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Game Day Experience through the Lens of Critical Incident Technique

Robin Hardin
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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the game-day experiences of fans at a college football game using Critical Incident Technique. This technique identifies and examines important occurrences, or incidents, identified by participants based on their own positive or negative experience. A total of 2,450 individuals responded to the optional open-ended question on a survey. Respondents indicated the most positive aspects of the experience as the enjoyment, pride, and tradition associated with attending the games. The facility, atmosphere, and policies and operations were reported as the most negative aspects of the experience. It is important to understand the experience of fans at events because they are one of the primary stakeholders of an organization and one of the primary resources of revenue in the form of ticket sales. Organizations, including collegiate athletic departments, should always be evaluating the consumer experience in order to enhance the experience which can lead to higher retention rates of season-ticket holders and also cultivate new season-ticket holders. The delivery of high-quality service is one of the important aspects of any service organizations.

Keywords: *Critical Incident Technique, college football, service quality, tickets, fans*

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An examination of the NCAA Revenue and Expense Report shows the business aspect of collegiate sport at its highest competition level, Division I – Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Median generated revenue for the 120 members of the classification was \$40.6 million with total median revenue, which includes institutional support at nearly \$56 million. Those generated revenue numbers increase significantly when the members are split into quartiles. The first quartile had generated median revenue of \$94.5 million and institutional support of \$4.3 million, resulting in total revenue of \$98.8 million. The second quartile had generated median revenues of \$52.6 million and institutional support of \$15.5 million, for total revenue of \$68.1 million. Half of the members of Division I-FBS are operating on yearly budgets of nearly \$70 million (Fulks, 2013).

The troubling aspect is that only 23 members throughout all divisions of the NCAA are generating enough revenue to cover athletic department expenses. One of the most highly publicized expenses is coaching salaries. Forty-two Division I-FBS coaches make more than \$2 million per year, with Alabama's Nick Saban and Texas' Mack Brown earning more than \$5 million per year. The average annual salary of head baseball and basketball coaches is \$1.62 million (Steinberg, 2012). The other visible financial expenditure in major collegiate athletics relates to facilities. The so-called "arms race" has universities trying to build the best and most modern facilities for student-athletes and fans. Bennett (2012) described this race as a

carnival of construction, as schools continue to build bigger, nicer, more state-of-the-art facilities for their teams. Go around to just about any power conference campus these days, and you're likely to see as many cranes, hard hats, and barrier fences around sports fields as you are students. (para. 5)

Bennett is describing the plethora of renovations and construction occurring at FBS member schools. This construction ranges from \$5 million at Syracuse University for locker room renovations to \$378 million on stadium renovations and expansions at the University of Arizona (Bennett, 2012). This is all done in hopes of attracting top recruits and ultimately placing a quality football team on the field, which in turn, will bring an increase in fans and donations (Meer & Rosen, 2009; Stinson & Howard, 2004.).

It is worth stating again that the troubling aspect of these financial situations is that only 60 men's programs have revenues that exceed expenses, but when the shortfall for women's athletic programs is taken into account, that number falls to the aforementioned 23. Not all football and men's basketball programs are self-supporting either, as only 56% of football programs and 53% of men's basketball programs generate enough revenue to cover costs (Fulks, 2013). The primary sources of revenue for athletic departments are derived from tickets sales (28%), contributions (26%), and NCAA and conference distributions (22%) (Fulks,

2013). Institutional support is then required to cover the budget shortfall, which annually comprises 20% of members' budgets and has a median value of \$11 million (Fulks, 2013). These are funds coming from the university general operating budget and with that, athletic departments are often criticized for receiving resources that could be used for academic purposes or programs benefitting the wider student body (Gerdy, 2002; Giannoto, 2012; Staurowsky, 2002).

It appears there are two solutions to the problem: reduce spending, which does not seem to be an option, or increase revenue (Dosh, 2013). NCAA institutions have little or no control over the direct impact of television revenue, as the NCAA and conference representatives negotiate those contracts in the best interests of the member institutions (Southeastern Conference, 2011). The institutions are certainly factors in those discussions, but conference commissioners and representatives negotiate the television contracts for all NCAA members or for the conference membership as a whole. Institutions do have the ability to impact revenue from ticket sales and donations. An increase in revenue in these areas will have a direct impact on the school, as that revenue solely belongs to the institution.

Athletic departments must then focus on increasing revenue from attendance and donations. One way to increase attendance is to ensure fans are having a positive and enjoyable experience at events. Season ticket holders help fund the core activities of sport organizations and attract outside funding through sponsors who want to reach those people (McDonald & Stavros, 2007). Having a large and strong season ticket holder base enables sales and marketing staff to approach potential sponsors who want to reach those fans. It is important to understand the fan experience enabling athletic department administrations the ability to better serve the needs of fans and create a positive experience.

