

GAME-DAY EXPERIENCE AND OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT ATTENDANCE AT DIVISION I FOOTBALL GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how student perceptions of game-day and in-game promotions correlate with attending college football games. Using a quantitative survey of students at a Midwestern, state, flagship, Football Championship School (FCS) university, this study examines factors that influence student attendance of the school's football games. Topics under study include what communication sources students prefer to use to learn about university athletic events or promotions, what factors influence the students' likelihood of attending, and how important are different elements of the game day activities to the students' decision to attend university athletic events? The results found that students prefer email and word-of-mouth information sources. The results also demonstrated that game-day activities that promote socialization, as well as rivalry games were the most likely to be significantly associated with past game attendance. High mean scores for socializing with friends and pre-game tailgating reinforce the importance of the social aspects of the game.

Keywords: Sports Marketing; College Football; Game-day Experience; Tailgating; FCS Football

INTRODUCTION

University athletics is big business (Williams, 2007). College football is often one of the most visible and prominent sports in a university athletic department. However, when aspects such as fan attendance and game revenue severely decrease, that financial and social impact can affect an entire athletic department's budget (Blount, 2018; Russo & The Associated Press, 2020), as well as sports marketing and promotion. In 2011 alone, programs in Division I (the highest division in NCAA college football) spent more than \$6 billion total, with many public institutions also relying on student fees, university self-support or state assistance for funding assistance (Lubbers & O'Malley, 2019).

Before COVID-19, sports marketers were charged with the imperative to increase game attendance, while nationwide attendance has been dwindling (Anders, 2019; Dodds, 2020; Evans, 2019; Wilder, 2020). In the aftermath of COVID-19, where the National Basketball Association is holding games without fans, the attendance imperative will be more difficult to achieve (Rader, 2020, April 27). In the past, game attendance increased revenue not only for the game, but for licensed gear, fan loyalty, TV coverage, all of which bring revenue to the university.

Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) attendance has seen declines at large programs, such as Florida, Michigan, Ohio State, Penn State and Alabama. In fact, decreasing fan numbers were prevalent in eight of the last nine FBS seasons, including the subdivision's lowest attendance since the mid-1990s (Anders, 2019; Dodds, 2020; Evans, 2019; Wilder, 2020). These attendance concerns include college students, who are a pivotal part of college football attendance and in-game atmosphere. Media outlets have also noted decreases in student attendance, including schools such as Ohio State and Michigan (Anders, 2019; Baumgardner, 2014).

Understanding differences between FBS and FCS classifications, such as media exposure and prestige perceptions, is crucial for college football research (Simmons, Popp, McEvoy, & Howell, 2017). This is especially true regarding student fan support. University size, ease of attending, and athletic marketing among NCAA athletic divisions (i.e. I, II and III), are also major factors in understanding successful promotions and fan attendance (McKnight, Paugh, Waltz, & Kirkbride, 2016). FCS schools are often understudied, and provide interesting examinations of programs and conferences which have a greater reliance on ticket revenue (Falls & Natke, 2015). This study explores ways to reach the ever-changing student population to help increase game attendance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Attendance Importance

College students are pivotal stakeholders to university culture; as such, there is a need to continually study students' perceptions and value on athletic events, attendance, and importance. Lubbers and Joyce (2013) described factors, such as information sources, game schedules, game opponents (especially rivalries), and social interaction, that were key aspects in gauging if and why students attend college athletic events.

Although issues of fan and student attendance, game opponents, rivalries, and importance of social interactions are important across all divisions of college football, Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) schools, the second level of Division I football universities, often work on a fraction of a FBS budget, and utilize payments from games versus FBS schools for a large portion of athletic and institution funding and exposure. FBS schools also receive millions of dollars in national television contracts (Palanjian et al., 2014). While this can have a negative impact in game attendance, this is a revenue stream FCS schools often do not receive. Revenue shortfalls have plagued FCS programs. In 2018, median revenues dropped two percent with a five percent increase in expenses (NCAA, n.d.; Temple, 2012). While attendance drops in FCS were very slight (only a drop of about 20 fans from 2018 to 2019), and past research indicated ticket sales were only five percent of FCS revenue for university athletics, there is an importance to gauge student feedback for game attendance and promotions (Haley, 2020; Latta & Mitchell, 2018; Lubbers & O'Malley, 2019).

University Sports Marketing Communication

Study of effective communication platforms is highly needed. Simmons et al. (2017) noted a major flaw at FCS schools was students' lack of awareness about university college football games. University sports marketing has traditionally used television, radio, newspapers, the university

website and posters to advertise games to the local community. In addition, students, faculty, staff and ticket holders are emailed reminders of the upcoming games. Castleberry & Espel (2018) noted university emails are highly valued by college students in receiving athletics information.

