

## **Tailgating at Collegiate Sporting Events**

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## **Statement of the Problem**

Previous research in the area of event management has focused on several different factors of the experience and how it relates to both customer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (James, Breezeel, and Ross, 2001; Ferreira and Armstong, 2004; Smith and Stewart, 2007). However, one area that has largely been ignored by researchers is the phenomenon known as tailgating. Typically associated with professional and collegiate football, tailgating requires large commitments of time, money and other resources from both consumers and managers in order to engage in the activity. While previous research on the subject has mainly focused on the motivations for individuals to participate in tailgating (James, Breezeel, and Ross, 2001; Drenten, Peters, Leigh, and Hollenbeck, 2009; McCartney, 2009) little to no research has examined how the tailgating experiences affect a fan's overall game day experience, their perceived value and their future behavioral intentions.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of the current study are three fold. The first is to gain a better understanding of how much impact the quality of the tailgating experience has on a fan's overall game day experience. Factors such as the weather, the outcome of the game and a consumer's satisfaction with the tailgating experience itself will be studied. Second, what is the perceived value of tailgating compared to other forms of leisure activities available to consumers both before and after a live sporting event? This relative value has importance for both the local economy and the operators/managers of tailgating sites. Finally, what role, if any, does the tailgating experience have in regards to a sports fan's future behavioral intentions? Previous research has argued that the overall experience of attending a sporting event is key to both overall satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (Martin & Howell, 2010), but previous research has not examined the role that tailgating has to play in the same constructs.

## **Literature Review**

College sports are big business in the United States: \$25 billion was spent on spectator sports in the United States in 2007 (Quinn, 2009). College football and basketball are two main sources of revenue for many National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member universities. We know that 57% of all Americans consider themselves to be football fans (Quinn, 2009) and 34% claim it as their favorite sport. Not only does it entertain more than half the nation's population, but more importantly provides financial support to allow students to compete in other NCAA sports such as baseball, golf, swimming, tennis, soccer, and many others (Plunkett, 2009). For example, the Ohio State University earned \$104.7 million in revenues from football alone (Plunkett, 2009). Specifically, Universities in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) have a host of nationally competitive Division-I football teams including the 2009-2010 NCAA National Champions. Each game attracts 80,000-plus fans and the majority of them take part in social activities outside of the game. This large influx of people implies heavy travel to locations hosting these events, and travel for the reason of sports is big business.

Tailgating is a phenomenon that has remained somewhat untouched in the literature. Tailgating, as it relates to United States college football has become a major industry niche itself. The term tailgating refers to those consumers who participate in sport tourism, not only by attending the event, but by devoting hours or even days before, during, and after the event to socialize amongst others interested in the same event. The total number of tailgaters in the United States is estimated to be somewhere around

50 million, having doubled over the last eight years (Megerian, 2007). These tourists spent \$7-15 billion on tailgating and related supplies in 2006. As a leisure activity tailgating raises spectator excitement and devotion to the organization as well as brings significant business to host cities. Somewhere around 57% of tailgaters make at least \$75,000 annually and 82% of them own a home (Megerian, 2007). While the sporting event itself is the reason that most sport tourists tailgate as many as 35% of these tourists never set foot inside a football stadium (Megerian, 2007), which highlights the importance of the support and ancillary services that surround the tailgating act and complete “game-day” experience.

## **Methods and Sampling**

Both paper-based and online surveys will be distributed to fans of several NCAA Division-I football teams during the Fall season of 2010. Paper surveys will be distributed by way of the head researcher and undergraduate volunteers after home football games at Auburn University. Online surveys designed using survey monkey will take the form of a web link that will be posted on the message boards of a major fan base website wherein members pay a monthly premium to access inside news, statistics, and other media of their favorite team.

Upon consent, survey participants will begin by completing a number of demographic questions as well as general questions about their activities and average expenditure on their game day activities. Modified versions of the SERVQUAL and SPORTSERV scales will be employed to measure fans’ satisfaction levels with their tailgating experience. A five-point Likert-type scale anchored at (1) Highly Dissatisfied through to (5) Highly Satisfied will be used to gauge fans’ satisfaction on a 20-item list of variables potentially affecting a typical fan’s game day activities.

Links to tailored surveys will be sent to a number of nationally-recognized Division-IA National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member universities, respectively, by means of social media and online fan base websites such as Facebook and Yahoo Rivals.

## **Discussion**

Trends in rules and regulations regarding tailgating have changed significantly in the last ten years and have led to heavily restricted parking, limited tailgating areas, and a hired second party to sell the best locations to those fans willing to pay for a full-service tailgate experience. These actions have led to resentful fans that have been tailgating for decades and disapprove of the obstacles to this shared tradition. This alone creates a need for research in this area. Very little research has been done to address the topic of tailgating specifically (James et al., 2001), leaving a full gamut of opportunities for this research. The potential impacts of finding that tailgating plays a major role in a fan’s overall satisfaction holds opportunity for years of further research on this subject.

Hypothesized results include a strong representation male respondents, students, and alumni of each school. Additionally, a young and affluent demographic with a spend averaging between three- and four hundred dollars on tailgating efforts alone each weekend will prove economic importance. Finally, it is likely a valid presence of NCAA football fans will view tailgating as equally or more important than the football game itself.

While the sporting event itself is the reason that most sport tourists tailgate as many as 35% of these tourists never set foot inside a football stadium (Megerian, 2007), which highlights the importance

of the support and secondary services that surround the tailgating act and complete “game-day” experience. It is imperative that these schools consider fan satisfaction as a huge driver of their programs. Unfortunately, sporting event coordinators tend to focus more on the main event when considering satisfaction, quality, and future behavioral intention of event attendees. This research also aims to find schools’ shortcomings in satisfying their most important customer: the fan.

### **Response to Reviewers**

1. The perceived value of tailgating, although not mentioned directly in this abstract, is currently being assessed through mentioned online survey. Space restraints barred mention of this.
2. Differences between schools, regions, and the win-loss record of each participating school are currently being recorded (as mentioned in the second paragraph) as we are in the midst of the college football season. These will certainly be reported in the final results of the research.
3. Thank you both for your comments and suggestions.

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