Menzis and Nguyen (2012) point out that research on attendance has been explored from basically two perspectives: the psychological perspective, which examines event satisfaction and motivations to attend, and the external perspective, which examines factors such as event comfort and service. The focus of this research is the external perspective and will be examined in terms of service quality and viewed through the lens of the consumer. To gain the ever-important consumer perspective, the researchers employed the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). This technique focuses on the positive and negative experiences a person might have with an experience. This approach has recently been utilized in sport-related research to gain an in-depth analysis of the researched population. Recent studies have examined sport volunteers (Love, Morse, & Ruihley, 2013), league bowlers (Ruihley & Greenwell, 2012), and minor league hockey spectators (Greenwell, Lee, & Naeger, 2007). CIT is an adequate and appropriate approach to learning more about the college football game day experience.

Dimensions of Service Quality

Not only is it important to understand why people are season ticket holders, but it is equally important to understand their experience at events. The delivery

of high-quality service is one of the important aspects of any service organization. Research suggests that consumer perception of service quality is a complex process measured by multiple dimensions of service (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Koo, Andrew, & Kim, 2008; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988). Service quality can be examined from three basic premises: 1) functional, 2) environmental, and 3) technical (Rust & Oliver, 1994).

The functional attribute involves the fans' evaluation of how service is delivered. This is based on fans' perceptions of service employees during the event. Employees are important because they are the first point of contact with consumers during the service delivery (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Money management guru Dave Ramsey refers to this front-line employee as Director of First Impressions (Ramsey, 2011). These service personnel include, among others, ticket takers, ushers, concession workers, and parking attendants. The impact of service personnel on the fan experience has been examined in terms of friendliness, responsiveness, presentation, and expertise (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Greenwell et al., 2002; Kelley & Turley, 2001; Koo et al., 2008; Murray & Howat, 2002; Shapiro, 2010; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Lam, 1998).

The environmental attribute has been shown to be the overall perception of quality in the service encounter (Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1992; Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). Especially in the sport context, the service environment (Bitner, 1992) makes important contributions to satisfaction levels, since the consumer spends an extended period of time observing and experiencing the environment. Perceptions of the sport venue influence excitement and satisfaction with the encounter (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994), spectators' desire to stay in the environment (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Wakefield et al., 1996), and their likelihood of re-patronizing games at the same facility (Wakefield et al., 1996; Kelley & Turley, 2001). This is imperative in developing season ticket holders and retaining season-ticket holders.

Many studies have considered the environmental attributes as a critical dimension of service quality, as they create a positive experience influencing a consumer's perceived service quality at the event (Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1990, 1992; Koo et al., 2008; Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). Layout accessibility, facility aesthetics, seating comfort, electronic equipment/displays, sensory conditions (e.g., noise and smell), concessions, parking, and facility cleanliness have been examined in regard to the impact of the environment quality on fan satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Kelley & Turley, 2001; Koo et al., 2008; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Lam, 1998; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield et al., 1996). The service environment appears to enhance the consumer experience as sport fans spend an extended period of time observing a sporting event (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996).

The technical attribute is the fans' evaluation of core service or product itself (Grönroos, 1982, 1984). It is the quality of team or athletic performances at sporting events. Sport marketers usually cannot control this because they have no control in regards to team composition or coaching decisions (Kelley & Turley, 2001).

Critical Incident Technique

Introduced by Flanagan (1954), CIT captures the positive and negative experiences of participants, examines their perspective, and reveals themes and areas of commonality. This qualitative technique focuses on simple words, responses, stories, and observations of participants and can be collected with procedures such as interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions (Love, Morse, & Ruihley, 2013; Ruihley & Greenwell, 2012). CIT identifies and examines important occurrences, or incidents, identified by participants based on their own positive or negative experience. An incident is defined as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). Additional definitions of an incident include positive or negative service encounters contributing to an activity (Greenwell, Lee, & Naeger, 2007; Gremler, 2004; Grove & Fisk, 1997).

As with most open-ended responses about service or service quality, some participants will utilize the opportunity to complain about negative experiences or compliment positive encounters. CIT accepts complaints and compliments as valuable data as they easily reveal critical incidents in service quality (Friman & Edvardson, 2003; Goetzinger, Park, & Widdows, 2006; Greenwell et al., 2007; Roos, 2002; Ruihley & Greenwell, 2012). Compliments are assumed to embody attributes of the satisfying aspects of the service encounter, while complaints represent the dissatisfying components of a service encounter (Friman & Edvardson, 2003; Ruihley & Greenwell, 2012). Utilizing comments anchored by positive and negative aspects of a service encounter provide information and insight about consumer experience likely to illicit positive or negative reaction (Johnston, 2004).

Prior research utilizing CIT focuses on areas including customer satisfaction (Backhaus & Bauer, 2000; Greenwell et al., 2007; Ruihley & Greenwell, 2012), service encounters (Bitner, Booms, Tetreault, 1989; Grove & Fisk, 1997), service failure (Bejou, Edvardsson, & Rakowski, 1996; Chung & Hoffman, 1998), service quality (Bell, Gilbert, & Lockwood, 1997; Edvardsson, 1988), and volunteer satisfaction (Love, Morse, & Ruihley, 2013). As evident with the aforementioned research, CIT is often utilized in attempt to better understand the experience of the consumer as it relates to service or service quality. In the current study, the participants are people who have attended at least one intercollegiate football game at a NCAA Division I – FBS University in the Southeastern United States. Considering the importance of understanding the college football spectator, the purpose of this study is to identify service quality attributes of the sport spectator experience that may be most influential to spectators' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Specifically, this study aims to identify and categorize aspects that favorably (satisfiers) or un-

favorably (dissatisfiers) affect a college game day experience. CIT is employed in this research to best address this purpose and to identify essential elements of the sport spectator experience.