Social media is another way for providing fans (including students) alerts for upcoming games and game outcomes (Burns III, 2018; DeShazo, 2015; Mason, Tucci, & Benefield, 2017; Tomko, 2011). Facebook and Twitter are popular technologies used to market athletic information, while additional platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr and Pinterest often depend on market psychographics, and if those technologies are often used by students (DeShazo, 2015; Zullo, 2018).

For smaller athletic programs, social media is crucial for examining and boosting student attendance. At the Division II level (one level below FCS programs), media such as Twitter, Instagram, online broadcasts, and digital advertising, were vital in boosting athletic program publicity (Zullo, 2018). Mason, Tucci, and Benefield (2017) analyzed Division II college basketball promotions. While programs have extremely loyal fans, there is a need for providing digital platforms for that fandom engagement (like blogs or social media), plus game incentives and promotions to hook casual fans into attending. In particular, social media can be used to promote athlete features, provide game updates, and virtual partnerships between the university and local business community (Mason, Tucci, & Benefield, 2017). However, to depend solely on social media is unwise, as television, radio, newspapers and posters all reach a local audience. Often, programs aim to increase radio and television access for fans who are geographically unable to attend (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000).

Across multiple analyses, social media usage was not a factor in increasing wanting to attend. That said, social media should be used to “create hype and excitement” (Haught et al., 2016, p. 26) about going, as well as marketing game pageantry, such as attendee involvement, and multiplatform social media campaigns. As social media is a strong element of current college students’ generational identity (Napoli, 2014), particularly content creation and individual expression, analysis of these factors is crucial for insights into student demographics and attitudes on university athletic messaging.

The role of social media in marketing collegiate football is explored further in this research. In particular, this study examines what platforms may resonate best with students for promotional and overall football game information, and if students are swayed to attend because of these promotions or information. To analyze the effectiveness of digital and traditional communication methods used in university athletic marketing to college students, the following research question is posited.

RQ1: What communication sources do students prefer to use to learn about university athletic events or promotions?

Factors influencing Attendance

Behavior is a key factor in examining athletic event perceptions and marketing trends. Understanding fan behaviors is important, as there must be analysis of fans’ motivations and behaviors to attend, instead of simply whether they attend (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Mahony,

Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). The more fans are attached to a team, and thus motivated to attend, the more their fandom becomes a significant personal behavior (Shapiro, Ridinger, & Trail, 2013). This understanding will keep fans coming back. The key factors are rivalry games, friends or family attending, team performance, opponent quality, and team record (Castleberry & Esper, 2018; Falls & Natke, 2015; Lubbers & Joyce, 2013).

Team Performance. Fan perceptions of the team and league's importance, their emotional and psychological investments, and overall fan loyalty (e.g. winning versus losing seasons), are all important facets in understanding the success of athletic marketing and promotions (Drenten et al., 2009; Falls & Natke, 2015; Hill & Green, 2000; Kim et al., 2019; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Palanjian et al., 2014; Simmons et al., 2018; Yoshida & James, 2010). Falls and Natke (2015) and Lubbers and Joyce (2013), specifically describe how conference and rivalry games often result in stronger fan team interest and attendance, especially if their team is winning. Opponent quality -- specifically if the game is a perceived marquee event -- and the overall game product (teams, athletes, etc.) are also crucial factors in fan interaction and perceptions of the quality of the game day experience (Castleberry & Espel, 2018; Yoshida & James, 2010)

Social Interaction. When fans do express devotion to a program, those sporting events are often avenues for increased social interaction (Castleberry & Espel, 2018; Kim et al., 2019). This is true for student engagement, as well. Students often attend athletic events for "social and entertainment value" (Lubbers & Joyce, 2013, p. 521); at a small Division II school, almost 60 percent of students went to football games to socialize with friends, while additional studies noted "school and friend commitments" as factors in the amount of student football game attendance (Castleberry & Espel, 2018; Simmons et al., 2017, p. 20).

Fan Behavior - Escapism and Entertainment. Deep personal identities, where fans create deep emotional attachments adding a human component to a sports team, are also highly influential in deciphering sporting attendance and engagement. Laverie and Arnett (2000) describe this as salience, where any study of fan motivation must include how important the team is to them. As a form of attachment, fans often see sporting events as a method of escape -- that is, getting away from everyday lifestyles and activities -- and a form of satisfaction and entertainment fulfillment, with fans more influenced by entertainment factors the more games attended (Kim et al., 2019; Palanjian et al., 2014; Yoshida & James, 2010). Entertainment can also be in the form of promotions, a prime tactic for increasing student involvement at games. Simmons et al. (2018) note game promotion must go beyond simply communication that games exist; rather, it must include benefits for students to attend, such as socialization and giveaways. Common games included for college football promotional events include homecoming and Senior Day (Simmons et al., 2018).

