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Recommended Citation

Fullerton, Sam; McCullough, Tammy; and Neale, Larry G., "Sports Events Attended by Americans: What and Why?" (2014). *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2014*. 41.
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Sports Events Attended by Americans: What and Why?

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 956 consumers who had attended a spectator sports event provided insight into what sport they last witnessed as part of the live audience. The data were collected in a major market with all four North American leagues plus major and mid-major collegiate sports and an abundance of minor league and other recreational sports. The respondents also identified the primary motive for attending. They also provided their age and gender. The results identified 41 different sports and 34 unique motives for attending. Age and gender were shown to be related to several, but far from all, of the motives.

INTRODUCTION

It has been stated that the “mass market is dead” (Anonymous, 2004). But despite this somewhat recent assertion, it is evident that segmentation has been an important tool in the marketers’ arsenal for many years. Smith (1956) articulated this reality some 58 years ago; however, the use of this tool most assuredly pre-dated Smith’s seminal work. Despite academicians’ and practitioners’ obvious propensity to embrace market segmentation, some might question whether marketers of spectator sports products have been slow to fully implement this most basic component of contemporary marketing strategy. Consequently, observers might question whether marketers of spectator sports are segmenting their markets in the most effective manner. While they may know who is attending, there is a paucity of research that assesses why they are attending. This research addresses that deficiency by looking at motives for attending a spectator sports event. It continues with an assessment that focuses the relationship between these motives and the spectators’ age and gender.

LITERATURE

It has been stated that segmentation is as essential for spectator sports as it is for any other product (Fullerton, 2010). Marketers typically acknowledge four categories of variables to be used in the segmentation process: demographics, geographics, psychographics, and consumer behaviors (Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelius, 2013). Certainly MLB teams have used demographics, income in particular, in developing a strategy designed to sell expensive premium tickets (Campo-Flores, 2012). From a geographic perspective, the NBA is refining its efforts to appeal to the European market (Associated Press, 2012). Regarding psychographics, Watson and Rich

(2000) described the “players” segment by stating that those who play a game are more likely to be a fan of that game. Finally, one of the commonly used behavioral variables is the individual’s level of consumption. There is little doubt that marketers of spectator sports routinely differentiate between season ticket holders and individual ticket buyers (Campo-Flores, 2012). Thus, there is evidence that all four of the categories of variables discussed in basic marketing textbooks have, at some time, been used in the segmentation of the spectator sports market.

Sports marketers have begun to explore this phenomenon more extensively, and research on motives for attending sports events has emerged. Since psychographics addresses a consumer’s lifestyles, it seems logical to consider one’s motives for attending as a psychographic dimension (allBusiness, 2013). Consider the following overview of a number of recent studies that have addressed motives for attending spectator sports events.

Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008) examined eight fan motives: escape, economic, eustress, self-esteem, group affiliation, entertainment, family and aesthetics. While focusing on 13 target sports, some of the key findings were that aesthetic motives were more pertinent for individual sports such as gymnastics and figure skating whereas economic motives, eustress and group affiliation were more commonplace when team sports such as professional basketball and college football were under scrutiny. Funk, Filo, Beaton and Pritchard (2009) put forth the SPEED concept. Specifically, they articulated five facets of motivation: Socialization, Performance, Excitement, Esteem and Diversion. Their model was able to explain approximately 30 percent of the variation in the respondents’ frequency of attendance. Woo, Trail, Kwon, and Anderson (2009) tested models germane to students’ motives for attending college football games and further articulated the role of the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) in the tasks of identifying market segments and developing appropriate strategies for those segments designated as target markets. Trail and James (2001) had laid the foundation for this MSSC scale in one of the earlier efforts to determine the role that individual motives play in influencing one’s behavior. As such, psychometric properties assumed a larger role in the task of better explaining differences in consumption behavior. Similarly, James and Ross (2004) differentiated among the motives for fans attending college baseball, college softball, and college wrestling competitions. They found differences on three key motivational attributes: eustress (drama), self-esteem (achievement), and family motivation. Mehus (2005a) studied a somewhat limited set of motives in the assessment of attendance at soccer games and ski-jumping events in Norway. One interesting finding that will be further examined in the current study was the conclusion that there is no relationship between one’s age and the motive for attending these two spectator sports events.