Methods

Procedure and Participants

An online questionnaire was created to assess the opinions of those who have purchased tickets and attended a home football game of the university in the study. The questionnaire contained an open-ended question that asked the respondents to "Please provide any other comments about your game-day experience at *university* home football games." Active ticket accounts including season ticket holders were approximately 55,000. An e-mail invitation was sent to anyone who had provided a valid email address. A total of 5,102 responded to the questionnaire during the 48 hours of data collection. The data in this research consists of only responses to the open-ended question asking for comments. A total of 2,450 individuals responded to the optional open-ended question on this topic and all were used in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Due to the electronic nature of the survey, no transcription was needed to view the data. Participant open-ended opinions were gathered and analyzed to find overarching themes within such a large group of individual responses. Content analysis was selected to analyze responses, as it has been previously used in CIT studies to deliver valid and reliable results (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Ruibley & Greenwell, 2012). Content analysis emphasizes "what was said, the properties of the stimuli, rather than what the communicator claims he said or the interpreter perceived to have been said" (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 8). In addition, this method focuses on "the message itself, and not the communicator or the audience" (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 8). Another definition asserts that "content analysis is a phase of information processing in which the communications content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, into data that can be summarized and compared" (Paisley, 1969, p. 133).

Coding for the content analysis followed the open, axial, and selective coding structure as outlined by Creswell (2007). Open coding involves searching for themes within responses and texts of the participant and "segmenting them into categories of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 239–240). Axial coding then seeks out themes about a phenomenon shared between multiple responses. Lastly, selective coding "takes the central phenomenon and systematically relates it to other categories, validating the relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and developments" (Creswell, 2007, p. 240; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through these processes, coding categories were discovered and created. Themes

were then developed based on similarities and differences within coding categories.

Results

This subset of 2,450 individuals was predominantly male ($n=1622$, 66.2%), married or having significant other ($n = 1941$, 79.2%), college educated ($n = 1749$, 71.4%), and coming from a household income of \$100,000 or more ($n = 968$, 39.5%). The average age of the sample was 46.8 ($SD = 13.6$). Please see Table 1 for a complete list of demographic information. The 2,450 responses included 3,466 units of analysis, or codes. With many of the comments expressing more than one idea, comment, or opinion, some of the individual responses were assigned two or more codes. The data were broken into two sections: positive comments and negative comments. The following paragraphs will discuss the results for each section providing categories and themes that emerged from the data (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 1
Demographic Profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1622	66.2%
Female	828	33.8%
Marital Status		
Single	341	13.9%
Married/Significant Other	1941	79.2%
Divorced	135	5.5%
Widowed	33	1.3%
Education		
Some High School	2	0.1%
High School Graduate	168	6.9%
Some College	531	21.7%
College Graduate	1120	45.7%
Graduate Degree	629	25.7%

Table 2*Positive Comment Data*

Theme	Number of Codes	Percentage of Codes
Enjoyment	487	25.97
Pride	416	22.19
Tradition	303	16.16
Atmosphere	224	11.95
Interaction	181	9.65
In Game	113	6.03
Facility	73	3.89
Management	54	2.88
Other	24	1.28
Total	1875	100

Table 3*Negative Comment Data*

Theme	Number of Codes	Percentage of Codes
Facilities	388	24.39
Atmosphere	338	21.24
Policy and Operations	285	17.91
Price	238	14.96
Transportation	222	13.95
Other	65	4.09
Concession service	55	3.46
Total	1591	100

Positive Comments

The positive comments produced 1,875 codes encompassing nine themes as seen in Table 2. Five primary themes and comments will be addressed. The top theme was entitled *enjoyment* (25.97% of all positive codes) and included very succinct and broad use of words used in the responses. When posed with the question about their game day experience, comments in this theme would include “great,” “awesome,” “always good,” and “I like the whole thing, I would not change anything.” The second most prominent theme was labelled *pride* (22.19% of all positive codes). Many of these comments were simply “Go [university nickname], or I bleed [university colors].” Another comment demonstrating pride stated, “I’m proud to bring guests to [our city] for home games and they are always impressed.” The third most codes were placed into a category called *tradition* (16.16% of all positive codes). The comments for traditions were the most interesting to read because tradition is near and dear to this particular subset of university fans. Some of the comments include the following:

- “I have always had the best football experience at on this campus and at our stadium. Tradition here is awesome and keeping with that is the most important thing to me each time I come back!”
- “I am a huge...fan and received my bachelor’s and master’s from [here]. Some of my favorite things are the [players walking to stadium] and running [into the stadium].”
- “I have gone to many or most games since 1959. I love all the tradition offers.”
- “I love the traditions and the atmosphere of [the university] football games.”

