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Segmenting the spectators of national team sports: the case of a pre-competition match

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ABSTRACT

It has become common for both academics and sports-marketing professionals to study and explain the heterogeneity and complexity of sports spectators' behaviors and attitudes; numerous works address this topic (Holt, 1995; Hunt *et al.* 1999; Trail *et al.*, 2000; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). But these surveys are more about fans of professional sport clubs (soccer, basketball, baseball, hockey, etc.) who attend the regular season games in the home stadium or arena of their favorite teams. To our knowledge, very few studies have been conducted on spectators of national teams. It is these who are of the focus of this paper.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The originality of our survey lies in the fact that we are concerned with a special case: a precompetition game prior to an international competition, but not an official match (thus with less at stake for spectators), which have been studied to a greater extent in the literature. Our research also concerns an original case, because of the location of the game, which is played in a “neutral” environment, not the team’s home arena. The objective of this survey is both to analyze and to compare spectators who attended a match on the basis of three criteria: i) the kind of team (the national handball team); ii) the type of game (a precompetition match); iii) the type of location (the indoor Bercy arena, which is not the home arena of the French national handball team). To achieve this objective we used a quantitative survey to investigate the main experience they were seeking as well as their motives with regard to their individual characteristics and their level of identification with the team. More specifically, we attempted to identify the main profiles of spectators attending the match in the sporting context and location described, using the Sporting Event Experience Search scale developed by Bouchet et al. (2011).

The results show that spectators in the pre-competition international context identified less closely than fans regularly attending the matches of a sports club that competes every week during the regular season. The dominant profile is “interactive”. Moreover, these spectators belong to the handball community; they are handball specialists and their aim is to enjoy the skill of national team stars in a friendly and festive atmosphere. Hence the marketing strategies of the National Handball Federation, which organizes the event, should take these data into account when providing fans with “interacting and participating” moments, character merchandising and products endorsed by the players, so as to share as much as possible the emotion of the game irrespective of the result (even if the experience is more intense in the event of a win).

Segmenting the spectators of national team sports: the case of a pre-competition match

It has become common for both academics and sports-marketing professionals to study the ways in which people support and follow their sports teams. The objective is to describe and understand the heterogeneity and complexity of sports spectators' behaviors and attitudes; numerous works address this topic (Holt, 1995; Hunt *et al.* 1999; Trail *et al.*, 2000; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). Traditional market segmentation in the area of sports spectatorship is based on individual demographic characteristics such as gender, age, residence, and social and economic background (Greewell *et al.*, 2002; Mehus, 2005; Ridinger and Funk, 2006; Summers, 2010; Trail *et al.*, 2002).

Following Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) article, a number of publications have stressed the psycho-sensorial dimensions of consumption, known today as the consumption experience. For now, it became a common issue for academics and sport-marketing practitioners to analyse the way that people consume the event and support their sport teams. Several authors (Gearhart, 2011; Johnston, 2004; King and Walker, 2011) have attempted to identify the various motives or reasons for sports-spectatorship consumption. For instance, Trail *et al.* (2000) identified nine motives for such consumption: vicarious achievement, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics, social interaction, drama/excitement, escape (relationship), family, physical attractiveness of participants, and quality of the participants' physical skills. According to these authors, a spectator may express one or more motives and they suggest that these motives are correlated and would compose a second-order latent variable. This framework failed to identify distinct customer types and did not provide information about what different spectators look for in their consumption.

A sporting event or spectacle can be consumed in diverse ways by different consumer groups (Holt, 1995; Wann *et al.*, 1999; Richelieu and Pons, 2005; Pons, Murali and Nyeck, 2006,

Hedlund, 2012). Bourgeon and Bouchet (2001) provided a Sport Event Experience Search (SEES) scale to study the expectations and dominant search experiences of sports spectators. Based on an empirical survey, they suggested four types of spectator profile (opportunist, aesthete, supporter, interactive). Following this study, another survey compared the live and TV consumption experiences in soccer and tennis, and emphasized the need to subdivide the dimensions of this experience into sub-dimensions in order to analyze them in more details, according to the sports and the contexts of consumption (Bouchet *et al.*, 2011).

