“It Was Great Talking to You!”: Increasing Senior Citizens’ Social Connectedness Through Tailgating

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The number of senior citizens in the United States has more than doubled since 1975. The Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation identifies that there are more than 90 million senior citizens in the U.S. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). The ever-growing senior citizen population indicates that individuals are living longer, but that does not mean that the individuals are all considered healthy. Recently, an emphasis of the importance of senior citizens experiencing social interactions for their wellbeing was identified (Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon, 2011). Social well-being, often achieved through interactions with others can lead to increased physical and subjective well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). It is important to note that when senior citizens interact with friends and family they achieve a higher sense of subjective/social well-being (Larson, Mannell, & Zuzanek, 1986).

Senior citizens (on average) participate in less leisure activity than the average population but seek to increase their social interactions to enhance their overall quality of life (Bernhardt & Kinnear, 1976; Ragheb & Griffith, 1982). A more recent study has found that senior citizens have more available leisure time but travel less and have a lower tendency to perform leisure activities; this may be due to their shrinking social network (Van den Berg & Timmermans, 2011). Although increased social interaction may not directly prevent chronic diseases, the act of having to venture out to interact with others could increase both physical and social activity; thus, increasing quality and satisfaction of life among senior citizens (Katz, 2000; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). One potential source of social interaction, within the field of sport management, that may be a valuable avenue to increase well-being in senior citizens is tailgating. It is important that the potential positive aspects of a popular, and socially lucrative, ancillary event such as tailgating be explored.

Through the investigation of the social benefits of tailgating, and the impact it has on the individuals participating, the positive aspects of tailgating can be accentuated. Specifically, the study will investigate the use of tailgating an effective method to increase social connectedness of senior citizens. Senior citizens, in this study, are defined as any individual aged 55 years or older (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). A modified version of Lee and Robbins (1995) Social Connectedness Scale was adopted for the study. Data will be collected on November 17, 2018 prior to a football game in the Southeast region of the United States. Descriptive statistics, ANOVAS, and t-tests will then be applied to determine if increased social connectedness is an outcome of tailgating.

This study expands on the findings of Scroggins and Gillentine (2018) that indicated that senior citizens tailgate to interact with family and friends. Additionally, through the investigation of the social benefits of tailgating the positive aspects of tailgating can be accentuated. More specifically, the social benefits of tailgating can be applied to populations who may be considered vulnerable, or in need of an enhanced social life, such as senior citizens.