Comparison of Perceived Barriers to Live Attendance Across Various Involvement Levels

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Understanding why spectators attend as well as do not attend matches remain important questions for sport franchises. Previous research has largely focused on reasons that explain attendance (Kahle et al., 1996) with less attention devoted to non-attendance (Pritchard et al., 2009). Given recent declines in professional sport attendance (Worley, 2017), more emphasis should be placed on understanding potential barriers that reduce or prevent live attendance. It is important for organizations to understand which factors influence attendance, so they can analyze such barriers and develop strategies to minimize or eliminate their impact, as well as understand which factors are within their control (Lepisto & Hannaford, 1980). The current research addresses the aforementioned imbalance by examining barriers to match attendance using a managerial focus and whether the perceptions of barriers differ based on team fandom levels.

Literature Review
The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk & James, 2001; 2006) is a framework that describes various levels of fandom. It proposes that an individual’s psychological connection with a sport team progresses through four stages: (i) Awareness, (ii) Attraction, (iii) Attachment, and (iv) Allegiance. Awareness describes when an initial connection has formed based on general knowledge and understanding that the team exists. As an individual’s connection develops based on functional, emotional, and symbolic meaning of team experiences, they progress through Attraction and Attachment. Finally, once an enduring and resistant connection has formed, the individual has reached Allegiance (Funk & James, 2001). The psychological connection level is proposed to influence the manner in which team marketing activities, socio-cultural forces, and match experiences are evaluated as well as reflect enhanced motivation to perform goal directed behavior. Hence, insight into barriers that reduce or prohibit match attendance could be examined across different fandom levels.

Barriers represent individual and environmental obstacles that are perceived as constraining or blocking behavior. Previous sport research has focused on the consumer’s perspective of barriers by classifying them as to how they impact or are perceived by consumers (e.g. Pritchard et al., 2009). However, past research has failed to consider barrier controllability from an organization’s perspective and how different spectator segments evaluate and perceive barriers. Arguably, the objective of barrier analysis is to develop a useful framework for managers to classify and examine barriers since marketers facilitate purchase transactions. In turn, segmentation strategies augment such an analysis by examining if barriers are evaluated and perceived differently across segments (Lepisto & Hannaford, 1980). With this in mind, the current study applies the three barrier controllability categories suggested by Lepisto and Hannaford (1980), controllable, semi-controllable, and uncontrollable, while segmenting by fans’ involvement levels. Uncontrollable barriers are those that allude complete control, while controllable barriers are the easiest for the organization to reduce or eliminate. Semi-controllable barriers might require atypical or unconventional marketing efforts, but can be reduced or modified through an organization’s efforts (Lepisto & Hannaford, 1980). Using these definitions, the current study extends past research by examining how the perception of barriers, categorized by controllability, differ across PCM levels.

Method
An online survey was used to collect 2,547 responses from a representative sample of adult Australians in terms of age, gender, and location regarding experiences with the Australian Football League. In consultation with the league, 17 barriers to attending more live games were identified and measured by allowing respondents to select all that applied. Following Lepisto and Hannaford’s (1980) example, the barriers were classified as controllable (5), semi-controllable (4), and uncontrollable (8). The proportions of selected barriers for each category were calculated (e.g. if a respondent selected two out of five controllable barriers, they received a proportion of 0.4). The PCM three-step segmentation procedure was employed to place respondents into fandom levels utilizing nine team involvement
measures (Beatson et al., 2011) resulting in 49.7% of respondents in Awareness, 7.1% in Attraction, 27.8% in Attachment, and 15.4% in Allegiance.

Results
The mean proportion of perceived controllable barriers for Awareness through Allegiance were 12.4%, 14.6%, 14.2%, and 10.8% respectively indicating less than one perceived controllable barrier selected on average. For all PCM stages, the most selected controllable barrier was ‘costs associated with attending’. The second most selected for Awareness and Attraction was ‘too crowded’ and for Attachment and Allegiance was ‘timing of the games’. Semi-controllable barriers had even less impact on attendance; only 5.1%, 6.9%, 6.3%, and 9.0% barriers selected for Awareness through Allegiance respectively. For all four PCM stages, the two most selected semi-controllable barriers were ‘weather’ and ‘crowd behaviour’. Uncontrollable barriers proved the most potent with at least one being selected on average; 12.0%, 15.0%, 15.6%, and 20.1% for Awareness through Allegiance respectively. The two most selected uncontrollable barriers, common across PCM stages, were ‘prefer to watch games on TV’ and ‘live too far away’. Further analysis sought to understand variation across these levels using logistic models due to the widespread problems associated with the use of ANOVA analysis over proportions (Jaeger, 2008).

Discussion and Implications
Since it is an organization’s responsibility to facilitate the purchase process, an analysis of perceived barriers using a managerial, as opposed to a consumer, focus provides organizations with the appropriate information to develop strategies to minimize and eliminate perceived barriers’ impacts (Lepisto & Hannaford, 1980). Also, by considering how barriers are perceived and evaluated differently across segments, and thus extending past research (e.g. Pritchard et al., 2009), this research identified common and unique barriers across fandom levels within the organization’s control. Controllable barriers were the most stable across PCM stages with no significant differences in the proportion selected between Allegiance and Awareness nor Attraction. Thus, lowering associated expenses of attending matches and managing crowd size would help eliminate the controllable barriers for all levels of fandom. Similarly, strategies to limit the impact of adverse weather and control unpleasant crowd behaviour would address the two most common semi-controllable barriers for all PCM stages. Though the two most common uncontrollable barriers are consistent across PCM stages, these are out of the organization’s reach. Since, the uncontrollable barriers received the highest proportion of selection regardless of PCM stage, it is of the utmost importance for organizations to respond to controllable and semi-controllable barriers. Overall, this analysis discovered a large degree of similarity in barriers between attendees of various fandom levels. Though strategies that address controllable and semi-controllable barriers might be costly, organizations can be comforted knowing these strategies target fans regardless of fandom level. Effectively, investing in minimizing or eliminating the impact of the controllable barrier ‘costs associated with attending’ as well as the semi-controllable barriers ‘weather’ and ‘crowd behaviour’ are strategic investments that optimize barrier reduction as these investments target common barriers across involvement levels, thus maximizing the organization’s return on investment.