Constraints

However, constraints inhibiting student attendance are also important to recognize. For instance, prior social engagements with friends, family, and/or schoolwork could inhibit the likelihood of students attending games (Simmons et al., 2017). Commitment can also play a factor, since students may often attend games at the expense of social factors like friends and family wanting to attend or overall socialization (Mahony et al., 2000). Additionally, when a FBS game is played

at the same time, the students' FBS fandom is another constraint. Larger FBS programs airing on television at the same time is a constraint that could impact student attendance and devotion to a FCS game (Lubbers & Joyce, 2013; Simmons et al., 2017).

Fan Types

Types of fans are another important construct to examining whether a person is likely to attend a game. Greene, O'Neil, Russell, and Johnston (2018) noted college student-age demographics, as well as faculty and alumni, was the largest group adopting fandom of a new college football program, specifically due to its association with the university.

Past studies have categorized fans, in attempts to analyze specific fan behaviors, motivations, and intentions. University athletic marketers should recognize a vast array of different fan characteristics, and promote accordingly to each. In sports fandom, there is often a range from superfans who devotedly attend and follow each game, to casual fans with middle-of-the-road interest, to students who have never attended a game, or have little to no interest in attending (Castleberry & Espel, 2018; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Mahony et al., 2000; Simmons et al., 2018).

Haught et al. (2016) discussed four specific types of fans. Proud University Fans are rigorous about the in-game and sporting experience, atmosphere, and team(s), including tailgating, spirit squads, crowd energy, and the team's performance and statistics, including social media coverage. Escaping Football Follower(s) care more about the game's "pageantry" (Haught et al., 2016, p. 26) than in-game concessions, and look to games as a means of leisure. The Football Experience Fan often uses social media to escape boredom during the game, and may care more about singular players than the overall team. Finally, the Reluctant Fan has slight interest, but may be very disengaged with any social media or in-game atmosphere (Haught et al., 2016, p. 26). Examination of fan behaviors and loyalty should also answer the amount of fans who could fall into particular categories, thus providing "customized" (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000, p. 22) strategies for how involved a fan could be in a particular team. For example, Mahony et al. (2000) examined different levels of fan loyalty -- high, spurious, latent, and low -- to determine particular factors in those groups that university athletic promotions could target specifically to increase chances of attending.

Therefore, to study the effect of these attitudes and behaviors on student college football attendance, the researchers pose the following question.

RQ2: What factors influence the students' likelihood of attending?

Game Day Experiences

In-Game Impact. While social media and traditional media, plus overall fan attitudes, are crucial for understanding student attendance and engagement at football games, a third component to this study is the game day experiences themselves. A university team's on-field performance and game day opponent play significant factors in fan attendance. Even among a team's passionate fans, a team's on-field struggles greatly impact the level of devotion and attendance, especially among college students. (Lubbers & Joyce, 2013; Padgett & Hunt, 2012; Simmons et al., 2018). Rivalry

and conference games can help increase fan attendance, though opponents are also a factor. A perceived mismatched opponent has a negative effect on a university program's ticket sales (Falls & Natke, 2015). Fans can also utilize social media for information and entertainment during the game, thus adding another layer to a game day experience (Haught et al., 2016).

Physical stadium constraints can also affect game-day experiences. For instance, while socialization is one attitudinal factor, the size of the student section itself can also sway a student's decision to attend, as well as other components like the facility's sound system and aforementioned in-game entertainment (Castleberry & Espel, 2018).

Tailgating. Another often-covered aspect of in-game experiences in college football studies is tailgating. Several past studies indicated the vast importance this one element had on the socialization and college football experience. Fans found tailgating is not just a socialization with family and friends, but an escape from their normal everyday lifestyles (Drenten et al., 2009; James, Breezeel, & Ross, 2001). In particular, involvement and social interaction, as well as fan and personal identities, were major motivations in why people tailgate. For example, not only is tailgating a ritualistic event, but also a sense of camaraderie and group interaction (Drenten et al., 2009). These are also motivations the researchers are analyzing in this study. Specifically, the current investigation examines the impact of individual and group social interaction on in-game experiences like tailgating and collective identity, and if these factors are also a large part of students' attitudes on attending college football games.

