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Factors Influencing Men's Basketball Season Ticket Purchase

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Abstract

This study explored the men's basketball season ticket consumption behavior and identified the differences among marital status and those who brought children to the game. Using survey methodology, statistical analysis reveals that entertainment, sport involvement, team identification, and game attractiveness, are keys factors influencing men's basketball season ticket consumption. Married persons appreciate team identification and entertainment more than non-married individuals. Practical managerial implications and marketing-strategy suggestions are also included.

Introduction

Ticket sales are a primary revenue source for many NCAA Division-I basketball programs, especially for those that do not have a lucrative television broadcasting contract (Howard & Crompton, 2004). Season tickets are an important component of the income stream. A high volume of season ticket sales not only secures a portion of ticket revenue, it may also attract more sponsorships and alumni donations (Isner, 2007; Slattery & Pitts, 2002).

It is a popular belief, that season ticket purchases are a direct reflection of a team's win-loss record in the prior season. However, this belief was criticized by Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2007) as a "sport marketing myopia," which neglected the consumers' needs and wants. The criticism of Mullin et al. (2007) simply reminds the readers that winning alone cannot completely dictate the season ticket sales. While marketing athletic program to the fans, regional and state institutions often encounter many challenges, such as the maintenance of a competitive athletic program and the competition of fans associated with the flagship university located within the same state (Chen & Mak, 2010). These challenges may affect season ticket sales significantly. To overcome those challenges, the researchers believe by identifying the factors influencing basketball season ticket purchase, the institution's athletic department would be able to boost its ticket sale revenues. The identification of such factors may contribute to improved marketing efficiency in the men's basketball program and enable the sport marketers to maximize the following seasons' marketing efforts, regardless of win-loss records. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore different aspects of men's basketball season ticket consumption behavior at a NCAA Division I regional university and to identify if differences among marital and parenting status influence various aspects of men's basketball season ticket consumption behavior.

Psycho-social Motivation for Purchasing Season Tickets

Past literature identified relevant information about several college fans' motivational factors for purchasing season tickets. Entertainment was one of the leading factors, which contributed to

customers' purchase of the men's basketball season tickets. This finding was supported by many studies (Hall & O'Mahony, 2006; Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008). The social activities, rivalry atmosphere, and exciting actions associated with basketball games are all considered as entertaining elements to spectators. Season ticket consumers enjoy the social opportunity of being a part of a group, bonding with friends, and the interaction with other spectators/fans (Chen, Salazar, & Fitzgerald, 2009; Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; James & Ross, 2004; Koo & Hardin, 2008; Mak, Lee & Donahue, 2007; Rindinger & Funk, 2006). Studies supported the beneficial effects on a person's social well-being when attending the basketball game at the arena versus watching the game at home (Bishop & Martin, 2007; Margolin, 2006; Wann, Bayens, & Driver, 2004). Basketball spectatorship enables spectator to escape from everyday life issues and problems. This sport provides an avenue for spectators to experience the enjoyment of risk, a sense of competitiveness, and excitement in an almost a risk-free environment (Mak & Cheung, 2009; Mak, et al., 2007).

In sporting goods retail setting, frequent users and actual participants are the primary market segments consuming the products. Thus, the consumers' sport involvement is a vital key to reflect the intensity of their consuming behavior. The Pareto Principle (the 80% of business sales come from 20% of clients), therefore, became a central principle to explain the concept of product usage (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). According to Mak et al. (2007), the spectators' motivation for attending games can be impacted by the following key factors: their habit of affiliating themselves with sport figures and/or teams, through watching or listening to sports news on television or radio. Chen et al. (2009) also stated that the spectators' love for the game, including their interest and past playing experience, was one of the four major factors influencing their willingness to renew the season ticket memberships.

