Who Pushes for Environmentally Sustainable Venues?

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In 2010, a group of venue operators, sport team executives, and environmental scientists came together to exchange information about the best practices in environmental sustainability in sport that we now know as the Green Sport Alliance (GSA, 2017). The GSA is thought to be one of the major decision-makers (stakeholders) involved in the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices (ESPs) in venues. While they are one of the many influencing stakeholders, there may be several other influencing venue stakeholders to consider. For example, an owner, an operator (if different than the owner), the primary tenant of the venue (e.g., a sport team), and the community in which the venue resides. Yet, of those stakeholders, it is unclear which was the primary motivator for the adoption of ESPs. While previous research has uncovered several motivations for a sport and entertainment venue manager to adopt ESPs (Mercado & Walker, 2012), it does not address who is primarily responsible for driving environmental sustainability efforts forward. Mercado and Walker (2015) have called for more focus to be given to this issue. Thus, the purpose of the present research is to address the relationship between the various venue stakeholders to determine if any particular stakeholder or group of stakeholders is primarily responsible for pushing for ESP adoption. This is important as it builds on the body of knowledge that will help sport and entertainment venues become more environmentally sustainable to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

Thiabult (2009) previously made a call for more research attention to be given to environmental issues in sport management. Venues, as buildings, are a particular aspect of the sport industry with a high level of environmental impact. According to the 5th Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Lucon et al, 2014), buildings accounted for 32% of global energy use and 19% of greenhouse gas emissions. According to Walker, Salaga, and Mercado (2016), 86% of venues have some sort of environmental responsibility program in their venues, yet only 42% of venues have a green task force with only 32% of venues retrofitting to with green improvements. This suggests that despite Mercado and Walker’s (2012) motivations for adopting ESPs, adoption may not be as widespread as believed. Some research has scratched the surface of the barriers to ESP adoption, which has included: high costs, lack of time, and lack of expertise (Trendafilova, Kellison, & Spearman, 2014). Yet another issue to consider would be the mix management structures and complex stakeholder relationships for those venues.

There is no consensus in the literature regarding which stakeholders are ultimately responsible for a venue’s decision to adopt ESPs. Yet, these stakeholders are one of the major determinants of usage of ESPs in venues. For example, ownership of a venue influences the organizational structure of the management team, which would then influence operations decisions (Mercado & Walker, 2016). It is known that publically-owned venues tend to make decisions based on finances and the bottom line (Walker et al, 2016). There are also facilities with mixed management structures (e.g., a publically owned venue that is managed by a private firm). In those venues, management decisions may be influenced by the values, shared or otherwise, of these two stakeholders or by any number of other factors (Mercado & Walker, 2016). In regards to newly constructed venues, Kellison and Hong (2015) as well as Kellison, Trandafilova, and McCullough (2015) propose that decision-making pressures for a venue may come design firms, political leaders, environmental activists, local citizens, and the press with the final decision on any operations, ESPs included, ultimately coming from the venue owner (Kellison & Hong, 2015). While this does describe the final decision-making process, it does not attempt to address who is motivating the adoption of ESPs within venues – especially those that have been open and operating for some time. This research would suggest that there are multiple parties who often control the operations of a venue. There is no research on whether stakeholders actually “buy into” ESPs and drive decisions on ESPs, or merely act as a rubber stamp for venue management’s ESPs.
Stakeholder theory provided a framework for examining this issue. It considers the individuals, groups, and organizations that influence a firm’s ability to achieve their goals as well as the influence of the firm on the ability of people, groups, and organizations in the achievement of their own goals (Freeman, 1984). Therefore, a stakeholder is anyone that may influence a firm or be influenced by that firm (Freeman, 1984). For this study, the venue is the focal organization and the venue operator, venue owner, primary tenant, local government, and any other group or organization are the stakeholders that influence the venue. Stakeholder theory is considered to be appropriate for studying management issues with regard to roles, influence, and power (Friedman, Parent, & Mason, 2004).

For this study, a qualitative approach centered on the use of semi-structured interviews with venue operators, owners, representatives of tenants, and other stakeholders was employed. This interview format was preferred since it allowed participants to discuss their experiences, motives and opinions with respect to a format of questions while also allowing them to speak freely on the subject (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A total of eleven interviews have been conducted at the submission of this abstract with plans to interview fourteen more venue stakeholders. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti. Thematic coding steps described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) were followed to code the data and highlight emergent themes with regard to the stakeholder relationships within the venues. A variety of inductive (e.g., city, operator) and deductive codes (e.g., university, community) have emerged as part of this process.

Preliminary findings suggest that the most influential venue stakeholders in the ESP adoption process are the venue operator and owner. Other stakeholders to consider include universities, tenants, the community, and the city or county government. There is a distinct difference in the stakeholder relationships between university-owned and non-university-owned venues as the presence of the university is critical for university-owned venues. ESP adoption seems to be greatly influenced by the venue setting and market, which is consistent with the findings from Walker, Salaga, and Uecker Mercado (2016). Absent from these findings is discussion of the role of the GSA, International Association of Venue Managers, and the United States Green Building Council as well as many of the stakeholders found by Kellison, Trendafilova, and McCullough (2015). These findings contribute to the venue management literature by describing the stakeholder network of the operations of these venues as well as help to stimulate research that will move ESP adoption forward in the sport and entertainment venue industry. Further discussion of the results, including the influence of specific personnel, will be delivered as part of the presentation.