Concessions. Food and beverage consumption itself is another notable aspect to understanding fan behavior and game experiences. Hill and Green (2000) noted stadium and concessions quality did not impact professional rugby league fan attendance. However, concessions can impact other game elements, including ticket cost. Krautmann and Berri (2007) indicated professional sports teams can use concession revenues to lower ticket prices. At the college football level, these are also important aspects for further study, as increased attendance can boost revenue streams like concessions (Falls & Natke, 2015). For instance, are concession prices a factor in student game attendance? As concessions are also a large part of the in-game experience, this is another aspect to analyze the vitality of specific game day elements to understanding student likelihood of attending college football games.

Other elements, such as restroom availability and cleanliness, the size of the student crowd, university bands and spirit squads, and even pre- and post-game traffic all impact the level of fan attendance and motivation to attend (Castleberry & Espel, 2018; Hindulak, 2011). In particular, university spirit squads, music, tailgating, and in-game fan chants and experiences are highly-visible aspects of the college football game day experience, and often nostalgic parts of university culture (Hindulak, 2011; NBC Sports, n.d.; Ryan & Greenstein, 2018).

Based on the previous review of literature, the researchers ask the following question.

RQ3: How important are different elements of the game day activities to the students' decision to attend university athletic events?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the McKnight et al. (2016) study focused on correlations between university components, such as graduation and enrollment, this study takes an exclusive look at student perceptions of game day and in-game promotions' influence on attending college football games. To examine what factors are crucial for this attendance, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: What communication sources do students prefer to use to learn about university athletic events or promotions?

RQ2: What factors influence the students' likelihood of attending?

RQ3: How important are different elements of the game day activities to the students' decision to attend university athletic events?

METHOD

The previous review of literature identified numerous variables that may influence a student's decision to attend a university athletic event. A self-administered, print or online survey questionnaire was used in the current investigation in an attempt to answer the research questions posed. Undergraduate students at a medium-sized, public university in the Great Plains region of the United States that competes in football at the Division I, FCS level, were asked to complete a survey questionnaire to collect information on their past attendance of University football games and what encourages or prevents them from attending.

In addition to demographic questions for classification purposes, one section attempted to determine if various information/communication sources were preferred sources of information on the decision to attend. Additionally, questions asked about their past attendance of the university's football games. Finally, closed- and open-ended questions were used to determine what encourages and discourages student attendance and how we might better promote these events. Specifically, one section asked about the influence of the game quality (teams' records, rivalry games, opponent quality). The second section obtained information on the importance of twelve elements of the game day experience. Two final sections asked specific questions related to concession offerings and the tailgating experience prior to the game.

A draft of the questionnaire was created and was pretested on students in an undergraduate research course. University athletic marketing staff also reviewed the instrument and suggested changes. Changes were made based on the pretest and the athletic marketing staff comments.

Thirty-two students in an undergraduate research class were tasked with the collection of print or online survey responses. The number collected by each student varied, but they averaged 14 per student. The students completed the university's ethical treatment of human subjects training and received instructions and guidelines on survey administration. Survey administrators were asked to meet quotas in respondent sex, academic class/year, and college/school enrolment similar to the percentages for the entire university provided by the university's Office of Institutional Research.

The sampling technique used a nonprobability, available sampling frame, but incorporated the quota variables mentioned in the previous paragraph. Since the research results were to be used by the Athletic Marketing office to inform marketing materials targeting undergraduate students, a

filter question at the start of the survey assured that all the respondents were currently attending the university. The surveys were administered by the student researchers in November of 2018, and were either collected face-to-face in print form or digitally using an online survey management system. Since the sampling involved convenience sampling and did not use a sampling frame/population, it is not possible to calculate a response rate.

The University Athletic Marketing staff suggested differentiating the respondents into the categories of “non-fans,” “occasional fans,” and “true fans.” A description of how the categories are defined is provided below. The occasional or “social fan” was identified by the marketing staff to be much easier to encourage to attend one or two additional games per year, than it would be to encourage the non-fan to attend even one, or to encourage the true fan to add to their already high number of games attended.

Data were analyzed using SPSS-PC. In addition to basic descriptive statistics for frequency, measures of central tendency and dispersion, correlation and regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationships between variables.

RESULTS

The method described above resulted in the collection of data from 452 respondents. Nearly all of the respondents (n=445) provided their current age and that data indicates that the vast majority (95%) were within the traditional college-age range of 18-22. The respondents’ self-identified gender preference showed that nearly 55% of the respondents self-identified as female and 45% as male. Both the age and sex percentages were very similar to those for the University’s overall undergraduate figures. Additionally, the percentage of students in the sample was within +/- 5% of the percentage of the enrollment in the University’s Colleges and Schools.

