Increasing College Football Attendance: An Exploratory

Study of Fan Typology

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Abstract: No sport enjoys more popularity in the USA than football. However, not every college can fill their stadium. This study examined spectator typology in relationship to college football attendance. Four typologies emerged as well as a chronology of expectations for game events. Presented is PUNT a sport marketing strategy that can be an integral component of a marketing campaign to increase football game attendance.

Key words: football fan typologies; increasing college football attendance; fan motives

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1. Introduction

Watching competitive sports is a leisure behavior engaged in by millions of people worldwide (Madrigal, 1995). However, no sport has higher popularity in the USA than football. The National Football League (NFL) is already America's game (Redding & Peterson, 2009) and college football is setting all-time attendance records (Beck, 2012). The overwhelming popularity of football may be abundantly clear, but what is unclear is the role of spectator personality in relationship to attendance. The question becomes, what is the typology of attraction to a college football game beyond the basic fan demographics?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Fan Demographics

Beck (2012) delineated the typical college football fan by distilling cumulative characteristics as published by the National Football Foundation. The fan profile includes the following demographic characteristics: 61% are male; 12% are 18-24 years old; 18% are 25-34 years old; 19% are 35-44 years old; 20% are 45-54 years old; 16% are 55-64 years old; 16% are 65 or older; 61% have household income of $50,000 or more; 42% have household income of $75,000 or more; 25% have household income of $100,000 or more; 32% are college graduates and 61% are married.

Madrigal (1995) contributed to establishing a fan demographic by publishing findings specifying that fans attend college football games because they identify with the team. Brokaw (2000), in a factor solution, revealed two primary characteristics of fans: (1) true fans need only to know the schedule; and (2) marginal fans need

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special attractions to bring them to the stadium. As a result, the concept of fan classification emerged.

2.2 Fan Classification

Twenty five years ago, Smith (1988) classified sport fans into two groups those who were serious and those who were normal. The serious fan believes that the results of an individual game or season matter in life; the normal fan enjoys the moment, but their life is not impacted by a win or loss. The serious fan will include participating in rituals and celebration; the team becomes identified as an extension of self and lasts a life time. The normal fan is often a spectator who may bask in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976) and will make statements such as "we won" or "they lost" (Grove et al., 1991; Wann & Dolan, 1994), but game outcomes are not extended to their identify or beyond the week. Moreover, fans can be local; they support the team because it represents a certain geographic area, specifically where they live (Jones, 1997). However, this fan can or will change allegiance and attendance with residence, even if trace memories are good or bad.

2.3 Fan Attendance

Fink et al. (2002), suggested that a fan's identification with a team is a strong predictor of fan consumption behavior. They are more likely to purchase items or pay for tickets to attend their college football team's game when identification is high. Trail, Fink and Anderson (2000) identified nine motives that foster fan identification and attendance. These motives are based on psychological needs of vicarious achievement, aesthetics, drama, escape, and special time with the family, along with acquisition of knowledge, appreciation of physical skills, social interaction and physical attraction to the athletes. The authors are alluding to psychological factors or perhaps typologies and their relationship to attending a sporting event or college football game.

2.4 Fan Typology

Ironically, Mowen (2000) discovered that 62 percent of the variance in participating in sports comes directly from personality; however, there is a paucity of literature examining the specific personality traits or typology when examining if a certain type of person attends a college football game for an identified reason. So far, clustered research findings offer a descriptive summary or classification of fans by emotional bonding or social identification theory, but no typology exists in relationship to attendance. Stewart et al. (2003) examined the sport consumer and derived a dualistic typology in the following manner: old vs. new; genuine vs. corporate; traditional vs. modern; expressive vs. submissive; irrational vs. rational; symbolic vs. civic; and die-hard vs. less loyal. This dualistic typology does not address specific or tangible differences regarding why one type of person attends a sporting event or more importantly, what can drive a spectator to attend a college football game.

3. Research Purpose and Questions of Interest

Although one could argue the relative importance of college football in the grand scheme of higher education, it is harder to dispute the amount of economic investment allotted by many universities. University officials typically justify this expenditure by acknowledging the sense of community (SOC) that college football creates (McPherson, Smith-Loven & Brashears, 2006). Also, researchers who examine this SOC have found better student academic performance and retention (Battistich & Hom, 1997). Therefore, if researchers are correct when reporting that college football helps to establish a SOC, it seems imperative for universities to investigate what in particular the student spectator is expecting to experience at a college football game and then provide it.

