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Communication and Engagement Strategies for Promoting Division III College Sports: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract – College sports programs are embracing promotional activities that aim to create spectators and fans for live-action events. Whereas relationship marketing and fan engagement tactics are a mainstay of professional sports organizations, their inclusion within college sports programs is not ubiquitous. This study explores the promotional strategies for college sports, surveys the sports marketing literature, and presents findings from a spectator/fan questionnaire (n = 600) conducted with full-time enrolled students for a Division III college sports team. The twofold purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate what motivates student-spectators to attend men’s college basketball games and how to increase the level of excitement at games. Survey results suggest generalizable insights on the communication and engagement strategies for promoting live-action sports events at Division III institutions. Findings indicate significant gender differences exist for several controllable promotional elements.

Keywords – Communication strategies, Promotional activities, Relationship marketing, Sports marketing

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – Relationship marketing techniques prove relevant and easily translated to a sports marketing context. Building upon prior research on promotional activities for live-action college sports events, this study provides theoretical implications and suggestions for effective marketing strategy when promoting attendance and spectator/fan engagement.

Introduction

Sporting event success is often measured by two distinct criteria: game statistics—win or lose, and ticket sales—the number of spectators and fans in attendance at a live-action event. Marketing has played an important role in the success strategies of sports organizations over the past few decades, and this phenomenon has extended to college-level sports programs. Sporting events are popular leisure and recreational venues in most countries. For a variety of social and cultural reasons, sports fans and spectators visit arenas, stadiums, fields, and rinks to cheer on their favorite teams. However, recent years have posed some challenges for sports organizations, including a greater number of competing entertainment opportunities and higher ticket prices. Researchers contend that in order to survive in the current sports business climate, sports organizations must determine how to manage challenges, such as spiraling costs, a highly competitive marketplace, increasing fan discontent and disconnection, and the explosive growth of new technology (Kim & Trail, 2011; Gladden & Sutton, 2009). At the collegiate level, athletic departments must not only meet the mission-driven goals of their institutions but more and more need to develop marketing initiatives conducive to the generation of revenue. These revenue-generating activities may include broadcasting rights, multimedia rights, stadium concessions, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, merchandise sales, and ticket sales (Bouchet, Ballouli & Bennett, 2011; Shughart, 2010; James & Ross, 2004; Leeds & Von Allmen, 2001).

As sports marketers compete for spectators' share of interest and share of wallet, they quickly realize that their marketing activities are assuming a new level of importance. To survive in today's competitive environment, sports organizations must adopt a more proactive relationship marketing approach in order to attract regular attendance to live-action sporting events. In particular, sports marketers need to employ communication and engagement strategies to maximize sports event attendance, build relationships with spectators, and convert spectators into fans in order to secure their future support. Emerging evidence suggests that a paradigm shift has occurred in sports marketing, from a traditional exchange model to a relationship marketing model (Kim & Trail, 2011; Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2007). All sports consumers are not alike; hence, it is important for marketers to employ market segmentation and customization in their communication and engagement activities in order to provide relevant promotional offers and relevant content.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate what motivates spectator/fans to attend college basketball games and consider what promotional activities may be used to increase the level of attendee/fan excitement at a game. A spectator/fan questionnaire (n = 600) yield insights on the communication and engagement strategies for promoting sports marketing programs at Division III schools among matriculated students. This study will help fill a void in the sports marketing literature as currently there are many published studies on Division I school sports programs; however, there is a dearth of research on sports programs at the Division III level.

Literature Review

Research on sports marketing has been on the rise over the past few decades. Three broad topic areas have garnered the interest of researchers: (1) understanding spectator and fan motivation; (2) cultivating relationships with sports fans; (3) and promoting college-level sporting events. Please see Table 1 for an overview of the published college-level sports marketing studies.