The only place where the sample was not near the university percentages was for the variable of the year in school. Nearly all the respondents answered the question. The sample contained 63 (14.0%) first year, 86 (19.1%) second year, 136 (30.2%) third year, and 154 (34.2%) fourth year student respondents. First and second year students are underrepresented in the sample, while the third and fourth year students are overrepresented.

Respondents reported the number of games they had attended during the current and previous season. Table 1 presents the results of these questions, and demonstrates that roughly one-third of the students did not attend a game during the season. An additional 32 (2017) to 41% (2018) attended one or two football games per season. The remaining 23% in 2018 and 36% in 2017 attended three to seven games.

The researchers divided the respondents into three fan categories. Non-fans (89, 19.8%) reported attending no games either year. Social fans (289, 64.2%) reported attending at least one game for one of the years but did not fall into the next category. The true fans (72, 16%) attended three or more games for each year they reported a number. To facilitate correlation-based analyses, a composite variable combining the number of games attended in both years was created. The total number of games reported for both years ranged from 0 to 11 with a mean of 3.35 games.

Table 1. Respondent University Football Game Attendance

# Games	2018	2018 %	2017	2017 %
0	160	35.7	144	32.7
1	94	21.0	73	16.6
2	91	20.3	66	15.0
3	49	10.9	54	12.3
4	34	7.6	45	10.2
5	19	4.2	55	12.5
6	1	.2	2	.5
7			1	.2
Total	448	100.0	440	100.0

The remainder of the section presents the results to answer the three research questions posed.

RQ1: What communication sources do students prefer to use to learn about university athletic events or promotions?

Table 2 presents the mean values for the twelve communication/information sources included on the questionnaire. Respondents chose a value to indicate the degree of preference for learning about athletic events using that source. The seven-point scale allowed respondents to indicate if they did not prefer the information source (a value of 1) or that it was a strong preference (a value of 7).

Table 2. Information Source Preference Means

Information Source	Total Sample		Social Fans	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
Email	4.74	2.106	4.81	2.052
Word-of-Mouth	4.69	1.964	4.67	1.979
Facebook	4.30	2.056	4.29	2.053
Twitter	3.98	2.178	3.99	2.174
Instagram	3.93	2.134	3.99	2.146
Snapchat	3.84	2.193	3.91	2.182
Posters	3.78	2.025	3.84	2.035
Univ. Website	3.68	2.006	3.58	1.966
Handout	2.75	1.853	2.83	1.857
Radio Ads	2.55	1.807	2.53	1.805
Television Ads	2.53	1.821	2.46	1.750
Newspaper Ads	2.48	1.800	2.46	1.771

Only three of the information sources had a mean score above the middle point of the scale – 4.0: email; word-of-mouth (WOM); and Facebook. Three additional sources, all social media platforms had mean scores very near the middle point: Twitter; Instagram; and Snapchat. Advertising in legacy media channels – newspapers, radio and television – were at the bottom of the table. The mean scores for the three methods of

advertising on legacy media channels were approximately 2.5 on the 7-point scale and held the bottom positions on the list of 12 information sources. Clearly, among the student population surveyed, traditional legacy media advertising was not the preferred method of finding out about athletic events.

Since the occasional fans were presumed to be a likely target market for the campaign, a separate analysis of communication channel preferences was conducted for the 289 occasional fans and is included in Table 2. Interestingly, there was no difference in the order of their preferences, and only extremely small differences in the mean scores. Thus, it appears that information source preferences do not differ between the occasional fan and the overall respondent pool, and would therefore not be a targeting factor in any campaign.

Attendance Factor	Total Sample		Social Fans	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
Rivalry Game	5.63	1.727	5.81	1.556
Friends or Family Attending	5.49	1.762	5.49	1.710
X Team Performance	5.23	1.827	5.33	1.736
Opponent Quality	4.54	1.834	4.64	1.755
X Team Record	4.35	1.890	4.36	1.866

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RQ2: What factors influence the students’ likelihood of attending?

Previous research cited in the review of literature indicated that the home team’s performance/record, game opponents, and/or a rivalry game were all factors that could influence game attendance. Those factors as well as the social factor of having friends and family attend were included as variables that may be general motivators or barriers to attending that are not necessarily part of the game-day experience.

Table 3 presents the mean scores for these general factors. Respondents chose a value to indicate the importance of each factor in the decision of whether to attend a University football game. The seven-point scale allowed respondents to indicate if a factor was very unimportant (a value of 1) or was very important (a value of 7). Table 3 exhibits the mean and standard deviation values for each of the five attendance factors and is presented for the full sample and just the occasional fans.

