

2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

High School Athletic Events: Factors Affecting Attendance of Non-Students

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25-minute oral presentation

(including questions)

In the fall of 2016, the enrollment for grades 9-12 across the United States included 15 million students enrolled in public high schools, and 1.3 million students enrolled in private high schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The 2016 Athletic Participation Survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) identified that 7,868,900 high school (HS) students (4,544,574 boys and 3,324,326 girls) participated in interscholastic sports during the 2015-2016 academic year (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2016).

HS athletics are not only popular among the students participating, but also provide excitement for their respective communities, attracting more than 500 million spectators in 2011 (Coakley, 2015; Howard, 2011). For example, the Red Rovers from Eason, Pennsylvania, average 5,000 fans at their home football events, including 1,700 student tickets and 1,500 season ticket holders (Groller, 2010). Similarly, South Forsyth HS from Cumming, Georgia, sold 4,262 tickets for one of their postseason football games in November 2016, which generated \$51,144 for their athletic department (Huddle, 2017). Coakley (2015) has noted that the focus on winning has increased, resulting in an arms race similar to that occurring at the collegiate level, with HS athletic departments competing to provide better facilities, equipment, and coaches' salaries. The competitiveness has placed added pressures on HS athletic departments to generate revenue through ticketing, creative private fundraising (i.e. advertising, sponsorship, television right, etc.), and even "pay to play" (Cook, 2012; Pierce & Bussell, 2011; Pierce & Peterson, 2011). Strong attendance numbers help athletic departments generate revenue, so understanding those who attend HS sporting events is critical for financial success.

Despite the popularity of HS athletics, very few researchers have attempted to understand HS athletic event attendees (Cianfrone, Zhang, Pitts, & Byon, 2015). Previous research has examined sport team identification regarding social connections in terms of the social well-being of HS students (Wann, Waddill, Brasher, & Ladd, 2015), relating fandom to psychological health (Reding, Grieve, Derryberry, & Paquin, 2011). However, these studies did not attempt to understand team identification concerning sport consumer behavior or spectator motivation to attend HS athletic events.

The large number of attendees for some HS sporting events, such as the football games noted, suggest that HS students are not the only HS sport fans. Thus, we consider it necessary to examine the broad range of spectators found at HS athletic events. Understanding what motivates individuals to attend HS athletic events would provide athletic directors needed information to formulate marketing and ticketing plans. Consumer motives have been studied extensively on various sport levels and types to predict sport consumer behavior (e.g., Funk, 2017; Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Trail et al., 2000; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008). Researchers indicate motivations to attend may differ by sport, type, or level, suggesting that high school sports may illicit different motives than other levels. Motives including vicarious achievement, social, escape, achievement, drama, skill, aesthetic, and knowledge. Taking into consideration that earlier sport marketing studies assessing consumer motives have focused on collegiate and professional sports (Cianfrone et al., 2015), we must first identify the HS athletic event attendees and understand the motives driving their behavior. Cianfrone et al. (2015) examined the market demand factors (i.e., event attractiveness, economic consideration, local attraction, and venue accessibility) associated with consumers at a regional HS basketball tournament. However, they did not attempt to measure the intrinsic factors influencing the spectators' decisions to attend. Additionally, they did not identify the attendees' consumption patterns for a regular season; rather, they looked solely at those present at the basketball tournaments, assuming that they were the same people attending regular season games.

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Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine factors that influence spectator attendance at HS athletic events. Specifically, we will assess HS football non-student spectators to determine motives to attend a regular season game.

Method and Data Analysis

At the start of the 2017-18 school year, we will administer a questionnaire during pregame and half time intermissions of HS football games at three different stadiums across the southeastern United States. The questionnaire will be available in both English and Spanish to ensure that participants can respond in either language. This study will concentrate on HS athletic fans over the age of 18. The survey will include demographic and psychographic items, including items from the Team Identification Index (TII; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005; Trail & James, 2001), self-reported attendance behavior, attendance intentions, support for the teams across time (Trail, Anderson, & Lee, 2016), and motives (a modified version of the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption; e.g., social interaction, nostalgia, drama, skill, knowledge, vicarious achievement, escape, support; Trail & James, 2001; Trail, Kim, Kwon, Harrolle, Braunstein-Minkove, & Dick, 2012; Woo et al., 2009). We will use structural equation modeling to determine the influence of motives on attendance. Specifically, confirmatory factor analysis will be conducted on the motives for fit and validity; then, we will test the structural model of the influence of motives on attendance.

Discussion and Implications

The study will identify motives for non-student HS football spectators and their influence on consumption (game attendance). The findings of this research will provide valuable information to HS athletic departments, booster clubs, and administrators, as well as marketing specialist and sponsors who are seeking to serve the HS athletic event attendees better. To tailor the overall sport experience and satisfy the needs of those present at the bleachers, sport organizations must first understand who these people are and what factors they are taking into consideration when making the decision to attend HS athletic events week after week. Additionally, this research may introduce factors that influence attendance that are different from other sport levels, providing theoretical implications for future study. Future research may compare motives of HS students to non-students, completing the analysis of HS athletic event consumers.

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