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Home Fare Advantage: An Examination of the Role of Food and Beverages in Mercedes-Benz Stadium's Spectator Experience

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Abstract

Through the lens of expectation disconfirmation theory (EDT), and with consideration of other event experience factors, the current study examines how strategic concessions changes implemented by the Arthur M. Blank (AMB) Group at Mercedes-Benz Stadium impact the fan experience at its professional sport events. The changes at Mercedes-Benz Stadium differ significantly from operational practices at most sport venues. For instance, there is a strong emphasis on eliminating bottlenecks to increase throughput, which then allows for reduced costs without negatively affecting quality. Data were collected through an online survey of Atlanta United match attendees and an in-person research observation. Results from this study, when examined from an EDT lens, suggest that management prioritization of poorly rated services such as concessions may be an area where sport organizations can create strong, positive disconfirmation. This can then engender positive overall event experiences from patrons.

Keywords: *concessions, consumer behavior, event management, satisfaction, sport experiences*

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Introduction

For many years, food and beverage services within the sport experience were perceived negatively by sport organizations and consumers alike. High prices, poor quality, and slow service were common fan experience complaints identified by extant literature (Greenwell et al., 2007; Slavich et al., 2018). Moreover, there had been no reason to anticipate any significant improvements within this ancillary service area, considering that high food and beverage service costs continue to be an ongoing consumer experience issue and an accepted inefficiency among many entertainment industries (e.g., movie theaters and concerts; Mikrut, 2020). In recent years, food and beverage quality and variety have improved (see Slavich et al., 2018), but price and service remain points of concern in the sport food and beverage experience. However, in 2017, the Arthur M. Blank (AMB) Group, owners of the National Football League's (NFL) Atlanta Falcons, Major League Soccer's (MLS) Atlanta United, and Mercedes-Benz Stadium (MBS), decided to address this industry-wide market inefficiency. With the opening of its new stadium, AMB Group announced overarching philosophical changes to their food and beverage services.

Years in the making, the AMB Group placed high emphasis on the food and beverage experience in MBS' design. This emphasis was prompted by fan complaints about concessions from the NFL's "Voice of the Fan" survey while Falcons games were still played at the Georgia Dome (Frank, n.d.). The new stadium included 64% more concession points of sale and 1,264 more beer taps than the Georgia Dome. Concession prices were also significantly reduced as part of MBS' "Fan First Menu," becoming the lowest priced food and beverage offerings in major professional sports (Rovell, 2016). This plan was made possible by streamlining the queue design of its concessions lines to reduce wait times and support increased demand (Frank, n.d.).

In addition to the AMB Group food and beverage services, regional restaurant brands such as Chick-fil-A, Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q, and Sublime Donuts were provided a presence in MBS (Figueras, 2018). Overall, these measures detailed a commitment to reducing concession costs while improving both the efficiency and quality of service for stadium patrons. With the AMB Group's stated goal of using its food and beverage services to improve the overall fan experience (Muret, 2016), the purpose of this study was to examine factors that contribute to fans' overall experiences. The study was framed around the following research questions:

RQ₁: What MBS event experience factors impact spectators' event experience satisfaction?

RQ₂: What MBS concessions experience factors impact spectators' concessions experience satisfaction?

Literature Review

Previous investigations into the role of concessions within the sport experience found fans exhibiting displeasure with price, quality, variety, and service of food and beverage operations. Research from the 1990s on college football fans showed that patrons possessed dissatisfaction with concessions pricing, and that they desired more variety and higher quality (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). College basketball and international sport fans have also been shown to view concessions as unsatisfactory (Kahle et al., 2003;

Kelley & Turley, 2001). Even as the quality and variety of concessions has improved in contemporary sports, consumer assessments of food and beverage offerings has yet to reflect these improvements (Parry et al., 2017; Slavich et al., 2018). Overall, findings from prior studies consistently highlight that consumers possess low expectations and poor evaluations of food and beverage services within the sport experience.