Table 1
Overview of College-Level Sports Marketing Studies

Date of Publication	Author(s)	Journal	Article Title	College Level(s) and Sport Type	Key Findings
1996	Lapidus and Schibrowsky	<i>Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior</i>	“Do the hotdogs taste better when the home team wins?”	Division I Large Southwestern state university - UNLV Basketball	Measuring patron satisfaction with specific services related to a sport event is subject to potential halo effects.
1997	Pan, Gabert, McGaugh and Branvold	<i>Journal of Sport Behavior</i>	“Factors and differential demographic effects on purchases of season tickets for intercollegiate basketball games”	NCAA Division IA Basketball	Numerous factors and demographic effects (gender) influence the decision to hold a season ticket for a university basketball team. Female season ticket holders demonstrated stronger team loyalty and had higher ratings on social factors than males.
1999	DeSchraver	<i>International Sports Journal</i>	“Factors affecting spectator attendance at NCAA Division II football contests”	NCAA Division II Football	Statistically significant relationship exists between spectator attendance and several key factors such as home team winning percentage, promotional activity, ticket price and weather.
2001	James, Breezeel and Ross	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“A two-stage study of the reasons to begin and continue tailgating”	Division I University of Illinois Football	Tailgating is an integral part of the game experience and offers sports managers an opportunity to enhance the overall game experience.
2003	Bristow and Schneider	<i>Marketing Management Journal</i>	“The sports fan motivation scale: development and testing”	Division I Hockey	The empirically tested Sports Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) exhibited high internal reliability and can be used by sports marketers to target specific market segments.

Date of Publication	Author(s)	Journal	Article Title	College Level(s) and Sport Type	Key Findings
2002	Fink, Trail and Anderson	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Environmental factors associated with spectator attendance and sport consumption behavior: gender and team differences”	Division I-A Basketball	Females differ from males in their behavior; specifically females purchase more sports merchandise, are less likely to utilize print media to get team information, are not as concerned about player statistics, and showed a greater inclination toward future team loyalty.
2002	James and Ridinger	<i>Journal of Sports Behavior</i>	“Female and male sports fans: A comparison of sport consumption motives”	Not specified. Basketball	Females and males were not equally likely to be sport fans, in general or for a specific team. Male participant ratings as fans of sport in general and fans of specific teams were significantly higher than those of females.
2003	Trail, Robinson, Dick and Gillentine	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Motives and points of attachment: Fans versus spectators in intercollegiate athletics”	Division I-A Division I-AA Division II Division III Football	Three types of motives are differentially associated with different types of attachment (organizational identification vs. sports identification) indicating two segments of attendees may exist based on motives and points of attachment.
2004	James and Ross	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Comparing sport consumer motivations across multiple sports”	Large Midwestern university – nonrevenue sporting events Baseball Softball Wrestling	Differences were found in the demographic makeup of the audience based on the sport and attendee interest in the three sports was based upon factors associated with the sport in general.
2005	Trail, Anderson and Fink	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Consumer satisfaction and identity theory: A model of sport spectator conative loyalty”	Large Midwestern university Basketball	Three competing models revealed that the more these spectators either build or maintain self-esteem, the more likely they are to attend future games and to purchase merchandise.

Date of Publication	Author(s)	Journal	Article Title	College Level(s) and Sport Type	Key Findings
2011	Bouchet, Ballouli and Bennett	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Implementing a ticket sales force in college athletics: A decade of challenges”	Division I None specified / Bowl Championship Series Athletic department	Specific conditions, such as sales training and experience and consistent management, are often necessary in order for ticket sales management to be successful.
2011	Peetz	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Marketing the ‘Big Game’: Developing a student rewards program in college basketball”	Division I University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Basketball	In order to execute a successful rewards program it is important to address the factors influencing motivation as well as the three dimensions of personal investment theory.
2012	Gray and Wert-Gray	<i>International Journal of Consumer Studies</i>	“Customer retention in sports organization marketing: Examining the impact of team identification and satisfaction with team performance”	Southwestern American University Seven different sports Not specified	Both team identification and satisfaction with team performance impact multiple consumption behaviors, as represented by fans’ intentions to engage in future consumption, with team identification having the greater impact.
2012	DeSarbo and Madrigal	<i>Interfaces</i>	“Exploring the demand aspects of sports consumption and fan avidity”	Division I Large U.S. public university (with home game attendance average is 100,000 fans) Football	Based on the 35 different expressions of student fan avidity investigated, four dimensions underlying fan avidity and four student market segments were revealed.
2014	Do, Rhee, Kim and Kim	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Perceived corporate social responsibility and donor behavior in college athletics: The mediating effects of trust and commitment”	NCAA Division I-A sports program Particular sports not specified.	Perceptions of college Booster club donors about corporate social responsibility activities significantly influenced trust and commitment toward the sports organization, which in turn, impact donor behavior.
2014	Heere and Katz	<i>Journal of Applied Sport Management</i>	“Still undefeated: Exploring the dimensions of team identity among fans of a new college football team”	NCAA Large Southwest University Football	Different stakeholders (students, faculty/staff, and alumni) identify differently with both team and university in the context of a new collegiate football program.