The current work's intention is also to use this scale to study expectations and dominant search experiences. However, the target is not the spectators at sports clubs, which are already over-studied in the literature (Baade and Tiehen, 1990; Byon *et al.*, 2010; Carmichael *et al.*, 1999; Casper *et al.*, 2009; Ferreira and Armstrong, 2004; Fredline and Faulkner, 1998; Funk *et al.*, 2004; Hoye and Lillis, 2008; McDonald and Rascher, 2000; Neale and Funk, 2006; Soutar and McLeod, 1993; Zhang *et al.*, 1995; 1997) but the spectators of national sports teams which have been little studied by academics. Moreover the aim of this research is to study a national handball team, in a pre-competition game. In our study, a pre-competition game differs from an official match, not because this game is not important (a pre-competition game stays important to select players for upcoming championships, to test the team's style of play, etc.) but because a friendly match has not high stakes and the result (to win or to loose) is not the key point of the match. As a result, in marketing perspective, these sportive stakes could not be the most important vehicle for marketing managers to attract spectators and could not be the main motive for them. Then, our objective is to test the relevance of the Sporting Event Experience Search (SEES) scale in this particular mixed case. This model, built on a series of observations of the behaviour of between 500 and 1000 sport spectators during five games of the French third-division rugby union club (Bourgeon *et al.* (2003)), allows sporting-event managers to analyse the nature and the expectations of sport spectators

by identifying which sport event consumption type is dominant. Can we find the same four types of spectator profiles with the same distribution? In this context, how can we explain the significance of their respective profiles? In terms of motives? By sociodemographic characteristics? By the greater or lesser degree of spectator identification? Lastly, what are the recommendations and managerial lessons for the sports-marketing professionals responsible for building a national sports team brand and – especially – for attracting people to its events in a large indoor arena?

Theoretical Framework

Experience as a key trend in marketing strategies

As mentioned in the introduction, we planned to study the dimensions of consumption in sport. This research is thus clearly connected to the seminal article by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) as well as to other works published later (Arnould and Price, 1993; Caru and Cova, 2006; Holt, 1995). All of these found that both information-processing and relationship-marketing models were outdated, and recommended turning to an experiential model of purchasing. There is no consensus concerning the motives for consumer behavior or on the fundamentals of consumers' decision-making processes. Following the approach of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), some key differences between these two models can be suggested in terms of environmental inputs (products, stimulus, communication content) and consumer inputs (resources, task definition, individual differences, etc.) which reflect the classical frameworks for consumer behavior. But even if the notion of experience appears to be a modern way of understanding consumer expectations and boosting purchases, a major criticism has been identified. For example, Ladwein (2003) considers that it is not sufficient to place consumers in a spectacular setting to enable them to access the experience. As a result, Caru and Cova (2006) designed a model facilitating immersion in a consumption

experience. This experiential-marketing approach is widely discussed in the literature. However, although it has become a mainstream tool in the comprehension of consumer behavior in various markets, this framework also has relevance in the sporting sector.

The consumption experience in sports industry as a key for types of spectators

Within the sporting area, there are numerous publications concerning stores and sporting goods (Penaloza, 1999; Campelo *et al.*, 2010). However, most of the international publications on experiential sports marketing deal with live sporting events (Pons and Richelieu, 2004; Trail *et al.*, 2003) or televised ones (Gantz and Wenner, 1995). Many of these publications address the motivational factors involved in attending a match or an event. Trail and Kim (2011) analyzed attendance at NCAA women's college basketball games and identified 16 items which can be correlated with spectator attendance. Among other factors, the authors found that halftime and pre- and post-game events, which may be included in the club's experiential offer, have a positive (although limited) impact on attendance. Kim and Walker (2011) also tried to understand why, within a community, certain people decide to attend a sporting event. Studying Super Bowl XLIII, the authors measured its local psychosocial impact. Levin and McDonald (2009) tested a specific variable: the effect on spectator attendance of the competitive balance among the teams in a league. Based on a sample of 12,956 games (75 seasons) they demonstrated that competitive balance is a significant predictor of attendance at league games. Others studies have dealt with the ways in which managers can ensure spectator satisfaction and strengthen loyalty. For example, Bodet and Bernarche-Assolant (2011) tested the relationships between team identification and consumer satisfaction, and consumer loyalty. For these authors, the consumer's transaction-specific satisfaction seems the more powerful in the sporting context. Bodet and Bernarche-Assolant (2009) studied the effects of service attributes on the satisfaction of French ice-hockey

spectators, and concluded that there was a need to strongly segment attendance at sporting events. Baker (2011) explored the impact of waiting time at sporting events on spectator satisfaction. This author concluded that studying the influence of waiting time on quality of service as perceived by the spectator is a complex matter, because such an evaluation is clearly subjective and depends on several factors.