Consequently, the current study employs expectations disconfirmation theory (EDT) as its lens of inquiry. This theory posits that satisfaction with a service experience is based upon one's expectations of the experience, with consumers evaluating service quality experiences relative to their expectations (Oliver, 1977). Individuals' expectations range on a continuum from negative disconfirmation to positive disconfirmation, with confirmation serving as the midpoint. Experiences exceeding one's expectations result in positive disconfirmation while those failing to meet expectations are negatively disconfirmed. Confirmation is reached when experiences meet expectations. Extant literature suggests that consumers are more satisfied when expectations are positively disconfirmed than positively confirmed while, in the same manner, individuals are most dissatisfied when expectations are negatively disconfirmed than when negative confirmation is achieved (Lankton et al., 2014; Oliver, 1977).

Evaluations are predicated upon consumers' expectations of the service outcome. Expectations are formed from a variety of factors, with the most common being consumers' previous experiences with a product or service (Kang & James, 2004; Kim et al., 2014; Trail, 2018). In the case of sport experiences, consumers will most likely draw upon previous experiences with the event attended or similar events attended. In the case of the current study, with concessions quality historically being poor, consumers likely have low expectations of their concessions experiences. Therefore, with the enhancement of the overall event and concessions experience at MBS, consumers should be more satisfied than they were in the past.

Methods

The current study employed two sources of data collection: (a) an online survey completed by event attendees and (b) an observation analysis conducted by a member of the research team. The survey, comprising both scaled- and open-response questions, was distributed online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Distribution through MTurk has been shown to be a reliable and valid source of data collection (Buhrmester et al., 2011). With its ability to create geographic parameters, MTurk was preferred for the current study.

Participant Selection

Initial eligibility for participation in this study was limited to respondents who lived in Georgia. Additionally, respondents had to confirm their attendance at an Atlanta United game within the previous seven days. Those who did not meet this requirement when answering vetting questions were directed to the end of the survey. As a secondary check, participants were asked to provide the date and opponent of the most recent game they had attended. Responses that did not align with the team schedule were removed from data analysis. Finally, respondents were asked whether they had consumed food and/or beverages at the game attended, permitting investigation of the food and beverage service experience.

Data Collection

Respondents answered questions that were focused on two core aspects of the event experience: (a) the overall experience and (b) the concessions experience. The overall experience featured six service quality factors examining satisfaction with the experience: (a) core competition; (b) sociability; (c) entertainment; (d) facility design; (e) facility ambience; and (f) concessions. The six factors were adapted from previous research of the sport service experience and were chosen based upon the study's focus on facility/event and concession satisfaction (Ko et al., 2011). Respondents also answered questions assessing five aspects of the concessions experience: (a) quality; (b) variety; (c) price; (d) employee interaction; and (e) speed of service. Satisfaction and future behavior for both concessions and the overall event experience were also assessed along with participant demographics.

Data were also collected via observation analysis from one of the researchers. The researcher had previously conducted observation analyses of both the event experience as well as the concessions experience at multiple other professional sporting events, establishing credence for their observational analysis serving as a positive contribution to the study. This researcher attended an Atlanta United game during July 2019. The purpose of the observation was to assess the complete event service experience with particular focus on the concession experience. The research team member was focused on the same components addressed in the online survey, seeking to identify factors that most contributed to consumer satisfaction and other desired spectator and organization outcomes (i.e., facility design, facility ambience, concession quality, and concession speed of service). As such, the researcher maintained moderate involvement, attending the event as a spectator while evaluating both the event and concession experience (Spradley, 1980). While observing, the researcher utilized photographs and took detailed written notes of their experience. Following the conclusion of the experience, the notes and photographs were examined by the observation researcher individually and then collectively by the complete research team. Following discussion, the data were coded and used for emergent themes (Fairley & Tyler, 2009; Spradley, 1980).

Analysis

To assess the impact of event service quality factors on experience satisfaction (i.e., RQ_1), multiple regression analysis was conducted. Independent variables included core competition, sociability, entertainment, facility design, facility ambience, concessions quality, concessions variety, concessions price, concessions employee interaction, and concessions speed of service. Event satisfaction served as the dependent variable. When assessing concessions service experience specifically (i.e., RQ_2), another multiple regression analysis was conducted. For this analysis, the independent variables included concessions quality, variety, price, employee interaction, and speed of service, with concessions satisfaction serving as the dependent variable. Both research questions were also assessed via researcher observation, which included transcription of notes from photographs and reflection upon data collected during his event experience to address the research questions (Creswell, 2003). Finally, mean scores of all event and concessions experience factors were examined to provide further assessment of the research questions.