Due to the highly emotional and competitive nature of sports, many fans develop a particular allegiance to their favorite team (Greenwell, Brownlee, Jordan, & Popp, 2008). Season ticket consumers often possess a high level of psychological involvement that is interwoven with their interest and affiliation toward their chosen team (Funk, et al., 2004). Research supported that individuals who publicize their association with a sports team are driven by the need for self-esteem and/or social identity (Fink & Parker, 2009; Funk, et al., 2004). The connection behind fan affiliation and ticket consumption is further elaborated by Koo and Hardin (2008), when they proclaim that season ticket consumers often develop a high level of attachment that makes them want to attend more games and purchase more products related to sports. In addition, many season ticket holders possess what Koo and Hardin (2008) refer to as "vicarious achievement, which represents why fans share the success of the team and feel good when the team succeeds" (p. 33). On the other hand, team identification can also contribute to unpleasant feelings when an athlete engages in immoral behaviors, which reflects negatively on the team (Fink & Parker, 2009).

Multiple studies supported game attractiveness as an important factor that customers consider when purchasing the men's basketball season tickets and supported by other study (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004). When the home team did not have a winning record or star players, spectators would focus on the opponent teams' performance or their predictions on how close the games would be (Mak & Cheung, 2009). Opponent teams with the similar level of performance, nationally ranked teams, and rivalry school were among the factors listed, which could attract consumers to buy season tickets (Mak & Cheung, 2009).

Demographics of College Basketball Fans

Understanding basketball fans' demographics, purchasing plans, shopping behavior, media consumption and event experience can help the athletic department to gain leverage to increase corporate sponsorship and ticket sales (Butler University Athletics, 2006). About 47% of Americans claimed that they are fans of college basketball (Jones, 2010). College basketball also has a high proportion of non-white fans (54%), although the differences are not nearly as pronounced as they are for pro basketball (Jones, 2010). College basketball is equally favored by both young Americans (under 21 years old) and older Americans (over 65 years old).

According to study reports, college basketball fans can be profiled with the following characteristics: (1) they are likely to have a good education (with a college degree) and a household income exceeding \$50,000; and (2) they are likely to be married (Grand Valley States, 2004; SportsBusiness Daily, 2007; The Ohio State University, n.d.) . In terms of the college football and basketball season ticket holders' demographic characteristics, there are just a few minor differences from the aforementioned description. Football season ticket holders would more likely to be Caucasian, and the percentage distributions in age and income level are gravitated toward the high-end (Chen & Mak, 2010; Pan, Gabert, McGaugh, & Branvold, 1997).

Methodology

Participants

The participants ($N = 240$) of the current study included 145 males and 95 females. They were season ticket holders from a NCAA Division-I institution in the Appalachian region of the United States. About half of the participants were married (51.2%). The general demographic characteristics of the participants included: (1) had at least one child (60.4%), (2) had a college degree (60%), (3) bought season tickets for family (51.2%), and (4) brought kids to the game (59.6%), and (5) earned more than the median annual income ($> \$23,000$) of the data collection areas (84.1%). The majority of the participants were between the age ranges of 25-54 (about 64%). Participants who were over 55 year-old and less than 24 year-old accounted for 18.9% and 7.5% of total sample population respectively.

Instrumentation and Procedures

Development of the questionnaire involved (a) a review of related literature, (b) a content review by an expert panel, (c) a series of usability tests, and (d) a pilot test. The initial questionnaire contained four parts. The first three parts (P-I to P-III) consisted of fifteen questions (items) related to motives and attitudes towards purchasing season tickets for a specific Division-I men's basketball team. Participants were asked to answer those questions based on a five-point Likert-type scale with "1" – strongly disagree and "5" – strongly agree. Part IV of the questionnaire consisted of ten questions that obtain demographic information about the participants. This questionnaire was reviewed for its content validity by a panel consisting of the institution's sport management faculty and athletics department staff. Minor changes were made to the wording of several questions. Following the confirmation of content validity of the questionnaire, usability tests were conducted to determine whether the items were defined similarly, and the vocabulary level was appropriate. Two season ticket holders and two students participated in the usability tests. They were asked to read the instrument out loud and state their understanding of each question. Minor adjustments were further made to improve clarity and comprehension. Upon completion of the usability tests, 240 questionnaires were delivered to season ticket holders.

Data Analysis

A frequency distribution analysis was used to describe the demographic information of the participants. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient indicated the results of the reliability test and internal consistency of the questionnaire. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the items in Part I, Part II and Part III for identifying the factors affecting men's basketball season ticket consumption behavior. Two by two factorial ANOVA were used to identify differences in various aspects of season ticket purchasing behavior based on the participants' marital status and whether having brought their children to the games or not.

Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analyses yielded four factors affecting men's basketball season ticket purchasing behavior. Those factors were game attractiveness, team identification, entertainment, and sport involvement, which explained 49% of the total variance. Game attractiveness was defined as the likelihood of the close games against rivalry opponents and success of the program. Team identification was defined as personal support and emotional involvement that participants had with a team. Entertainment covered areas such as the sense of rivalry, excitement, social interaction, and enjoyment that a spectator was likely to experience. Sport involvement was defined as perceived interest, past participatory experience and passion/love toward a sport. Please refer to Table 1 and 2 to review the details on factors affecting the participants' season ticket purchasing behavior. Among the aforementioned identified factors that influenced participants' purchasing behavior, sport involvement had the lowest average score ($M = 2.48$). The other three factors, team identification, entertainment, and game attractiveness clearly recorded a higher rating ($M > 3.61$). In addition, there was not much differentiation among the ratings for each of those factors. In other word, those three factors were viewed as equally important influential factors affecting ticket purchasing at a moderate level (M ranged between 3.61~3.75).

Measuring Instrument Reliability

The Cronbach Alpha coefficients for each factor ranged from .67 to .80. The overall Cronbach Alpha coefficient was .77 which indicated that the questionnaire was internally consistent and reliable.

Factorial 2 x 2 ANOVA

Factorial 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed that the married group had a significant ($p < .05$) higher team identification score ($F_{1, 239} = 4.921, p = .027$) and entertainment score ($F_{1, 239} = 4.718, p = .031$) than the single/widowed/separated group. There were no significant differences in game attractiveness scores and sport involvement scores under the conditions of these two combined characteristics: (1) the participants' marital status and (2) whether the participants have brought their children to the game or not.

Discussion, Suggestions and Conclusions

The findings of the present study indicated that entertainment, sport involvement, team identification, and game attractiveness, are all factors influencing men's basketball season ticket consumption. Among

those four identified factors, sport involvement seemed to be a little weak in its influential impact. Although the findings of this study have supported the conclusions of several studies concerning the influential factors for season ticket sales, the practical managerial implication of this study may seem to be a little more complex. Since a multitude of elements were identified as influential factors, narrowing down the promotional foci has become a difficult process. Although certain elements in game attractiveness and entertainment were related to the success and winning of the team, which the sport marketers have little control of, they may still augment the fans' experience by creating a more family-oriented entertainment experience, promoting school spirit, and an atmosphere of rivalry. However, the sport marketers also need to be aware of the potential risk of violent acts by the fans once the rivalry spirit has intensified.

The results indicated the demographic characteristics of this sample group were quite similar to typical college sport spectators (Grand Valley State, 2004; The Ohio State University, n.d.). Because the sport involvement was not a strong factor dictating the consumers' purchasing decision when acquiring season tickets, the sport marketers can boldly and optimistically cultivate community members, regardless of whether or not they are currently basketball fans, by increasing community members' awareness and interest toward the program.