The fourth primary positive theme, *atmosphere* (11.95% of all positive codes) encompassed comments about the atmosphere, excitement, environment, and eustress of attending a college football game. One participant responded, “I absolutely love game day...the band is great inside and outside the stadium. All the [colors] and all the excitement vibrating inside and outside is the best!” Similarly, another added, “I enjoy the great atmosphere surrounding football Saturdays. I was watching the band come down that hill when there were only a few thousand people watching, now there are tens of thousands.” Another comment read, “I never leave a game before it’s over. I like the atmosphere and excitement even when the game is over. I still support the team when they lose, but I do enjoy the wins much better.” The fifth primary theme was entitled *interaction* (9.65% of all positive codes), as it involves categories of family, general interaction, and community. These comments really speak to the communal nature of attending a sporting event. One comment about family read,

The fans around our family (our team and the visiting teams) have always been respectful of our children and that strongly influences us in

attending game day and all the other activities associated with it. [We appreciate] the great family time and traditions...as well as a good sense of sportsmanship and respect for our university, our teams, and others around us.

Another family focused comment highlighted the fact that a child attends the school and stated, "First time to attend a [university] football game. We have a freshman student [here] and will definitely attend more games." Another comment read, "Once a season I fly from Boston to [university city] to attend [a] football game with my Dad. We make a day of it attending as many pre- and postgame activities ...it is always a great time. (Even if we lose, though it is better when we win!)" Wrapping up the interaction section was a simple comment that summed it up nicely: "Just enjoy being in my native state and visiting with friends before and after game."

The remaining secondary themes are important and worth mentioning, but by sheer percentage, were not mentioned as frequently as the previous themes. They are as follows:

- *In Game* (6.03% of all positive codes). Includes categories of team quality, sport appreciation, game entertainment, and concessions. Comments include: "My life doesn't derive meaning from [university team] and whether we win or lose, I love good collegiate football and thus, a high-quality, winning product is important." "Love football!"
- *Facility* (3.89% of all positive codes). Includes categories of general facility, cleanliness, and seating. Comments include: "Best game day experience I've ever had by far; no other sporting venue comes close." "I have been to stadiums all over the Southeastern United States. [This stadium] is an outstanding facility and the entire university should be proud."
- *Management* (2.88% of all positive codes). Includes categories of operations, policy, staff, and cost. Comments include "Everyone we come in contact with on game day [are always] pleasant and courteous. From the parking pass ladies, train staff, [ticket] takers, security, and concession stand staff. I am always proud to take anyone to a game." "Glad policy on leaving and re entering is made an exception due to inclement weather."

Negative Comments

The negative comments produced 1,588 codes containing seven themes as seen in Table 3. Five primary themes and comments will be addressed. The theme with the most negative comments and codes revolves around *facilities* (24.39% of all negative codes). The theme was comprised of coding categories of a general tone as well as those involving seating, and cleanliness within the facility. The

comments ranged from the simple (e.g., “concourse should be widened and more bathrooms installed; way to crowded” and “Need significant upgrades to restrooms and concessions in the south end of the stadium!”) to the more complete and complex:

For years, the south end zone was supposed to receive much needed renovations. During hot weather [and] weather evacuations... people are not able to move freely. They are passing out, getting stampeded, and emergency staff [is] not able to reach them in a timely manner. We have been [athletics] donors for 20+ years and are considering not returning if work does not begin on the south ramps and concession area. People stand on the ramps and smoke and no one cares, our ramps and concession areas are crap and no one cares. [A food charity] is assigned to the concessions area and they were embarrassed at the condition of their workspace. They spent hours cleaning the popcorn machine and soda area to make it presentable to those of us purchasing items from them.

Seating comments included: “Seats are too close for full-size adults.” “I felt a little claustrophobic in my seat. We were really crammed in our row!” “I have been unhappy since the size of the seats were made smaller. It is very uncomfortable with people crammed so close together.”

The second primary theme associated with negative game day experience involves *atmosphere* (21.24% of all negative codes) at the football games. Issues of crowding, interactions, and game entertainment were the primary coding categories making this theme. One participant commented on treating others politely:

I would like to see [our university] known for its hospitality during home games. This means the utmost respect for visitors, wives, and girlfriends. Hecklers, rowdies, and drunkenness...these people should be escorted from the stadium immediately...this should strongly be enforced. The Auburn tree [scandal] is a growing sign of misplaced passion. Competition is to be encouraged but above all, respect for others is imperative.

Another participant stated:

My wife and I had a miserable experience. ...We had fans in the row in front of us and beside us that were absolutely ridiculous. We felt like outsiders in our own stadium. I am a 1982 grad and for the first time in my life, I was not proud to be a [a fan]!

Game entertainment elements include areas of scoreboard, music, public address, and other entertainment comments. Comments included “Much too LOUD, busy

noise announcements makes it difficult to converse.” “My 2 biggest complaints are that the volume of announcements and canned music is too loud. Cannot carry on a conversation when music is playing and hurts our ears.” “I cannot see the Jumbo-Tron and the TVs under the deck are not very good.”