Results

A total of 99 complete and usable surveys were collected, which met the minimum sample size necessary for the analyses conducted in the present study (Jenkins & Quintana-Ascencio, 2020). Demographic results are shown in Table 1. The results of RQ_1 revealed the combined nine factors (e.g., core competition, social, facility design, facility ambience, entertainment, concessions quality, concessions variety, concessions price, and concessions employee interaction) accounted for 71 percent of the variance in experience satisfaction and was statistically significant ($F(9, 90) = 25.454, p < .001, r^2 = .710$). Table 2 provides details on the individual factors contributing to event satisfaction with core competition ($\beta = .211, p = .044$), facility ambience ($\beta = .321, p = .032$), and concessions quality ($\beta = .282, p = .045$) as the only significant contributors to event experience satisfaction.

For RQ_2 , four concessions factors (i.e., quality, variety, price, and employee interaction) accounted for 70 percent of the variance in concessions satisfaction and was statistically significant ($F(4, 88) = 52.631, p < .001, r^2 = .701$). Table 3 reveals concessions employees ($\beta = .273, p < .001$) and concessions quality ($\beta = .365, p = .010$) as individual factors that positively contributed to concessions satisfaction.

Examination of the mean scores (Table 4) exhibited overall high ratings between all event and concessions experience factors, with all nine factors analyzed maintaining mean scores of at least five on the seven-point scale. Facility ambience, facility design, core competition, and social were all rated at 5.8 or greater, while each of the four concessions factors were at 5.4 or greater. Overall, spectators were highly satisfied with the event and concessions experience.

Finally, results of the observation analysis revealed three overarching themes: (a) concessions variety; (b) concessions speed of service; and (c) facility design/layout. The event featured a wide variety of items offered at the 700 points of sale. Such items included traditional, local, novelty, health food, and craft beer. Therefore, each category of the enhanced food and beverage experience within the sport industry was provided.

In addition to the variety of items offered, the observation revealed the role that speed of service played in the entire concessions experience. While the numerous points of sale allowed for the dispersion of spectators throughout the facility, the cashless aspect of the concessions service experience allowed spectators to be served more expeditiously and ultimately helped contribute to increasing sales volume at MBS (Tucker, 2019).

The facility's wide concourses were also shown to be a key contributor to the concessions experience as well as consumers' overall experiences. The concourses enhanced the flow of spectator traffic throughout the facility and, in particular, the flow of traffic to concessions and restroom areas. The concourse design allowed for the positioning of the concessions points of sale to offer proper spacing among these stations and their spectator lines. In all, the facility design appeared to aid foot traffic amid the 700 concessions points of sale, which positively contributed to consumer evaluations of the concessions and event experience.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondents

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	54	50.5
Female	44	41.1
Prefer not to say	9	8.4
Age		
18-24	13	13.3
25-30	37	37.7
31-35	21	21.4
36-40	10	10.2
41+	17	17.3
Race		
Caucasian	51	47.6
African-American	20	18.7
Asian	12	12.9
Hispanic	10	11.2
Other	14	13.1
Income		
\$0 - \$24,999	12	12.1
\$25,000 - \$49,999	21	21.2
\$50,000 - \$74,999	28	28.2
\$75,000 - \$99,999	16	16.1
\$100,000 - \$124,999	9	9.1
\$125,000+	13	13.1
Education		
High school/GED	1	1.1
Some college	20	20.6
Associate degree	10	10.3
Bachelor's degree	46	47.4
Graduate degree	20	20.6
Relationship status		
Married	47	47.5
Single, never married	27	27.2
Single, but living with another	20	20.2
Divorced	2	2.0
Other	3	3.0

Table 2*Regression Analysis Event Service Quality Factors on Experience Satisfaction*

Variable	B	SE B	β	<i>p</i>
Core Competition	.234	.114	.211	.044
Sociability	.112	.116	.111	.336
Entertainment	-.124	.083	-.126	.140
Facility Design	.226	.136	.217	.102
Facility Ambience	.324	.149	.321	.032
Concessions Quality	.318	.156	.282	.045
Concessions Variety	-.178	.151	-.170	.239
Concessions Price	.016	.088	.018	.855
Concessions Employee Interaction	.104	.093	.090	.269