All five of the factors were deemed important, as they are all over the scale median score of 4.0. However, some are more important than others. The respondents seem to prize the social element of the game (rivalry game and friends and family attending) over the measures of the quality of the football, such as the home team’s record and the quality of the opponent. Again, there were no differences in the mean rankings between the total sample and that of the social fans. Additionally, the mean values were fairly similar, with the occasional fans evaluating rivalry game, home team’s performance and opponent quality as being only slightly more important than the total respondent responses.

A regression analysis was conducted in an effort to determine if the respondents’ ratings of the importance of the five measures (predictor variables) could predict their reported game attendance

(dependent variable). The analysis did not yield a statistically significant F value ($F=1.932$; $p = .088$), indicating that these five measures were not able to predict the number of games attended. A post hoc correlation analysis was conducted and determined that correlations between the predictor variables were extremely high. As can be seen in Table 4, while only two variables were significantly correlated with game day attendance (at the .05 level), all but one of the predictor variables were significantly correlated with each other. Additionally, 8 of the 9 significant correlations for the predictor factors were at the .000-level. Therefore, they were not providing a unique contribution to the regression equation. The one predictor variable correlation that was not significant (friends or family attending and university team record) is not surprising, as the football team’s record is unlikely to be the primary reason for people to visit and/or attend a game.

Table 4. Correlation of Game Attendance with 5 General Factors

		Team Performance	Team Record	Opponent Quality	Opponent Rivalry	Friends-Family Attendance
Games Attended	Pearson Corr.	.116*	.093	.038	.114*	-.014
	Sig.	.014	NS	NS	.016	NS
Team Performance	Pearson Corr.		.641**	.532**	.668**	.197**
	Sig.		.000	.000	.000	.000
Team Record	Pearson Corr.			.572**	.494**	.082
	Sig.			.000	.000	NS
Opponent Quality	Pearson Corr.				.565**	.101*
	Sig.				.000	.033
Opponent Rivalry	Pearson Corr.					.281**
	Sig.					.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The two general factors that are significantly correlated with game day attendance, team performance and opponent is a rival, are consistent with past research that found those to be important factors in the decision to attend an athletic event.

RQ3: How important are different elements of the game day activities to the students’ decision to attend university athletic events?

The greatest emphasis in the questionnaire content was to assess the importance of a wide variety of game-day experiences on the decision to attend. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first section identifies 12 elements of the game-day experience that have been studied as variables in previous investigations. The remaining two sections focus in on two important elements of that experience, the tailgating experience and the concessions.

Twelve measures of the game-day experience. Table 5 presents the mean scores for the total respondent group, as well as the respondents in the occasional fan category, for the twelve game-day experience factors. Respondents chose a value to indicate the importance of each factor in the decision of whether to attend a University football game. The seven-point scale allowed respondents to indicate the importance of a factor and ranged from very unimportant (a value of 1) or was very important (a value of 7).

Game-Day Experience	Total Sample		Social Fans	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
Socializing with Friends	5.86	1.470	5.90	1.415
Pre-game Tailgating	5.74	1.811	5.99	1.660
Size of the Student Crowd	5.42	1.753	5.60	1.544
Free Giveaways	5.07	1.908	5.00	1.915
Seating Comfort	4.73	1.821	4.77	1.862
Internet Connectivity	4.60	2.003	4.57	2.026
Concessions	4.53	1.956	4.46	2.002
Promotional Games	3.83	2.013	3.82	2.006
University Band	3.32	1.968	3.33	1.960
University Cheer Team	3.31	1.968	3.35	1.967
University Dance Team	3.14	1.927	3.19	1.922
Parking Availability	3.12	2.066	3.10	2.082

Both the total respondent pool and the occasional fans rated the social elements of

socializing with friends, the pre-game tailgating and the size of the student crowd as the most important factors in the decision to attend the football game. The occasional fans rated all three of these as more important than the total fan base, and even flipped the first and second factors, so that tailgating was deemed even more important than socializing with friends. Clearly the responses of the social fan group support the name of the social fan, but all the student responses also just as clearly demonstrate the importance of these social factors.

It is also important to note that the traditional game-day elements of the promotional games/activities, the University band, the University cheer team and the University dance team were below the mean and appear to have little importance on the decision to attend. The final factor below the median score of 4.0 was that of parking availability. While parking can be extremely important at some sporting venues, at the venue used for these football games there is abundant parking at the facility and in the surrounding area. Additionally, many students simply walk to the facility, so parking does not register as an important factor.

A regression analysis was conducted in an effort to determine the correlation of the respondents' rating of the importance of the 12 game-day experience measures (predictor variables) and their reported game attendance (dependent variable). The regression model developed had an F value of 1.833 that was statistically significant at .041. The coefficients table for the model is presented in table 6.