Bourgeon and Bouchet (2001) provided a Sporting Event Experience Search (SEES) scale to study the expectations and the dominant search experiences of sports spectators. Based on an empirical survey, they organized their findings around semantic axes. Applying this semiotic analysis, they suggested four types of spectator profile (opportunist, aesthete, supporter, interactive), as shown in Figure 1 (below). According to the authors, four types of marketing strategies can be implemented, according to two major axes: vertical (individualisation *versus* interaction) and horizontal (appropriation *versus* participation).

-Insert Figure 1 about here -

They assume that it is possible to construct consistent and accurate targeting and positioning strategies, and also to adjust the provision of services in accordance with the four consumption patterns. The sports event strategy corresponds either to “one-on-one” marketing where the sporting spectacle is mostly experienced individually, or to “tribal” marketing where consumption experiences are largely based on the search for social interaction, or to “appropriation” marketing where consumption experiences are co-produced with customers, or to “participation” marketing where consumption experiences are based on the promise of something out of the ordinary. This model, suggested by Bouchet et al. (2011), seems to be relevant to study the motives and the behaviour of fans during match for both national or local teams, regardless of the stakes of the match, the distance to join the stadium, the frequency of the game (one-shot or included in a championship), the kind of venue, etc.

Pulh *et al.* (2005) used this model to examine the behavior of between 500 and 1000 sport spectators during five games of the French third-division rugby union club. This brought to light the need for marketing professionals to “create specific and accurate targeting and positioning and to adjust the services they offered”. They supported the idea of there being a major diversity between attendance motives and spectator behaviors. For instance, Trail *et al.* (2003) tried to introduce a link between motives and service expectations but the motives focused only on the quality of the play and the victory issue.

Research objective

The objective of this survey is both to analyze and to compare spectators who attend a game on the basis of three criteria: i) the kind of team (national handball team); ii) the kind of game (precompetition match); iii) the kind of location (indoor Bercy arena, which is not the home arena of the French handball national team). To achieve this objective we used a quantitative survey to investigate the main experience they were seeking as well as their motives with regard to their individual characteristics and their level of identification with the team. More specifically, we attempted to identify the main profiles of spectators attending the match in the sporting context and location described, using the Sporting Event Experience Search scale developed by Bouchet *et al.* (2011).

We tested this scale on spectatorship for the French national handball team. This team has been number one in the world for several years (Olympic Champion in 2008 and 2012, World Champion in 2011 and 2009, and European Champion in 2010). The match against Norway was held in January 2012 in the Bercy Arena, the biggest indoor arena in France for this kind of event (15,000 seats). The match was an international friendly game and was organized in preparation for the 2012 European Championship starting a couple of days later.

Method

Data collection and analysis

In our study of a Friday night, the live-attendance sample consisted of 642 spectators (442 men and 200 women) with an average age of 32.34 years. Data were gathered during the game and interviewing was equally distributed across all different seating categories in the arena. The individuals interviewed regularly attend handball games. They physically attend an average of 6.52 (SD = 14.45) and watch an average of 13.56 televised handball games (SD = 24.17) per year. Nearly 87% of them spent on average more than €300 per year to physically attend handball events; for about 80% of them household income is less €500 per month; and only 28 of them came alone (the rest came with friends and/or family). This point will be confirmed later, but it can already be concluded that the spectators interviewed belong to the sports fans community and in particular to the handball fans community.

The questionnaire employed includes a psychometric scale to enable testing of the model of Bouchet et al. (2011), with sub-dimensions proposed by the authors, team-identification levels, and six principal motivations for supporting the team. With 22 investigators, we covered all ticket-price categories and collected the questionnaires randomly. The questionnaires were filled out by the investigators highlighting spectator responses. The statistical analysis was performed using Statistica.

Results

The Search for the Sports Event Experience

The sample comprised 642 spectators; this enabled the authors to conduct an Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA). An EFA with rotation (Varimax br.) was first conducted on the sample: only five factors were extracted, based on the Kayser (1960) criterion. The Scree test criterion developed by Cattell (1966) was then applied; it indicated that five factors may be

appropriate when considering the changes in eigenvalues, i.e., the “elbow” occurs after the fifth factor. Then based on the theoretical number of dimensions making up the scale, i.e., four, and on the overall percentage of variance explained (84.12%) and the Scree test, the authors confirmed a five-factor structure (see Appendix 2). Items were deleted when they did not contribute sufficiently to a specific dimension (loading < .50), when they cross-loaded, and when the gap was too large between factor loadings of the same dimension (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Those items were deleted one by one and in various orders.