Table 3*Regression Analysis Concession Quality Factors on Concession Satisfaction*

Variable	B	SE B	β	<i>p</i>
Concessions Quality	.813	.132	.365	.010
Concessions Variety	.241	.128	.269	.063
Concessions Price	.033	.074	.043	.658
Concessions Employee Interaction	.266	.072	.273	<.001

Table 4*Means and Standard Deviations Among Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Core Competition	5.81	1.25
Sociability	5.72	1.29
Entertainment	5.29	1.31
Facility Design	5.80	1.26
Facility Ambience	5.81	1.28
Concession Quality	5.77	1.14
Concession Variety	5.66	1.24
Concession Price	5.56	1.40
Concession Employee Interaction	5.42	1.13

Discussion

Upon review, MBS food and beverage services significantly exceeded consumer expectations (i.e., positively disconfirmed) when compared to previous studies on the topic. For example, the mean score for overall food and beverage measures was 1.89 (on a 5-pt scale) versus a mean score for concession measures of 5.6 (on a 7-pt scale) in the current study. The current results are supportive of a holistic approach to improving food and beverage services because an approach that focuses on quality, variety, price, and employee interaction may be effective in improving patrons' concessions satisfaction. Of the factors that were statistically relevant to overall event experience, concessions quality was the only one that can be regularly monitored and managed. Thus, management prioritization of concessions may be the most effective way of promoting a positive overall event experiences for patrons.

In this study, the AMB Group was capable of successfully implementing strategic changes to its concessions through long-term planning focused on addressing needs communicated by its consumers. Changes in facility design and overall infrastructure were necessary to execute their new concessions strategy. Yet, based on this study's findings, another point of positive disconfirmation may have been patrons' interactions with concessions employees. Therefore, training and retention of quality food services personnel should be emphasized because this human element has implications for both the concessions experience and overall event experience.

Following the concessions strategy change, the Atlanta Falcons went from being ranked 18th (out of 32 teams) to 1st in the NFL for its food and beverage experience (Novy-Williams, 2018). Similarly, in its inaugural season, Atlanta United received the highest MLS team ranking for its food and beverage services. While holding these concessions rankings, Atlanta United was ranked 1st and the Falcons 3rd in their respective leagues for overall game experience (Atlanta Falcons, 2018).

Shortly after MBS opened and launched its "Fan First Menu," neighboring entertainment venue, State Farm Arena, adopted a similar concessions strategy for Atlanta Hawks games with its "Fan Friendly Concessions" (Mandel, 2018, July 26). Since this strategic change, which significantly reduced the cost of concessions at Hawks games, the team has been ranked best in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in overall game experience, as evaluated by a league-wide survey of teams' season ticket holders (Atlanta Hawks, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

This study was exploratory in nature and focused on one sport organization (i.e., the AMB Group) and its two teams (i.e., Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United). As such, findings from this study should only be considered in the contexts investigated. Future studies should examine this change in sport and entertainment concessions strategy among different contexts (e.g., MLB, NBA, NHL, intercollegiate sports, etc.). Another limitation to this study was the sample size. Though the sample size met the minimum requirements for analysis (Jenkins & Quintana-Ascencio, 2020), data collection had to cease earlier than planned with fan access to games ending with the start of the coronavirus pandemic in Spring 2020. Future studies are recommended to collect data throughout a sport team's entire season.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reinforce certain business best practices. Long-term, strategic planning should be holistic in nature, and should begin with receiving and responding to consumer feedback. With an understanding of EDT, areas where consumer feedback denotes negative experiences should be prioritized, with the goal being to positively disconfirm consumer expectations during repatronage. Within sport and entertainment industry contexts, there are opportunities for improving concessions experiences and overall event experiences by aggressively addressing long-standing operational inefficiencies. By drastically exceeding patron expectations at sporting events in areas where consumers have historically held low expectations (i.e., positive disconfirmation), sport organizations can engender strong consumer satisfaction ratings that are anticipated to improve repatronage rates and increase overall attendance; thus, promoting greater revenue generation.

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