Table 6. Coefficients for 12 Game-Day Experience Measures ^a

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	2.427	.695		3.492	.001
Seat Comfort	-.038	.090	-.024	-.419	.676
Parking Avail	-.155	.080	-.112	-1.940	.053
Promotional Games	-.057	.090	-.040	-.632	.528
Free Giveaways	.141	.098	.094	1.438	.151
Dome Concessions	-.045	.095	-.031	-.472	.637
USD Cheer Team	.006	.118	.004	.053	.957
USD Dance Team	-.015	.120	-.010	-.125	.901
USD Band	.106	.086	.073	1.231	.219
Socializing with Friends	.162	.111	.083	1.454	.147
Pre-game Tailgating	-.210	.093	-.133	-2.258	.024
Internet Connectivity	.095	.082	.066	1.162	.246
Size of Student Crowd	.165	.103	.101	1.604	.109

a. Dependent Variable: Games Attended

Table 7 presents the results of a post hoc correlation analysis of the 12 dimensions with the variable of game attendance. Only the correlations of socializing with friends and the size of the student crowd were statistically significant. Again, the results note the connection between the likelihood of attending a game and the importance of the ability to socialize. While not statistically significant at our standard of .05, internet connectivity and the University band would be significant at more lenient .1.

Table 7. 12 Factor Correlations with Game Attendance

		Seat Comfort	Parking Availability	Promotional Games	Free Giveaways	Concessions	Cheer Team
Games Attended	Pearson Corr.	.011	-.069	-.001	.066	.024	.045
	Sig.	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
		Dance Team	Band	Socializing with Friends	Pre-game Tailgating	Internet Connectivity	Size of Student Crowd
Games Attended	Pearson Corr.	.035	.087	.101*	-.053	.085	.107*
	Sig.	NS	.069	.035	NS	.075	.026

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

The remaining sections on the game-day experience focus on the areas of the pre-game tailgating and the in-facility concessions. Past research and anecdotal evidence indicated the importance of

these two areas, so more specific information was collected on each to determine what elements of each was important to the students.

Five measures of the in-facility concessions.

Table 8 presents the mean scores for the total respondent group, as well as the respondents in the occasional fan category, for five game-day experience factors related to the in-facility concession offerings. Respondents chose a value to indicate the importance of each factor in the decision of whether to attend a University football game. The seven-point scale allowed respondents to indicate the importance of a factor, ranking from very unimportant (a value of 1) to very important (a value of 7).

Attendance Factor	Total Sample		Social Fans	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
Food Quality	4.97	1.847	5.06	1.843
Prices	4.85	1.968	4.85	1.954
Food Variety	4.76	1.870	4.87	1.869
Wait Time	4.43	1.890	4.49	1.852
Staff Friendliness	4.40	1.879	4.50	1.845

All five of the factors related to concessions were seen as being important, having means over the median of 4.0. Food quality, food variety and prices were the most important factors. The occasional fan group agreed on the same three factors being the most important, but felt that food variety was more important than the overall respondent pool.

A linear regression analysis was conducted with the five factors related to concessions as predictor variables for the dependent variable of game day attendance. The model explained virtually no variance, the associated F value was not significant and none of the coefficient t values were significant. Student responses related to concessions demonstrated no ability to predict game attendance.

Five measures of the tailgating experience. The final section of analysis related to the game-day experience focuses on the pre-game tailgating experience. Table 9 presents the mean scores for the total respondent group, as well as the respondents in the occasional fan category, for five game-day experience factors related to pre-game tailgating. Respondents chose a value to indicate the importance of each factor in the decision of whether to attend a University football game. The seven-point scale allowed respondents to indicate the importance of a factor, ranging from very unimportant (a value of 1) to very important (a value of 7).

Attendance Factor	Total Sample		Social Fans	
	Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD
Large Crowd	5.47	1.805	5.65	1.668
Weather Conditions	5.44	1.817	5.47	1.788
Restroom Access	5.30	1.825	5.43	1.746
Food Provided	4.83	1.896	4.79	1.939
Longer than 4 Hours	4.07	1.970	4.01	1.931

Both the total respondent group and the occasional fans agreed having a large crowd, weather conditions and access to restrooms were the most important factors related to the tailgate. While the weather conditions are beyond the scope of the marketing staff, the other four factors can be influenced by actions of the Athletic Department.

A linear regression analysis was conducted with the five tailgating factors as predictor variables for the dependent variable of game day attendance. The associated F value of 2.686 was statistically significant at .021. The coefficients table for the model is presented in table 10. Only the variable of desiring to have the tailgate longer than four hours had a t value that was statistically significant. The negative coefficient indicates that the more important having a longer tailgate was to the student respondent, the less likely that respondent was to attend the game. The results related to the length of the tailgate can be seen as further support for the notion that socializing, in this case at the tailgate, takes precedence over attending the football game.