The third highest percentage theme involves participant reactions to *policy and operation* (17.91% of all negative codes). When asked about their game day experience, participants provided negative comments about the university and athletic department’s operations mainly focusing on staff and policies on a variety of topics including tickets, schedule, and donation requirements. One comment focusing on staff read, “Police on-duty at the game are notorious for ‘turning their heads’ at the widespread consumption of alcohol inside the stadium. Failure to eject or control the drunks often leads to fights and other behavior that disrupts the game.” Another staff comment highlights the importance of staff as well as the negative issues that can arise from a change of the norm:

My usher, Bob, was not at the...game and I was concerned about him. I look forward to seeing and talking to him weekly. The lady we had was not Bob at all. Also [an]...usher came during the first half and plopped himself in a seat in the last row (59) and stayed there the whole game. I found this odd, as no usher has ever sat during a game that I have been to in the last 12 years.

Examples of other policy and operation comments include:

- According to newspaper reports, some fans who left during the downpour were not allowed to return to the stadium because tickets were unreadable. If that report is true, [the University] missed, in my opinion, a good PR opportunity. Attendance was not a sell-out, the fans were willing to be there in spite of the weather, so why not inform the ticket takers to let people in? [The University] may have missed an opportunity to become the “fan-friendly” school.
- Fans and visitors need to be made aware that you cannot bring items into the stadium that were purchased elsewhere. For example, I purchased some [team] merchandise at a vendor a few blocks away and was not allowed to bring it into the stadium. My husband had to walk all the way back to our car (a long way!) to put our bags away.
- I am very concerned about emergency weather procedures. When an event arises, the stadium goes into chaos!!! Someone is going to get seriously injured one of these times. The police are rude and not helpful. Getting fans to a safe place should be their main concern when this occurs. When a person buys a ticket, it should guarantee (within reason) a wholesome and safe experience. This happened last year and this year, with this year’s seemingly worse than last. It is unsafe for fans to be sitting in lightning with no safe place to go.

The fourth primary negative theme is on the topic of *price* (14.96% of all negative codes). One poignant comment states,

I understand that college football is a business. But the cost of attending a game is too high. Common fans and families have been priced out of being able to attend. I don't like looking across at the new [stadium] terrace and see the high dollar empty seats. I would rather see a full stadium with lower priced tickets. ...Do something to capture the younger generation now.

Another comment read:

The game day experience is becoming to commercialized and it seems like more an assault on my wallet than a sporting event. Everywhere I turn someone has their hand out wanting my money for something and a VERY inflated price. From tickets to parking to concessions, it's seemingly never ending on how many ways the University or [concession company] want to gouge me and take advantage of me for something they know I feel I must be a part of.

The fifth primary theme coming from negative experiences involves *transportation* (13.95% of all negative codes). The two primary coding categories making up this theme involve parking and traffic. One comment about parking stated, "Parking and leaving the games are the deterrent for me not going to the games. Sometimes I would rather watch them on TV and not have to deal with all the hassles." Another comment read, "Parking, as you are aware, is a significant issue for those of us who cannot donate enough to obtain a parking pass. We pay \$25.00 per game for a space at a [local restaurant]. That is quite a hike for this old fellow." Traffic comments were very specific about how things could be handled to avoid a comment like this: "Managing the traffic after the game is my worst experience of the day."

A secondary theme included *concession service* (3.46% of all negative codes). Comments included, "Too many times concessions seem to run out of food." "On extremely hot days...need to have vendors outside the stadium selling beverages. People were dropping like flies waiting for the [football player walk] and the band." "There need to be free hydration stations for those who cannot afford to buy bottled water."

Discussion

This study used the CIT approach to ask respondents about the factors that are most relevant in their game-day experience. The CIT data analysis revealed items that led to positive experiences and negative experiences. The responses to

the open-ended question asking for comments about the game-day experience provided more in-depth responses rather than responding to a rating scale of pre-determined factors that may have an impact on the level of satisfaction regarding the game-day experience. There is certainly value in using rating scales to examine this issue, but using CIT analysis provided a different perspective in allowing the respondents to choose their own words to describe the experience. The open-ended question format allowed fans to provide detailed and in-depth comments about the experience and provide comments about issues that administrators may have not previously considered. This research complements the existing body of mostly quantitative knowledge regarding service quality and fan experience.

CIT allows the respondents more freedom and flexibility to describe their game-day experiences and can lead to areas impacting the game-day experience that had previously not been examined. This research showed the idea of pride and tradition as important aspects of the game-day experience but yet those had not been uncovered in previous quantitative research. It is also evident that none of the areas on a quantitative scale may truly reflect the game-day experience, thus the opened-ended question allows the respondents to provide their own perspectives and use their own words. The CIT approach allows respondents to identify the factors that had the most impact on their game-day experience without the limitations of close-ended questions. This provides administrators with a unique perspective into the fan game-day experience.

It is imperative that athletic administrators assess the experience of their fans at events. The assessment is necessary to gauge experiences of fans in terms of what aspects of the event are positive and which aspects of the event experience are negative and need to be evaluated (Koo & Hardin, 2008; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). There have been numerous studies in regard to sport event motivations and service quality, and these have primarily been quantitatively driven studies (Beccarini & Ferrand, 2006; Brady & Cronin, 2001; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; James & Ridinger, 2002; Koo et al., 2009; Koo & Hardin, 2008). These studies employed questionnaires measuring specific items. This study used a unique approach in examining fan experience by using critical incident technique as the form of data analysis. This approach granted the researchers valuable access to the thoughts and opinions of the consumer. This consumer expression of positive and negative experiences allowed the analysis to dive further into the college football game day.

