Sport Experience Design: The Impact of Physical and Relational Contexts at Division-II Athletic Events

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This research determines the effect of physical circumstances and interpersonal contexts on sport consumers’ psychological and behavioral processes, and it improves understanding of critical areas in which college athletics departments can put more effort into designing spectators’ sport experience. College sport event attendance in the last few years has declined. Because Division III athletics naturally place more importance on the impact of student-athletes’ participation rather than on spectators’ perspectives, a majority of Division III schools are struggling with surprisingly low attendance at athletic events. However, if athletics put effort into providing desired experiences, spectators recall those events’ distinctiveness, and that influences their future behavioral intentions toward attending athletic events.

The determinants for designing the experience of collegiate sporting events were conceptualized based on sportscape (i.e., environmental stimuli) and relational elements (i.e., spectators’ social interaction). Sportscape assesses spectators’ perceptions of and satisfaction with sport facilities, including facility accessibility, aesthetics, scoreboard, seating comfort, layout accessibility, space allocation, and signage (Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). The more engaged customers are by touchpoint experiences, the better the outcomes (e.g., sales profits or customer loyalty) for both the customers and service providers (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). On the other hand, relational contexts as humanistic clues refer to spectators’ social interactions at a sporting event. Underlining the importance of the interaction between spectators and the service provider, as well as among spectators, is the fact that organizations cannot control experiences. Hence, three hypotheses were derived as the following:

H1 & H2: Sportscape (i.e., physical settings; H1) / relational contexts (H2) have a direct and positive association with an individual’s level of sport event distinctiveness.

H3: An individual’s level of sport event distinctiveness has a direct and positive association with spectators’ behavioral intentions (i.e. WOM, revisit intention, and intent to stay).

A multivariate questionnaire was distributed to attendees of collegiate athletic events at two NCAA Division III schools during spring semester 2019 (N = 234). The measured items in the research model were developed based on existing literature. The CFA results provided good fit to the model ($\chi^2$(df)=755.20(420), $\chi^2$/df=1.80, p<.01; RMSEA=.059; SRMR=.049; CFI=.95; TLI=.94). The fit of the structural model was acceptable. The results of SEM indicated that relational contexts positively influence event distinctiveness ($\beta$ = .77), which in turn significantly influences spectators’ behavioral intentions, supporting H2 and H3. A bootstrapping analysis was employed to test a mediation effect. In particular, full mediation effect of relational context was found in the relationship that exists between sportscape factors and event distinctiveness ($\beta$ = .64**, 95% BC CI = [.35, 1.51]).

Overall, this study augments prior research by considering the role that relational context has in increasing the predictive validity of sportscape on explaining spectators’ perception of event distinctiveness and their behavioral intentions. The large explanatory power combined with the significant indirect effects supports theorizing that physical settings with relational contexts are a mechanism that has the capacity to enhance event distinctiveness ($R^2$ = 60%) and directly influence spectators’ future behavioral intentions.