As indicated earlier, previous research has focused on fan identification, personality or demographic variables associated with attending a college football game. Other researchers investigated environmental characteristics (Baade & Tiehan, 1990), cognitive and affective factors (Madrigal, 1995) or "fanship" in general (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). However, this review found no literature that examined the relationship between specific fan typology and college football attendance, given the "why" fans attend a game in the first place. Specifically, four research questions are addressed: (1) Do fans have expectations when attending a college football game?; (2) Are there clear student-spectator typologies?; (3) Do typologies for universities emerge?; and (4) Is there a chronology to expectations for game events?

4. Methodology and Statistical Analysis

A five (5) question viral survey addressing why individual spectators attend a college football game was initially sent to five students attending two Midwestern universities. The selection of these five students was not random; these students had participated in other, non-related studies and appeared to have large, personal student networks (N > 250). These selected students agreed to send an electronic survey to their college peers attending other universities. These students in-turn sent it to their friends. This process allows the research to extend beyond a single geographic area or university, permitting students at multiple universities to participate across multiple states.

Participating students responded to the following 5 questions: (1) are you male or female; (2) What college do you attend; (3) Are you more a thinking or feeling person, operationally defined as: A THINKING person makes decisions and actions on rational or logical thoughts, and tends to schedule events in their life; A FEELING person makes decisions and actions on emotion or gut intuition, and tends to be flexible with events in their life; (4) Would you describe yourself as an introvert or extrovert, operationally defined as: An INTROVERT prefers to spend time in isolation and thoughts; An EXTROVERT prefers to spend time with others and in activities; and (5) Why have you attended college football games in the past or what would be the reason to attend a game in the future? Students could also make comments.

The use of a "thinking vs. feeling" or "introvert vs. extrovert" as a student typology measure is pragmatic, relatively simple, and directly applicable to a college population. The questions are classic, conceptual areas used on well-known and established typology measures (see Briggs-Myers & Briggs, 1985). Moreover, the establishment of a four-factor typology is sufficiently comprehensive to establish spectator profiles for sports marketing planning purposes.

The clustering of student comments used a top-of-mind approach common in marketing research. However, by research design, instead of asking and sorting specific brand names or products that come to mind first, all responses related to why they as students attend college football games. All responses were coded and categorized according to their initial response.

This was an open format, with no established areas or Likert scale to evaluate. Table 1 highlights the conceptual typology of a 2 x 2 model for college football attendance.

Table 1   College Football Attendance: A Typology Model

	Introvert	Extrovert
Thinking	TI	TE
Feeling	FI	FE

The data collected to answer the four research questions were analyzed with a simple rank-order cluster methodology. Researchers assigned the student responses with the greatest frequency (percentage) to one of four categories: (1) Thinking/Introvert (TI); (2) Thinking/Extrovert (TE); (3) Feeling/Introvert (FI); or (4) Feeling/Extrovert (FE). This analytical technique is appropriate, given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study. Specifically, the research instrument used is characteristic of an open-survey format, which elicited top-of-mind responses, with non-Likert scaling. This format allows for an orthogonal assignment. A narrative summary addressing each relevant area per categorical assignment (TI; TE; FI; or FE) was then performed. Frequency distributions of college typologies used binomial statistical analysis to assess significance.

5. Research Finding

The total number of participants included 2,961 students, representing 168 colleges and universities from 14 states: Florida; Georgia; Illinois; Indiana; Kentucky; Michigan; New York; North Carolina; Ohio; Pennsylvania; Texas; Virginia; West Virginia; and Wisconsin. The male/female ratio approximated a 60/40 split. The colleges could not be defined by one single typology. However, approximately 26% possess one of two typologies, approximating a 50/50 split; 11% of the colleges possess one primary typology, representing more than 75% of the participants from that college. This 11% is characterized as a Thinking/Introverted typology. Moreover, it was common for participants to say that they did not attend college football at their university.

The assessment of each conceptual area included: (1) why a participant attended a college football game; (2) frequencies for each conceptual area were then tabulated; and (3) every conceptual area was assigned to one of four quadrants (TI; TE; FI; or FE). This was a forced assignment by greatest frequency. Therefore, it was not necessary to have a significant difference between the frequencies of occurrence. Categorization of the research findings became the foundation of a narrative by typology (see Table 2).

Table 2   Spectator Typology

Thinking/Introvert (TI)   11% of sample
This typology attends games because of the competition. They want real football, a national focus or playoff contention. The stadium history was important. TI spectators have great interest in game strategy and team record. They also used the whole school name as the descriptor. Comments often referred to having interest in observing pro-prospects. TI spectators apparently enjoy watching other fans as well as the game; however, the focus is the game.