Nearly 26% of the coded data for positive experiences had comments related to satisfaction and enjoyment at the event. This, coupled with the 22% of comments regarding pride, shows that respondents have a stake in the experience not just from a fans' perspective but also from a university stakeholder perspective in that they care about the university as a whole and not just the football team. It is important for administrators to be aware that fans are not only consumers, but also unofficial representatives of the university and athletic department. Having

fans show pride in the event is a sign that they want the event to be first class in all capacities. This can vary from making visiting fans feel welcome, to providing a positive atmosphere for everyone to enjoy the event. Fans can certainly cheer, be loud, stand, and bemoan what is deemed as poor officiating, but all can be done in a respectful manner. Knowing that fans take pride in this can be something administrators try to develop to increase the likelihood of a positive experience. Fans do not want drinks spilled on them nor do they want their children exposed to vulgar language. This may actually prohibit fans from attending events, so this concept of pride should be examined in more detail to make the fans an actual stakeholder in the event experience rather than merely attending the event.

Similar to the theme of pride is the notion of tradition. Many people enjoy the traditional aspects of a college football game and this was shown in the findings of this study. Marketers and other administrators should take note of this and use it as a sales and retention tool. The tradition is what many people feel make college sport so unique and exceptional. The experiences of a Notre Dame, Alabama, or Wisconsin home football game, as examples, are popularized by the history and tradition each fan brings with them. This type of tradition should be used as a tool in marketing the event to attract casual fans or enthusiasts of sport to the event. The fans would not necessarily even have to be a fan of a particular team but of college football or sport in general. There can be marketing strategies put in place to promote the experience and tradition of attending a home game. The game can become a pilgrimage of sorts for fans, in that it is something that must be done if you are a college football enthusiast. This exists somewhat in Major League Baseball, as people often plan vacations focused on attending games in several ballparks during the course of their vacation. Baseball fans must see the ivy at Wrigley Field or the Green Monster at Fenway Park (Borer, 2006; Twietmeyer, 2008).

The results of this study show that tradition is important and must not be overlooked in marketing the event. The retention aspect of tradition for fans is that this is an experience unattainable anywhere else. There is nothing like the atmosphere of a well-produced sporting event, so fans should always want to return to experience it. This concept of atmosphere is also tied to pride in that part of the experience is the fans that attend the game are what make the experience so unique and excellent. Administrators should make continuous effort to impress and retain the season-ticket holders as a stakeholder in the tradition. Doing this, will create a culture of respect with the season-ticket holders and can impact the future desire to attend games.

The positive theme of atmosphere is similar to tradition and culture as it takes the stakeholders to create an exciting and positive atmosphere. The game management staff, band, marketing and promotions teams, video screen operator, students, and all other ticket holders assist in creating the atmosphere. Representatives of each should have some say in how the atmosphere is created and shaped. This can be from choreographed cheers, singing of certain songs associated with

the university, or what is shown on the video screens. The crowd is going to be diverse; therefore all demographics should be taken into consideration to try to create an exciting environment for all stakeholders. Many administrators and game management do not know what it is like to be in the stands during the game in which they are responsible for managing. Those people are working or are most likely in premium seating. It is important to keep in mind that input is needed from actual fans and to not assume what people may be thinking or feeling about the game experience.

This leads into the themes focusing on the negative aspects of the game day experience. The majority of the comments dealt with the atmosphere at the games in terms of quality of the facility and fan behavior. Atmosphere relates back to the notion that everyone at the event is responsible for creating a positive environment and being respectful. Fans certainly cannot be accountable for monitoring the behavior of other fans but having a strong security presence can help reduce many problems that may occur in the stands. Security is not merely an usher, but a uniformed officer with the ability to escort someone from the venue if behavior becomes unruly and perhaps dangerous. There is cost involved, but the benefits outweigh those costs (Schimmel, 2012).

The negative comments about the game entertainment aspect of the facility also involve understanding the key stakeholders. This does not mean that every policy or decision has to be at the extremes, either traditional or trendy, but there should be some combination of the two. There should not be a rut where fans expect the same promotions or video screen content game in and game out. There are some things that are classic and should be a part of the game day tradition. However, there should also be new features and substance each game to keep things fresh. The classic material or other traditions should also develop over time and not be forced onto fans by the athletic department. A new tradition cannot be introduced to the fans. The fans have to decide if something is a tradition and then let that mature over time.

Many times, education and easily available information can be valuable tools for the athletic department. The athletic department does not want to have poor and substandard facilities, but in most cases there are reasons renovations have not occurred. It can be due to the lack of financial resources, lack of time, or low priority. It is important to share information with fans about the plans for facility renovations and why some renovations have not been made. The same is true for parking, traffic, and the cost of parking. College campuses are not designed for upwards of 100,000 fans for a football game. They are designed for 25,000 students not on campus at the same time. There are really no parking solutions to appease everyone, especially if the campus has natural borders such as rivers, interstates, business areas, or residential areas. There is simply not enough parking. The same is true for traffic. A campus is designed for a constant flow of staff and student traffic on and off campus throughout the day and not the exodus

of 100,000 people leaving, in 20,000 cars, in a 60-minute span. Fans often have unrealistic expectations in this regard and explaining the situation and the plan for traffic flow may help fans understand the situation better; therefore becoming more accepting of their traffic or parking fate. The same is true for the cost of parking. The athletic department does not necessarily own the parking areas surrounding an athletic event. In many cases, the parking is university owned and the revenue generated from parking fees actually goes to the university not the athletic department. Again, education and information of these areas can be beneficial in helping develop an understanding of many of the negative situations brought up in this research.