A second narrowly-focused study was undertaken by Tokuyama and Greenwell (2011) who delineated differences – and similarities – for both playing and watching soccer. Interestingly, one of the key motives for watching soccer was that of stress reduction. Among the other motives examined were aesthetics, social facilitation, and commitment. Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, and Mahony (2009) also focused on a single genre of spectator sports, namely mixed martial arts. Their research incorporated ten distinct motives, many of which are similar to some of those articulated in the aforementioned studies; yet there are others under scrutiny as well. The ten motives were gleaned from the authors’ literature review. Specifically, the

motives being examined were drama/eustress, escape, aesthetics, vicarious achievement, socialization, interest in the sport, national pride, economic considerations, adoration, and violence. Furthermore, gender was found to be related to a subset of these ten motives. Heere and Dickson (2008) took a somewhat different perspective in their examination of the roles that affective commitment and attitudinal loyalty play in one's propensity to attend a team sports event, particularly during a period of declining team status as measured by success on the field of play.

From a broader and somewhat different perspective, Mehus (2005b) used a theoretical framework to investigate the nature of the relationship between cultural capital and different forms of sports consumption for three different sports. The findings emanating from this study revolved around the issue of social belongingness, arguably one of the categories of motives articulated in the aforementioned studies. This literature review concludes with a look at two additional broad-based studies that were recently published. McCullough and Fullerton (2012) examined the consumption of the spectator sports product as part of both the live audience and the media-based audience. Looking at levels of consumption, four segments were delineated. Using 34 different sports-oriented psychographic criteria, differences – many of which involved motivational phenomena – were documented across the four segments. The final study in this review involved the delineation of ten segments of spectators. These segments, defined primarily on the basis of motives for attending included the following groups: socialites, avid fans, situational fans, entertainment-seeking fans, patriots, friends, reluctant spectators, novelty fans, appreciators, and players (Fullerton, McCullough, and Bruneau, 2013).

As stated by Ross (2007, p. 22), “not all sports fans are the same.” In this regard, it is likely that some of these differences are based upon the motives for attending a particular spectator sports event. Furthermore, there remain questions as to the role that age and gender play in determining what and why spectators attend their chosen event. Thus there is an apparent need for more empirical scrutiny in regard to what people attend, why they choose to do so, and how those motives are related to the two most commonly employed demographic variables that marketers use in the task of identifying pertinent market segments, namely gender and age. As noted by Bernthal and Graham (2003), a better understanding of the motives for spectatorship can significantly benefit any sports marketer who is seeking to boost the revenues associated with a particular event.

OBJECTIVES

There are three objectives for the current study. First is the determination of the most popular spectator sports among American consumers. One component of this initial objective is the identification of those events which resonate with the broader market as well as small segments and niches of the target population. The second objective is that of identifying the set of prevailing motives that influence an individual spectator's decision to attend a sports event. Finally, the research seeks to determine how those motives vary depending upon the spectators' gender and age.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection took place in a geographic area that is the home of a team in each of the four major North American sports leagues. Furthermore, there is an abundance of college sports ranging from FBS, FCS, Division IA, to Division IAA and a vast array of high schools with comprehensive athletics programs. Data were collected using two protocols. First was a sample of students enrolled in several upper division marketing courses at a university best characterized as a mid-major. Second, students were asked to have surveys completed by non-student respondents with a particular focus on soliciting input from individuals in the older segments. To eliminate seasonal biases, data were collected over the duration of a full calendar year. As a result, a total of 956 usable surveys were submitted for analysis.