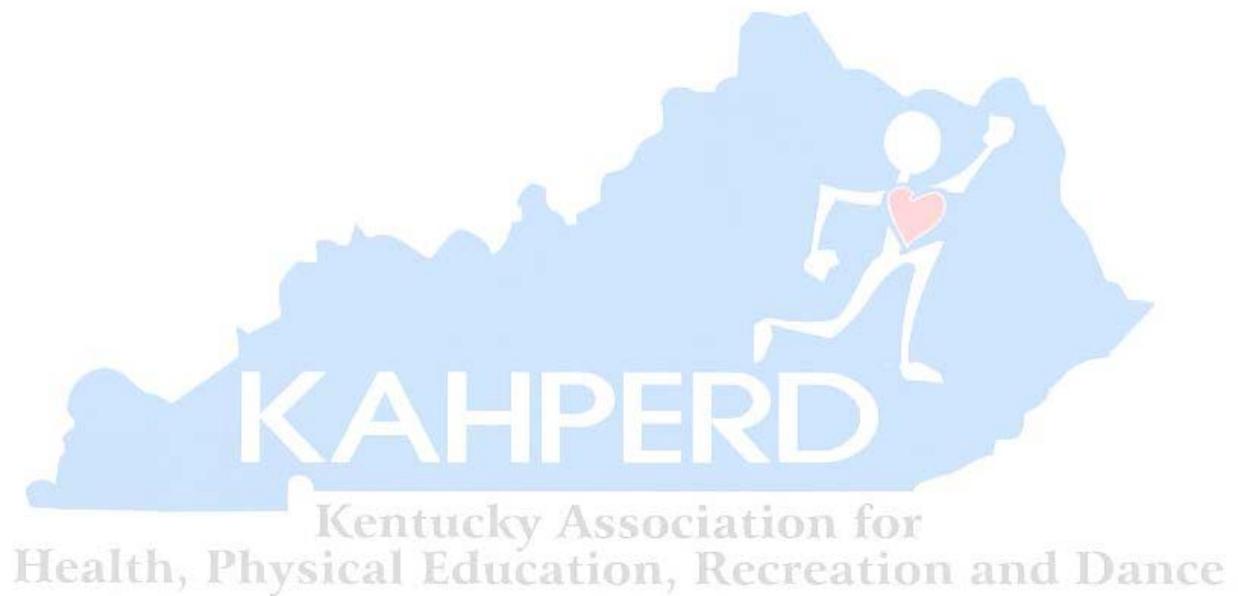
If marketers need to select a specific demographic group to target for season ticket purchasing, they may primarily target the married individuals by emphasizing the entertainment component and team identification. Apparently, the married couples with children had a slightly higher rating (almost statistically significant) on team identification, which implies they could be loyal attendees to the program. In typical married-couple families, women are often the financial decision maker of a family's spending on sports, entertainment costs, and other needs (Impact Lab, 2008). It is vital for marketers to approach and build a good relationship with the mother of a household. They are more likely to be decider in financial decision for the family pertaining to renew the season ticket options.

Values and lifestyles have been viewed as important attributes that marketers must extensively consider, when targeting their potential and existing clients (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Strategic Business Insight, 2009). Therefore, the marketers should identify the best strategies to satisfy the psychological and social needs of the young adult and middle-aged spectators. For this reason, it is ideal for the marketers to brand their basketball program as an economical family-oriented source of entertainment. The researchers would like to offer the following practical strategies that may be useful for the survey institution to adopt. The unique focus of the proposed strategies is on the social and service aspect instead of the economic benefits.

- (1) Promoting and creating more family-oriented half-time entertainment and benefits/incentives to attract married spectators
- (2) Offering different levels of season-ticket packages with various plans to enhance social opportunities (i.e. dining options, seating arrangements);
- (3) Upgrading the current hospitality plan for the season-ticket holders;
- (4) Targeting certain rivalry match ups;
- (5) Offering special package deal to the new alumni (who have graduated for less than three years), and
- (6) Offering special youth activities and programs (i.e., free one-day sport camp or club membership) as incentives to attract married couples with children.

This sample was derived from a state institution in the Appalachian region; therefore, the generalization of the findings and application of the practical implications may only be

applicable to schools that are similar to the surveyed institution in size and geographic location. For a future research direction, the season ticket holders' perceptions about the economic benefits of the season ticket packages and the quality of game services may be further explored.



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Table 1
Factors Affecting the Participants' Season Ticket Purchasing Behavior

Factors	I	II	III	IV
I. Entertainment				
1. The more intense the rivalry, the more I enjoy watching my favorite sport	.794			
2. Watching my favorite sport gives me a chance to spend time with friends	.654			
3. Being a spectator of my favorite sports helps me get away from daily pressure	.605			
4. I feel excited for hours after a victory by my favorite team	.544			
II. Sport Involvement				
1. I watched college sporting events regularly		.528		
2. I attended college sporting events regularly		.795		
3. I participate in sports regularly		.646		
III. Team Identification				
1. Affiliation with university			.833	
2. Contribution to the University Foundation			.711	
3. The success of the University Basketball team is important to me			.556	
IV. Game Attractiveness				
1. Schedule of opponents				.763
2. Winning record of team				.765

Table 2
Averaged Rating of Factors Affecting the Participants' Season Ticket Purchasing Behavior

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Team Identification	3.75	.93
Entertainment	3.74	.867
Game Attractiveness	3.61	1.03
Sport Involvement	2.48	.92

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