Future Research

This research focuses on the college football game day experiences. The positive and negative experiences of 2,450 people have provided some major areas of consideration for college athletic administrators. The strengths of this research are the large amount of participants and the ability to capture that many in-depth opinions, but the findings were based the data collected from one university fan base. Future studies could replicate this research across many different fan bases and football cultures. Another limitation is the inability to follow up with the participants. In many aspects of qualitative work (e.g., interviews and focus groups), follow up questions or clarification are possible. Future studies could incorporate the aspects of this study in a focus group type setting where issues are brought forth and expanded even further. There are very skillful consultants that could be hired by an athletic department for such purposes as organizing and learning from focus groups.

Future research in this area of fan experience is endless. With new trends, new data, and new fans entering stadiums yearly, there is always something to learn from the fan experience. From traditional issues of music, seating, and traffic, to new issues of social media usage during game day, tailgating policy and procedure, and renovations, fans are going to demand the attention from an athletic department. It is not enough to only care by reacting to customer complaints or research (like this), rather, an athletic department needs to be proactive, seek out information, evaluate, and react. With this emphasis on proactive concern, athletic departments will be on the cutting edge of industry trends and fan loyalty. This will be imperative in an attempt to maintain current season-ticket holders, attract new season-tickets holders and increase single-game ticket purchasing. All of which will add to the revenue stream which is a must in the multimillion-dollar world of collegiate sports.

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Management Whitepaper

Game Day Experience through the Lens of Critical Incidents Technique

Robin Hardin, Brody Ruihley, Cindy Veraldo

I. Research Problem

Collegiate athletic departments must focus on increasing revenue from game attendance and donations in order to compete in the fast-changing world of collegiate athletics. One way to increase attendance is to ensure fans are having a pleasant and positive experience. It is important to understand their experiences to enable athletic department administrations to host enjoyable events to attract new and maintain existing season ticket holders as well as generate or increase donations. The purpose of this study is to identify service quality attributes of the sport spectator experience that may be most influential to fan satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Specifically, this study aims to identify and categorize aspects that positively or negatively affect a college game day experience through Critical Incident Technique.

This article would be useful to intercollegiate athletics departments, specifically in the areas of administration, facility and game operations as well as sales, marketing, and development. Additionally, stakeholders involved with sponsoring college athletics as well as those involved with stadium or arena management may also be interested in this article.

II. Issues

There is certainly evidence to demonstrate the big-business aspect of collegiate sport at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I - Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level. The troubling aspect of this is that fewer than 25 member institutions are generating enough revenue to cover expenses. There are millions of dollars of revenue being generated through media rights and distributions from the NCAA, but it is not enough to cover costs. It appears there are two solutions to the problem: reduce spending, which doesn't appear to be an option, or increase revenue. Member institutions have little or no control over the direct impact of television revenue, as the NCAA and conference representatives negotiate those contracts in the best interests of the member institutions. The institutions are certainly factors in those discussions but conference commissioners and representatives negotiate the television contracts for all NCAA members or for the conference membership as a whole. Institutions do have the ability to

impact revenue from ticket sales and donations. An increase in revenue in this area will have a direct impact on the school, as that revenue solely belongs to the institution.

One way to increase attendance is to ensure fans are having a positive and enjoyable experience at events. Having a large and strong season ticket holder base enables sales and marketing staff to approach potential sponsors who want to reach those fans. It is important to understand their experience as fans at events to enable athletic department administrators to better serve and host a positive experience.

For this study, an online survey was created to assess the opinions of those that have attended a collegiate football game within one calendar year of taking the survey. Areas of consideration included: pregame activities outside the stadium, pregame activities inside the stadium, overall game day activities, and the food and beverage experience. An e-mail invitation was sent to anyone who had purchased a ticket to a football game of a Southeastern university in the past year and who had provided a valid e-mail address. A total of 5,102 responded to the questionnaire during the 48 hours of data collection, and a total of 2,450 individuals responded to the open-ended question about overall game day activities.

The conceptual framework used to guide the research in this study is called Critical Incident Technique (CIT). CIT focuses on identifying and examining important incidents identified by participants based on their own positive or negative experience. An incident is defined as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). CIT is often utilized in attempt to better understand the experience of the consumer, as it relates to service or service quality. As with most open-ended responses about service or service quality, some participants will take the opportunity to complain about negative experiences or complement positive encounters.

III. Summary

The data were initially broken into two sections: positive comments and negative comments. The positive comments produced 1,875 codes encompassing nine themes as seen in Table 1.