Finally, the Opportunist dimension disappeared, the Aesthete dimension was dissociated into two sub-dimensions (Fair play and Beauty of Game) and both items were retained, the Interactive dimension was split into three sub-dimensions (Socialization, Social Interaction and Ambience) and two items were retained, and the Supporter dimension retained its five items. In addition, Beauty of Game is associated with Ambience in the same factor. This last result may be explained by the “entertainment” dimension of this sport event. All dimensions presented satisfied the internal consistency criterion (alpha >.74) (see Table 4 for the factor loadings and alpha indicators).

-Insert Table 4 about here-

It should be emphasized that the SEES with its sub-dimensions is partially validated in a pre-competition international context for national handball teams. Because the five dimensions were not considered to be independent, it may be observed, in this sporting context, that they seem to correspond particularly to a social interactive practice with a double aesthetic dimension linked to the quality of the event with the best players in the world.

Identification level

We performed a one-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to compare the team-identification levels in a pre-competition international context with those in a European

national championship. The results show that spectators in the pre-competition international context ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.58$) identified less closely than fans directly attending games of a sports club which competes every week in the regular season (see data published by Bernache-Assollant *et al.*, 2007; Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Murrell and Dietz-Uhler, 1992; Wakefield, 1995; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). This game had a low sporting interest, therefore it attracted few spectators who were strongly identified with the national team, i.e., fans as defined by Spinrad (1981: 354): “the person who thinks, talks about and is oriented towards sports even when the fan is not actually observing or reading or listening to an account of a specific sports event”. The main reason is probably that in a pre-competition context without very much at stake the spectators came primarily to see an exhibition game with handball stars trying to win a match (like an NBA All-Star Game).

Principal motivations

The third result concerns spectators’ principal motivations for supporting the handball team in this pre-competition game in the Bercy Arena (Table 1).

-Insert Table 1 about here -

The results show that the spectators’ motivations were for the most part related to the style of play (technique, 6.35), to the fact that they were representing their country (6.29), and to the players’ personalities (6.01). The dominance of these three motivations may be explained by (i) the status of being the world’s best handball team for five years; (ii) the presence of four French players who had been voted world’s best player by the international federation; and (iii) the fact that handball is the team sport in which France has won more world and Olympic titles than any other. Next, a lesser reason appeared, related to the fact that these are “players who have won many matches” (5.36), which shows that, for this pre-competition game, this motivation counted for less than the reputation of the team. Lastly, motivations related to the

players, including "I like his looks" (4.14) and that "the people in my circle are supporters" (3.49) are less strong, no doubt because of the lower importance of such motivations for men, with a significant difference between the two genders: $p < .001$ for the players' looks (3.76 vs 5.01) and for group social relationships (3.33 vs 3.83).

-Insert Table 2 about here -

The results in Table 2 show that the motivations are all mutually correlated except for a link between "a team that represents my country" and a team "with players I like the look of". This latter result may be explained by the lack of a relationship between support for one's national team and finding its players to be good looking (especially for men). In addition, the level of identification is significantly correlated with each of the motivations: $p < .0001$ (see Appendix Table 3), which may be explained by its mean value ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.58$). Finally, all socio-demographic variables (other than gender) fail to differentiate between the motivations and the measures of life experience, in the context of this pre-competition handball game.

Discussion

Supporting former researches (Stewart et al. 2003; Johnston, 2004; Neale and Funk, 2006; Gearhart and Keaton, 2011), our investigation of the spectators finds that the live viewing experience varies widely depending on the game's stakes and its venue. In this pre-competition context, handball community appears drawn to this type of event on a Friday night, so as to have a good time in company with others (only 28 of them came alone) in a setting devoted to entertainment (dominant profiles: Socialization, Social Interaction and Ambience), to support their team in a great patriotic fervor (dominant profile: supporter), and to appreciate (for players or fans of this sport) the best play and best players of handball. It may be seen that this distribution does not match the one suggested by Bouchet et al. (2001) presented above. In our study, two of the four profiles (supporter profile and interactive