Feeling/Introvert (FI)   16% of sample
This typology attends the game because of the social interaction. They love banners, wearing their college letters (e.g., OSU), the wave and cheering. Many spectators commented on face-painting, wearing university colors, sweaters and jackets. They prefer high scoring games and were often athletes in high school, although not football. FI spectators wanted souvenir items and spoke of the joy of purchasing team merchandise. They enjoy half-time events with friends and having bragging rights with wins. FI spectators were the only group to discuss the importance of the weather and drinking either coffee or hot chocolate.

Thinking/Extrovert (TE)   44% of sample
This typology attends games to be with friends and family. They often view getting a ticket as a status-symbol and game memorabilia. TE spectators use the college nickname, wear team t-shirts and want a championship. They appear to support the local team and played football at some point in life. TE spectators want a winning record and strong defense. They spoke of enjoying the team introductions, fog machines and cannon fire. TE reflected on reunions and new stadiums or scoreboards. Post-game events, such as, dinners or meeting with friends are important to game attendance.

Feeling/Extrovert (FE)   29% of sample
This typology attends games for the entertainment value. FE loves tail-gating parties, wearing jerseys, alcohol, balloons, body painting, souvenirs, bond-fires and team rallies. They get a rush-feeling being with the crowd. FE spectators spoke of the team mascot and having team spirit. They love the band, loud music and airplanes with banners flying over the game. They enjoy all the sights, sounds and people at the game. FE spectators were the only typology to mention free-tickets and pre-gaming activities.

A deeper analysis of the data discovered anecdotal evidence suggesting that many spectator participants would not attend their own college football game, but would attend games at other colleges. These comments came primarily from TI and TE typologies. Moreover, many spectators commented that they were unaware of an imminent game event at their university. However, the FE and FI typologies were most likely to comment about only attending the tail-gate parties or leaving the game at half-time.

6. Discussion and Implications

Addressing the first research question, "Do fans have expectations when attending a college football game?", participants offered over 75 specific areas, often in a conceptual framework. For example, an expression like "I love the total environment", referring to the crowd, sounds or airplanes flying overhead is typical. It is clear that fans have expectations. The implication is that spectators are anticipating more than a football game. Even the TI typology that spoke primarily of the game, referred to conceptual areas beyond the game at hand. Therefore, marketers must do more than post a game schedule, especially if your team has a history of low attendance. Some universities have a history of fulfilling spectator expectations and can simply post a game schedule and enjoy adequate game attendance.

The second research question was, "Are there clear student-spectator typologies?" Table 2 demonstrates discernible typologies. The implication is that spectators do attend college football games for unique or specific reasons. Fan segmentation is possible and warranted. It is important to know the fundamental typology of your college or fan base. This provides the sports marketer a base on which to build a better understanding of the marketplace. Furthermore, it is important to note that the largest typology attending a college football game is TE, followed by FE. Therefore, if a sports marketer is not aware of their college typology, cautiously start with the normative data.

The third research question was, "Do typologies for universities emerge?" This research did not uncover a single typology representative of all colleges (i.e., except for the TI typology). This is most likely a result of low participant numbers from each specific university. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that most university marketers, faculty, staff or students could assign a typology of their college. This is likely to be an intuitive process, but it probably could be quantified by benchmarking or assessing standardized test scores and total student involvement records. Regardless, the point remains that knowing a university's typology becomes the foundation of any marketing plan aimed at increasing football attendance.

The fourth research question was, "Is there a chronology to expectations for game events?" The results suggest that there is a natural process, or discrete events, characterizing the unfolding of a college football game. For example, FE spoke predominantly about the pre-game and entertainment; TI focused on the game and the individual experience; FI discussed the half-time and the social aspects; and TE highlighted being with family or close friends, and post-game events. The implication for marketers is to understand spectator typology not only as a segmentation strategy, but by the chronology or unfolding of key activities pre; during; and following the game event.

Finally, this research suggests that even the most ardent fan is a spectator with expectations that go beyond the game. Findings confirm all the background literature reviewed for this study. However, this research offered the "what and when" to market in relationship to "who". Table 3 highlights a simple marketing strategy (P-U-N-T) to increase college football attendance.

Table 3   P-U-N-T: A Marketing Strategy to Increase Football Attendance

P ersonalize the fan experience   Match expectations with fan typology

U nderstand the marketing options   By pregame, game, half-time and postgame activities

N obody benefits from an empty stadium   Develop, test, refine, and improve your marketing strategy

T ypologies are real   Determine your college typology

7. Limitations and Future Study

This research was qualitative in nature. This type of research design is useful for theory development and hypothesis generation. Future research should include quantitative analytics like factor analysis, factor scores, and discriminant analyses to confirm conceptual factors and typologies. It would then be possible to delineate specific typologies (market segments) with differentiated marketing mix elements catering to each market segment. With this type of information, sport marketers would likely improve their chances of a "winning" season at the box office.

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