The top theme was entitled *enjoyment* because of the very succinct and broad use of words used in the responses. When posed with the question about their game day experience, comments in this theme included, "great," "awesome," "always good," and "I like the whole thing, I would not change anything." The second most prominent theme was labeled *pride*. Many of these comments were simply "Go [college nickname]," or "I bleed [college colors]." The third most codes were placed into a category called *tradition*. The fourth primary positive theme, *atmosphere*, encompasses the categories of specific comments about the atmosphere, excitement, environment, and eustress of attending a college football game. The

fifth primary theme was entitled *interaction*, as it involves categories of family, general interaction, and community. These comments really speak to the communal nature of attending a sporting event. The *In game* theme includes categories of team quality, sport appreciation, game entertainment, and concessions. Facility includes categories of general facility, cleanliness, and seating. Management includes categories of operations, policy, staff, and cost.

Table 1

Positive Comment Data

Theme	Number of Codes	Percentage of Codes
Enjoyment	487	25.97
Pride	416	22.19
Tradition	303	16.16
Atmosphere	224	11.95
Interaction	181	9.65
In Game	113	6.03
Facility	73	3.89
Management	54	2.88
Other	24	1.28
Total	1875	100

The negative comments produced 1,588 codes containing seven themes as seen in Table 2. Five primary themes and one secondary theme emerged. The theme with the most negative comments and codes revolves around *facilities*. The theme was comprised of categories of a general tone as well as those involving seating, and cleanliness within the facility. The second primary theme associated with negative game day experience involves *atmosphere* at the football games. Issues of crowding, interactions, and game entertainment were the primary categories making this theme. The third highest percentage theme involves participant reactions to *policy and operation*. When asked about their game day experience, participants provided negative comments about the university and athletic department's operations mainly focusing on staff and policies on a variety of topics including tickets, schedule, and donation requirements. The fourth primary negative theme is on the topic of *price*. The fifth primary theme coming from negative

experiences involves *transportation*. The two primary categories making up this theme involve *parking and traffic*. A secondary theme included *concession service*.

Table 2

Negative Comment Data

Theme	Number of Codes	Percentage of Codes
Facilities	388	24.39
Atmosphere	338	21.24
Policy & Operations	285	17.91
Price	238	14.96
Transportation	222	13.95
Other	65	4.09
Concession service	55	3.46
Total	1591	100

IV. Analysis

It is a must that administrators assess the experience of their fans at events. This study used a unique approach in examining fan experience by using CIT as the theoretical framework for data analysis. This approach granted the researchers valuable access to the thoughts and opinions of the consumer. This consumer expression of positive and negative experiences allowed the analysis to dive further into the college football game day. Nearly 26% of the data for positive experiences had comments related to satisfaction and enjoyment at the event. This is encouraging, knowing that fans are enjoying their experience. This, coupled with the 22% of comments regarding pride, shows that respondents have a stake in the experience not just from a fan's perspective but also from a university stakeholder perspective. It is important for administrators to be aware that fans are not only consumers, but also representatives of the university and athletic department. Having fans show pride in the event is a sign that they want the event to be first class in all capacities and are willing to do things to contribute to the overall experience.

Similar to the theme of pride is the notion of tradition. Many people enjoy the traditional aspects of a college football game which was shown in the findings of this study. Marketers and other administrators should take note of this and use it as a sales and retention tool. The tradition is what many people feel make college sport so unique and exceptional. When considering the positive theme of

atmosphere, the game management staff, band, marketing and promotions teams, video screen operator, students, and all other ticket holders should have some say in how the atmosphere is shaped and molded.

The majority of negative comments dealt with the atmosphere at the games in terms of quality of the facility and fan behavior. Fans certainly cannot be accountable for monitoring the behavior of other fans but having a strong security presence can help reduce many problems that may occur in the stands. The negative comments about the game entertainment aspect of the facility also involve understanding the key stakeholders. There are some things that are classic and should be a part of the game day tradition. However, there should also be new features and substance each game to keep things fresh.

Many times, education and easily available information can be valuable tools for the athletic department. Athletic departments might benefit from educating their fans on facility, parking, and transportation issues. Lack of resources for facility improvement and campuses with natural borders such as rivers, interstates, business areas, or residential areas can cause traffic and parking issues. Education and information regarding these issues can be beneficial in helping develop an understanding of many of the negative situations brought up in this research.

V. Discussion/Implications

The positive and negative experiences of 2,450 people have provided some major areas of consideration for college athletic administrators. While the strengths of this research are the large amount of participants and the ability to capture many in-depth opinions, the research still contains weaknesses. One weakness is the fact that this data was collected from one university fan base. Each campus has a unique atmosphere with a different fan base and distinctive traditions. A second limitation is the inability to follow-up with the participants. With these open-ended questions occurring in an anonymous survey format, follow-up was not an option.

Future research in this area of fan experience is endless. With new trends, new data, and new fans entering stadiums yearly, there is always something to learn from the fan experience. From traditional issues of music, seating, and traffic, to new issues of social media usage during game day, tailgating policy and procedure, and renovations, fans are going to demand the attention from athletic departments. It's not enough to only care by reacting to customer complaints or research (like this), rather, an athletic department needs to be proactive, seek

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