profile) are over-represented in this national handball team's precompetition game. On the other hand, unlike what we assumed before conducting this survey, the opportunist profile is very weakly represented. Future studies should confirm the idea that the games of the French handball team do not yet appear to be an event that could confer social or image benefits on the people attending them (contrary to certain other competitions such as the national football team's matches, the French Open, the FIFA World Cup, a Formula One Grand Prix or the Olympic Games). In the case studied in this article, it is therefore members of the handball community who form the bulk of spectators at matches. We thus found a discrepancy with the ambition of the Federation to expand its public and recruit fans from outside the handball community (French handball federation wants to use this kind of friendly games to hire new fans who do not belong to handball community but we observed that the most important part of spectators are already with the handball community and new fans from outside the community seem not to be interested in the game). Indeed, in France, handball is in its professionalizing phase in terms of business (far behind soccer or rugby) and the French Federation is trying to promote its sport using the national team as a figurehead. In this professionalization process, the Federation needs to put on shows in order to draw a large audience attracted by the fame of their national team and the personalities of its iconic players. This strategy by the federation is supposed to provide a spectacle both live and on television to promote their sport in their own country, to create national support ahead of the big international championships and to hire new fans. Looking at the discrepancy between the goal of the Federation and what we observed in the course of the study, future research should determine whether this discrepancy is the result of the French Handball Federation's plan to strengthen the link between the national team and spectators, first by looking at the handball community and then to extend this link to people who are not yet handball fans, or whether this over-representation of the handball community reveals the failure of the National

Handball Federation's strategy of acquiring new fans among the French population (in other words, despite the Federation's aim to enlarge its fan base to people who are not handball specialists, the handball community is the first to attend the games). We also should provide in-depth studies to distinguish what concerns the handball national team and what concerns others national teams, whatever the sport.

From a managerial standpoint, the French Handball Federation should take more account of the classification of the different motives of these spectators. The Federation should also provide fans with some "interacting and participating" moments, character merchandising and endorsement of product, which could be signed by the players so as to share as much as possible the emotion of the game regardless of the outcome (even if the experience is more intense in the event of a win). Because of the absence of the "opportunist" profile, there will be little advantage for the Federation to increasing its provision of VIP boxes and high quality services, which are intended to provide a social or image benefit to a specific spectator segment.

A final point can be mentioned to discuss the results and to consider some futures researches. With regard to the international literature (MacDonald, 2002; Izzo et al., 2011), it appears that the sporting context of events viewed by live spectators in an indoor arena modifies the experiences they seek and their behavior on the site. By identifying the sporting context of the match offered to the spectators, it became evident that the event will condition the type of behavior and experiences sought. For example, a same arena or stadium may offer a variety of sporting events that will appeal to various kinds of consumers, depending on whether they involve a local team's regular matches, an European Cup featuring clubs or national teams, or an exhibition match between NBA stars and the best players from a country or a continent. In terms of sporting event context, two points seem to emerge from the results of our study and

would merit particular attention because they could affect the experiences, the motivations and the degree of identification of the spectators in the stadium: the sporting “level” of the match (local, national or international) and the sporting "stakes" involved (exhibition, pre-competition or competition).

Another lesson from the literature (Urlich and Benkenstein, 2010) is to consider the Arena Context in itself because it can influence spectator consumption in three experiential dimensions: temporal (to maximize the use of their spare time; Shores and Scott, 2007), spatial (to increase the participation of spectators in this experiential context; Carù and Cova, 2007a) and social (to promote interpersonal encounters and exchanges; Wann *et al.*, 2008).

Taking into consideration the two contexts (sporting context and arena context) allows us to suggest a framework for the consumption of handball competitions (Figure 2).

-Insert Figure 2 about here-

The figure shows that these two different contexts have an impact on the identification with the team. In regard to our own study, this approach could be useful for specifying the main spectator profiles in a specific sporting event and arena context and could be seen as a framework for future studies in which the sporting event and the arena contexts are two variables to be tested.

Conclusions

This research show how important it is for professionals of sport events to focus their efforts on the various possible contexts for the consumption of their product. Beyond the simple relationship between a consumer and an event, the sporting and arena contexts of consumption need to be considered and differentiated. This is moreover one of the most striking contributions of our research because a "Handball Community" appears with one

profile of behavior quantitatively dominant: “interactive” with “supporter” and “aesthetic”. This case of event suggests a tribal marketing or a marketing of participation, with strategies which aim to offer a product to meet common practices and values.

Of course, the social-linkage and shared-experience aspects have been the subject of many studies from the 1980s onwards (development of tribal or relational approaches to marketing), and a few researchers have very recently focused on the problem of managing event sites. But our research is focused on spectators of the national team, who have been little studied in the literature. We also shed light on the influence of the competitive level of the match on identification with the team. We observed that spectators in the pre-competition international context identified less closely than fans in directly attending games of a sports club which compete every week in the regular season. Finally, with Figure 2, we have provided a model which could be useful in future research to further investigate the respective impact of both sporting and arena contexts on spectators’ profiles and on the live viewing experience of a sporting event. But a specific anthropological study could be conducted to better understand direct sport attendance experience and to provide further knowledge to support or not the theoretical choice of applying the same tool for another sport, another context or/and another attendance in a pub or at home.

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