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MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH TAILGATING: A UNIQUE TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

We examined how individuals describe the meaning of one type of travel experience—tailgating—which takes place within a unique cultural environment. Results showed that individuals associate four meanings with their tailgating experience: “Nostalgic Journey,” “Camaraderie Trip,” “Belonging Tour,” and “Voyage of Support.” These meanings either originated from individuals’ past memories (e.g., nostalgia), or were emotionally connected with their feelings (e.g., camaraderie, belonging) and personal growth or renewal (e.g., support). These findings provide a glimpse into how tourism marketers can create even more meaningful experiences for consumers, and increase the economic benefit to the community.

Keywords: *Tailgating, Meaning, Travel Experience, Culture*

INTRODUCTION

The United States has experienced an evolution in consumer demand. In the 1980s consumers focused on accumulating “things,” and by the 1990s they sought “experiences.” By the early 2000s, consumers began to seek “meaningful experiences” (Norton, 2003; Pine and Gilmore, 2011), which arguably facilitate a positive quality of life (Juniu and Henderson, 2001; Shaw, 1999). Documenting meaningful experiences is challenging, particularly in unique experiential (such as tourism) and cultural contexts, but doing so is important because meaning affects how consumers buy and live (Norton, 2003). We chose to accept the challenge by examining how individuals describe the meaning of one type of travel experience (i.e., tailgating), which takes place within a unique cultural environment (i.e., university).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Travel allows for “meaning making,” a process that results in meaning (i.e., “...shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships,” Baumeister, 1991, p. 15). Humans use meaning to discern patterns in the environment (e.g., signs

of rain, response of a group member) and to control their behavior. Meanings differ depending on context and social group, and they exhibit at multiple levels (i.e., low to high) and evolve over time (Williams, 2008). In the context of tailgating, generally considered to be a pre-game, ritualized, travel activity associated with American sporting events (Drozda, 1996), and the focus of our study, researchers have suggested that it generates multiple meanings (Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak, 2002; James, Breezeel, and Ross, 2001). This may be particularly germane with recent challenges to college football (e.g., NCAA penalties) as well as tailgating itself (e.g., increased regulations and fees; Bachman, 2012).

Studying the “meaning” of the university-based tailgating experience will not only advance knowledge of tourism, but will also be of value to sponsors (e.g., Anheuser-Busch who donates hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to universities); suppliers (e.g., Collegiate Athletic Travel®, which offers packages to sporting events), and universities who profit from the revenue earned through game day events such as tailgating (Weiberg, 2012).

METHODS

Data were collected from a convenience sample of 80 individuals tailgating outside a university stadium in October and November 2012. A total of eight interviewers (4 teams of an observer and an interviewer) collected data. Data collection involved an interview, photo elicitation, and observation. The three types of data were collected at the same time, were complementary, and allowed the researchers to support the reliability and validity of each measure. The data analysis process (e.g., independent open coding by each researcher, code comparison, data reduction and theme identification) was based on the work of Stedman et al. (2004) and Patton (1990).

RESULTS

Individuals associated four meanings with their tailgating experience: “Nostalgic Journey,” “Camaraderie Trip,” “Belonging Tour,” and “Voyage of Support.” For some individuals tailgating represented a “Nostalgia Journey.” Individuals indicated that tailgating gives them the opportunity to recall past experiences with old friends, including their *“roommates when [they were] in school here.”* They work hard to find a weekend *“...that [their old friends have] ... free at the same time [at the sample place].”* For other individuals, tailgating exemplifies the spirit of camaraderie; it generates a sense of community. People feel comfortable talking to all members of the tailgating community; in fact, one respondent can’t remember a time when *“...somebody else... wasn’t nice to [her].”* This “Camaraderie Trip” also includes friends and family members who travel to the destination (i.e., university) for reunions. The sense of camaraderie results in individuals feeling like they “belong” to a vast group of people similar to themselves. Their “Belonging Tour” takes place in a unique, thrilling environment: *“the excitement of everybody being here, the thrill ... just like the energy.”* It gives each of them a sense of *“...being part of something bigger... [hanging] out with people who have the same passion [about the university]... ”*. For alumni and football fans, tailgating also represents a “Voyage of Support” for the university and its academic programs as well as the football team. Tailgaters said that they are *“...100% behind [the university]... and extremely supportive of these players and the coaching staff...”* and *“...behind [the university], no matter what happens.”*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In keeping with the findings presented by James et al. (2001) and Gibson et al. (2002), study participants associated multiple “meanings” with their overall experience. These meanings either originated from individuals’ past memories (e.g., nostalgia), or were emotionally connected with their feelings (e.g., camaraderie, belonging) and personal growth or renewal (e.g., support), as has been suggested by Arnould and Price (1993). The meanings were not linked to individuals’ need for novelty, freedom, or other intrinsic needs cited by various authors (e.g., Jeffries and Lepp, 2012; Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick, 2010), suggesting that context does matter when studying meanings arising from the travel experience. In terms of application, these findings provide a glimpse into how tourism planners can create even more meaningful experiences for consumers (e.g., hold a cohort reunion inside the stadium; introduce evening events that generate a stronger sense of belonging) and tourism marketers can increase the economic benefit to the community (e.g., extend stay by adding nostalgia-based experiences to the tailgating weekend).

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