of the study provide a significant contribution to the literature related to alumni associations and athletics departments. As university alumni attended more gamewatch parties, their (team, university, and fan community) identification levels increased. Further, alumni who attended local gamewatch parties experienced a greater responsibility to their fellow members than individuals who did not attend. Similarly, individuals who attended these events were more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth about the respective athletics program. Taken as a whole, this study provides evidence that these alumni sponsored gamewatch parties impact the individual members as well as have practical importance to the university and athletics alike. By providing events that contribute to higher levels of identification among members, the alumni association can justify the investment of these gamewatch parties because highly identified fans are more likely to participate in pro bono marketing, university recruitment, and financial donations (Bass, Gordon, & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, the results of this study can play a role in additional positive financial attainment. Schmitt (2014) suggests that, “Beyond the intrinsic benefits to the individual (e.g., higher self-esteem, well-being, etc.), the behavioral outcomes from highly identified fans (e.g., increased game attendance, increased investment of time and money) will be directly realized financially by teams” (pg. 33). This further develops the importance of maintaining highly identified fans through gamewatch parties and its implications for alumni associations and athletic departments. Alumni associations and athletics departments can use this information to utilize gamewatch parties as a channel for university and athletic marketing and financial development.