Table 10. Coefficients for Regression of Five Tailgating Measures ^a

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.008	.536		7.474	.000
Restroom Access	-.155	.094	-.099	-1.651	.099
Large Crowd	.145	.096	.091	1.516	.130
Food Provided	-.046	.088	-.030	-.519	.604
Weather Conditions	.068	.095	.043	.720	.472
Longer than 4 Hours	-.194	.075	-.133	-2.583	.010

a. Dependent Variable: Games Attended

DISCUSSION

In light of COVID-19, and having the games potentially (at this writing) being played without fans present, getting fans to come back to the university to watch their team will be an ongoing battle. For FCS teams where the fan base is marginal, filling seats at the games will be imperative for the university.

Newspapers, TV and radio paid advertising showed poor results. While this is still an important tool to reach older audiences, no one should be that surprised that it doesn't reach the student population. However, this should not mean that these mediums should be abandoned, they are great methods for reminders and attracting local audiences who might not be students.

Word-of-Mouth, Facebook, and emails were the preferred way of reaching the students to tell them about the games. According to Edison's Infinite Dial, (March 2019), Facebook users from 12-32 have dropped in percentage to 62% overall (Edison Research, 2019). This still means that students are Facebook users, just not at the rate that previous generations have been. Because these are not sponsored emails or Facebook posts, the posts are the equivalent to word-of-mouth online, which is a very important tool according to this study.

Considering that the subjects who were occasional fans went to the games because of their friends, they found out about the game through word-of-mouth, through a personalized email, and through, most likely, a Facebook group post. This intimate connectedness drives the social fan to the games. In addition, Internet connectivity and socialization were the only factors tested that had a positive correlation with the subjects. Internet connectivity helps the occasional fan be front and center on social media, in strengthening those relationships.

While other studies, as referenced in the literature review, suggested giveaways and promotional games as reasons to attend, this study indicates otherwise. Although these factors are an important part of the in-person experience of a football game, it doesn't appear to have enough pull to get students there. Likewise, the band, cheer team, dance teams, concessions, seat comfort are all a part of the in-person experience, but those components alone are not enough to draw the subjects to attend the game in person.

For the case of tailgating, while it will even bring fans to the venue, this study suggests that the longer the tailgate the less likely fans will attend the game. This counterintuitive finding could suggest that the fans are having so much fun that they don't move from their tailgating spot to their seats. This finding could also mean that over four hours for a tailgate party, plus a three-hour football game is too much time to spend on a social event. It should be noted that tailgating is part of the fan experience and the traditions of most universities. Just because it doesn't move people from the parking lot to inside the venue, doesn't mean that it isn't important for the sporting event.

Based on the results of the current investigation, the occasional fan should be called the social fan. These student social fans look for places where they can meet their friends in person, and have those small connections online. They want to go with their friends to the game and record their game day online. From this study, ensuring that students know that their friends will be attending the game is crucial to having the social fan attend.

Limitations

This study only surveyed students attending one FCS Division I university. Replication on other campuses will be important to determine if the results are applicable to a wider variety of campus settings. Even a large convenience sample is still a convenience sample. While the sampling methods eliminates the ability to generalize, this study is important because it gives a framework for universities to explore fan-base in an era of dwindling attendance.

Sports Marketing Implications

These findings suggest that the way that university sports marketing departments reach students may be different than they have done in the past. Highly targeted messages, such as personalized emails, word-of-mouth and social media would appear to be more successful than the traditional posters and legacy media.

As sports marketing looks toward the future, online gaming platforms are the students' new social media. Almost 90% of students are gamers, compared to 56% of the population. These gaming platforms allow users to connect with friends without the polarization that traditional social media has become (Mahoney, S. 2020). Therefore, this may be another opportunity to reach students on a personal level to encourage them to attend the football games.

An area for further research would be the use of newer social media outlets, such as TikTok. TikTok is now the sixth largest social media platform, with 42% of US users being people within the 18-24 age range (Sehl, 2020, March 2). YouTube may be another area of study. According to Statista (2019), 95% of 18-25 year-olds rated YouTube as their #1 social media platform.

Additionally, university sport marketing departments might be wise to think about having “true fans” be rewarded by helping others go to the game. If people are asked by a friend to go to the game, they are more likely to attend. What if the true fans were rewarded for inviting people to go with them to the game that the true fan is already planning to attend? The energy of a true fan is palatable, and may increase their friend’s level of game attendance. Why wouldn’t a student want to go to a game with their new found friend, as opposed to working on their paper at the library?

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