The survey used two open-ended questions to determine behavior and motives. It concluded with two multiple choice questions with the purpose of determining the consumer's gender and age. The respondents were asked to identify the most recent spectator sports event that they had attended and the single, most important criterion that motivated their decision to attend that event. The age question included six categories with the oldest being the over-65 segment. Since the variables generally produce nominally-scaled data (other than age which was ordinal-scaled), simple frequencies and percentage distributions were used to identify the overarching motives for attending. To assess relationships among the variables, cross tabulation was used.

RESULTS

The initial objective was the determination of the most frequently attended sports events. A total of 41 different spectator sports events were identified. Of these, only 13 were identified by at least one percent of the sample's respondents. With 21.5 percent indicating their attendance at a Major League Baseball game, MLB was the most frequently mentioned sport. It is worth noting that the two generally acknowledged revenue sports for American universities – football and basketball – were both within the top five. Care was taken to differentiate among different levels of the same sport. For instance, baseball included multiple sub-categories: MLB, minor league baseball, college baseball, high school baseball, and recreational baseball/softball. Noteworthy in this disaggregation, with 3.6 percent, high school football was seventh out of the 41 sports events. Of note is the fact that the aggregation of the three levels of football creates a segment comprising 25.9 percent of the respondents, a metric that slightly surpasses baseball's aggregate measure of 24.0 percent. A number of niche sports were also identified; these include widely recognized events such as arena football and rugby while also including more esoteric events such as broomball, cheerleading competitions, and ultimate Frisbee. To illustrate this point, the events that rank from 11th through 41st comprise a total of only 15.2 percent of the respondents. Table 1 delineates the top eight spectator sports.

Table 1
Last Spectator Sports Event Attended

<u>Last Sports Event Attended</u>	<u>Percent</u>
MLB	21.5
College Football	17.1
NHL	12.7
College Basketball (men or women)	10.5
NBA (or International Pro Basketball)	9.3
NFL	5.2
High School Football	3.6
Men's Soccer	3.6

The next research objective addressed the spectators' motives for attending. In this regard, a total of 34 unique motives were identified. With 23.9 percent, the social motive is far and away the most common reason one chooses to attend a spectator sports event. Second on the list is that of attending in order to watch a friend or family member play. Third on the list is that of receiving tickets for free; tied for fourth are the enjoyment that a sports event provides and a self-professed love for the sport and/or one of the competing teams. Sixth was that of simply being a self-professed huge fan. Number seven on the list is the need to attend in order to complete some work task or other form of assignment. Eighth is the patriotic motive of exhibiting school loyalty followed by an interest emanating from being a current or former participant in the sport. Table 2 delineates the nine motives identified by at least four percent of the respondents.

Table 2
Motive for Attending

<u>Motive for Attending</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Social	23.9
Friends/Family Play	9.4
Free	8.7
Enjoyment	8.2
Love sport/team	8.2
Work/other Assignment	7.5
Huge Fan	6.1
School Loyalty	5.2
I play(ed) the game	4.0

While the most common motives which are delineated in Table 2 capture the mindset of the consumer marketplace, these are not the only drivers for attending a spectator sports event. Among the less commonplace drivers which lead to the decision to attend an event are the motives of being forced to go, post-game entertainment, giveaways, novelty, and fundraising opportunities. Of note is the reality that the last 18 motives on the list were attributed to a total of only 5.9 percent of the respondents.

Gender-based differences were documented for 10 of the 34 motives delineated by the respondents. Women were slightly more likely to indicate that their primary motives were social. They were also far more likely to identify the desire to watch friends and/or family members play or that their attendance was predicated upon the receipt of free/gift tickets. Another motive more likely to be attributed to females was loyalty to their school; this included both their high schools and universities. In this regard, they were far more likely than their male counterparts to indicate that their loyalty to either their current school or one from which they graduated was the primary motive driving them to attend a particular spectator sports event. Women were also more likely to indicate that they attended because it was convenient to do so. Thus it may not have been planned far in advance; rather it was simply selected on the basis of the ease of attending.

