An Investigation of the Influence of Official Supporter's Sections on Spectator Satisfaction at Major League Soccer Games: A Conceptual Framework

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Spectators have been shown to impact the atmosphere of a sport event (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012), and given the importance of attendance to sport organizations as a revenue generator, sport managers should seek to better understand what elements of in-person spectating drive repeat attendance. This has become even more important as more attractive options for consuming sporting events continue to threaten gate revenues (e.g., higher-definition televisions, game watch parties, etc.). Researchers who have studied stadium atmosphere have identified other spectators as a positive source of influence for future attendance intentions (Biscaia, Correia Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2012; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Green, 2012; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). However, spectators have only been studied in aggregate, as though all spectators were homogenous group. In this study, I will conceptually define a specific sub-group of the spectating population, the Official Supporter’s Group Section (OSGS). The OSGS is a section in the stadium where Official Supporter’s Groups (OSGs) are given priority access. The purpose of the OSG is to assist their team through chants, singing, and cheering. In Major League Soccer (MLS) in the United States, all 22 current MLS franchises have at least one OSG. While similar groups exist in other contexts (e.g. Europe) (Charleston, 2008), the boundaries described in this study make these OSGs distinct from more commonly known groups such as Ultras or Hooligans. In this study, adopting Complexity Theory and Social Identity Theory, I propose a framework that elaborates on the concept of OSGs and the influence of OSGs on spectator satisfaction at MLS games.

OSGs have specific boundaries which distinguish them from general groups of fans, specifically: an official connection to the sport organization, priority access/specialty seating, formal membership, group name, and singing/chanting/choreography. OSGs are considered 'official' which refers to a recognized association with the sport organization they support. As part of their official relationship, the OSG is given priority access to seating in the stadium at home games. A formal membership process exists for OSGs, whereby the group recognizes the member as being in the group, and the member considers themselves to be part of the group. The OSG has a name with which to differentiate itself from other groups, and this name serves as a point of attachment for the members. Finally, the OSGs engage in supportive behavior, be that in the form of chants, songs, or choreographies to fulfill their stated purpose.

The current research is grounded in Complexity Theory as it helps us understand Complex Adaptive Systems (Gilchrist, 2000; Horn, 2008; Manson, 2001; McGrath, Arrow, and Berdahl, 2000; Morrison, 2006, 2008; Rubenfeld, 2001). I contend that OSGs are Complex Adaptive Systems because they exhibit the five main components: interacting and interconnecting agents (e.g., OSG members interacting) (Horn, 2008), open system (e.g., new members can join at any time, OSG members can leave at their own will) (Horn, 2008), ability to adapt (e.g., OSGs adapt their behaviors based on the game or influence of other spectators) (McGrath et al., 2000), exhibit non-linear behavior (e.g., OSGs can generate additional vocal/behavioral support outside their group; can respond to the game with specific chants related only to said game) (Morrison, 2008; Rubenfeld, 2001), and existing on the edge of chaos (e.g., fluctuations in membership are common but the group avoids heavy turnover through consistent in-group leadership) (Gilchrist, 2000; Morrison, 2006).

As a means of understanding group membership and distinction of the OSG, Social Identity Theory is helpful. Social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and social categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) outline the ways in which individuals understand who they are in their social world, and how they classify others/objects within that world. Self-categorization (Abrams and Hogg, 1990) is a process by which an individual places themselves in a group, thus dichotomizing the group to which they belong with a referent out-group. Social Identity Theory enables
us to comprehend how OSGs exist, how individuals of OSGs perceive themselves as group members, and how spectators in a stadium can perceive OSGs to be unique groups within a designated section.

Designed by Ulrich and Koenigstorfer in 2009, the Sport Stadium Atmosphere (SSA) framework was derived from Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model which is grounded in environmental psychology. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) contended that individuals experience environmental stimuli everywhere they go, and the sum of those stimuli, when coupled with the individual’s predispositions (termed personality by the authors), generate a behavioral response. The current research adopts this premise as it seeks to investigate a specific element of the SSA construct: the OSGs. Uhrich and Benkenstein’s (2010) conducted research yielding thirteen formative indicators of their Sport Stadium Atmosphere (SSA) construct, broken into three categories of environmental stimuli: organizer-induced (four indicators), game-induced (three indicators), and spectator-induced (eight indicators). The higher number of indicators for stimuli emanating from spectator behavior led the authors to conclude that there is evidence to suggest that stadium atmosphere is greatly driven by spectators (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010).

The proposed conceptual framework modifies the existing SSA framework (Ulrich & Koenigstorfer, 2009) in three ways: (1) by including the effects of the OSGs on other spectators as the spectator-induced stimuli, (2) by including satisfaction as a measure of the effects of the stadium atmosphere upon the consumer, and (3) by including behavioral intention variables (i.e., word of mouth, revisit intention). The affective responses construct is included in the same manner as the original SSA framework (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010). Little previous research has connected the influence of other spectators on individual consumer satisfaction despite Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) noting an expectation that “typical affective responses of spectators to be high levels of pleasure, sensory stimulation, and arousal” (p. 217), outcomes that have been previously connected to satisfaction (Madrigal, 1995; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994, 1999).

The next step in this research is to empirically investigate this model, with the results likely furthering our understanding of the inter-group dynamics between OSGs and non-OSG fans at sporting events. Further, I will discuss the possible methodological approaches (i.e., measurement, research design, analysis) used in formulating, the proposed conceptual framework used in this study.