Males were far more inclined to identify the enjoyment as the primary motive; in that regard they view it as an entertainment option. Men were also more likely to indicate that they wanted to attend because they either once played or currently play the game; in other words, former (or current) golfers are more likely to attend a golf event as a spectator than are non-golfers. Men were more likely to indicate their desire to see one particular player; so it may not have been the Los Angeles Dodgers that drew men to the baseball game; rather it was the fact that Clayton Kershaw was the probable starting pitcher. Yet at the same time, men were more likely to indicate that the primary reason for attending was their desire to see their favorite team compete. Competitive rivalry was a stronger draw for men than it was for women. Finally, sex appeal was more likely to attract male spectators than females, although the motive was not confined to the male respondents. Table 3 provides an overview of the results specific to gender.

Table 3
Relationship between Motive for Attending and Gender

Motive	Gender More Inclined to Cite as Motive
Watch Friends and Family Play	Females
Received Free/Gift Tickets	Females
Loyalty or my Current/Former School	Females
It was Convenient	Females
Enjoyment Associated with Event	Males
I Currently Play or Once Played the Game	Males
I Wanted to See One Particular Player	Males
I Wanted to See my Favorite Team Play	Males
Competitive Rivalry	Males
Sex Appeal of the Participants	Males

When the focus is shifted to age, ten of the 34 motives were determined to be related to the spectator's age. Regarding age, the youngest segment (≤ 25) was somewhat more likely to cite social motives, competitive rivalry, admiration of skills, and participation by friends and/or family members as motives to attend. For obvious reasons, this youngest group was far more prone to specify school loyalty. Apparently, current students or recent graduates tend to express greater loyalty to their schools than do those who are more removed from their alma maters from

a time perspective. Combined with the 26-35 year-old segment, they comprise the age group most likely to cite sex appeal as their primary motive for attending. That same 26-35 year-old segment is also the most likely segment to indicate that fulfilling an occupational requirement was the primary motive for attending spectator sports events. The two segments populated by individuals aged 35 or younger were far more likely than those in the older segments to indicate that the reason for attending was to benefit from a new experience. The combined oldest segments (>45) were more likely to stress enjoyment whereas the two middle-aged segments comprising respondents between the ages of 36 and 55 were the most inclined to specify international appeal. Table 4 summarizes the motivational differences that are related to the age of the spectator.

Table 4
Relationship between Motive for Attending and Age

Motive	Age Group	More or Less Inclined to Cite
Social	≤25	More Inclined
Competitive Rivalry	≤25	More Inclined
Admiration of Skills	≤25	More Inclined
Friends or Family Participating	≤25	More Inclined
School Loyalty	≤25	More Inclined
Sex Appeal	≤25	More Inclined
Sex Appeal	26-35	More Inclined
New Experience	≤35	More Inclined
Occupational	26-35	More Inclined
Enjoyment	>45	More Inclined
International Appeal	36-55	More Inclined

A total of 16 motives were found to be unrelated to either age or gender. For example, neither novelty nor love of the sport was found to be associated with age or gender. Conversely, two of the motives – enjoyment and competitive rivalry – were determined to be related to both of the demographic variables under scrutiny. Several motives were cited by too small of a number of respondents for any statistically significant relationship to be identified, although some anecdotal information suggested the potential for a relationship to exist. In this regard 12 of the 34 motives were articulated by less than one percent of the respondents. For example, being *forced* to attend was cited by only four respondents (all in the youngest segment). A finding that will chagrin marketers of spectator sports is that peripheral products such as post-game fireworks, concerts and giveaways were also specified by an extremely small subset comprising only three respondents.

SUMMARY

American sports fans have a litany of alternatives from which they can choose. These range from the four primary professional leagues to intercollegiate, high school, minor league, amateur sports and an array of niche sports. Influencing an individual's decision to attend a particular sports event is a varied array of motives. These include but are not limited to social

considerations, admiration of the participants' skills, and ancillary components of a sports event such as a halftime concert or post-game fireworks. While some of the 34 identified motives are not related to one's age or gender, some were found to be related to either age or gender – or both. Marketers of spectator sports need to understand the importance of segmentation as they seek to fill their venues. And they should not overlook the role that motivations and demographics play in these efforts.

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