Date of Publication	Author(s)	Journal	Article Title	College Level(s) and Sport Type	Key Findings
2014	Kwon and Kwak	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Revisiting the team identification-value-purchase relationship in the team-licensed merchandise consumption context: A multidimensional consumer value approach”	Two large Midwestern universities. Particular sport not specified.	Attitude toward team-licensed merchandise had a direct significant impact on purchase intention. Also product category affected the relationship between team identification and consumer values and between team identification and purchase attitude.
2014	Rishe, Mondello and Boyle	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“How event significance, team quality, and school proximity affect secondary market behavior at March Madness”	Division I Men’s Basketball March Madness tournament	Secondary market behavior is influenced by perceptions of event significance and the attractiveness of an event’s draw—which is influenced by consumers’ perceptions of the quality of participating teams and the proximity of participating schools from the host site of their competition.
2015	Aiken, Sukhdial, Kahle and Downing	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Linking fan values and sponsorship effectiveness: The case of old school values”	NCAA Division I Midwestern University Men’s Basketball	Fans do embrace Old School (OS) values (beliefs that are centered on three specific foundations) and that these OS fans have both higher sponsorship recognition rates and more positive perceptions of sponsors.
2015	Dixon, Martinez and Martin	<i>International Review on Public and Non-Profit Marketing</i>	“Employing social media as a marketing strategy in college sport: An examination of perceived effectiveness”	NCAA Division I Specific sports not specified.	Most college athletic departments use social media to raise awareness and support their marketing objectives, but few use it for fundraising and volunteer recruitment.
2015	Keaton, Watanabe and Gearhart	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“A Comparison of college football and NASCAR consumer profiles: Identity formation and spectatorship motivation”	Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College Football	Empirical results with respect to spectator motivation showed that college football sport consumers were influenced to watch their sport by the aesthetics of the game, along with a relationship to other recreational activities such as tailgating.

Date of Publication	Author(s)	Journal	Article Title	College Level(s) and Sport Type	Key Findings
2015	Koesters, Brown and Grady	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“You agreed to what? Implications of past agreements between donors and athletic support groups”	Division I University of South Carolina Football	Reports of courts’ decisions on lawsuits submitted by different donors. Both insight and caution are provided for sports marketers who are constantly striving to generate revenue from sporting events.
2016	Birim, Anitsal and Anitsal	<i>Academy of Strategic Management Journal</i>	“Perceived value, satisfaction, brand equity and behavioral intentions: Scale development for sports spectatorship in US college football”	Southeastern public university Football	Analysis of empirical research generated four significant factors that spectators consider when evaluating a sports team. These factors are: satisfaction, perceived value, brand equity and behavior intentions.
2016	Hutchinson, Havard, Berg and Ryan	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Losing the core sport product: Marketing amidst uncertainty in college athletics”	Division I University of Alabama at Birmingham Football	An overview of the need to address market segments when tackling the marketing challenges associated with the discontinuance of a university’s football program.
2016	Rishe, Sanders, Reese and Mondello	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“A heterogeneous analysis of secondary market transactions for college football bowl games”	Division I Football	Inferences are made about how fan avidity levels and infrequent bowl appearances impact consumer behavior on the secondary market. In addition, distance traveled affects secondary markups across multiple bowl games.
2016	Wear, Heere and Clopton	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	“Are they wearing their pride on their sleeve? Examining the impact of team and university identification upon brand equity”	NCAA Division I Midwestern University Basketball	Results of the empirical study examining effectiveness of sportswear companies’ sponsorship of intercollegiate athletic departments and the subsequent effects on the students of the university show that team and university identification did not impact sportswear brand equity.

Understanding Spectator and Fan Motivation

In recent years, sporting events have had to compete more overtly with other leisure activities and entertainment products. This has made it increasingly important for marketers to understand what motivates people to attend live-action sporting events. Several researchers have developed conceptual models in an attempt to measure the motives of sporting event attendance. James and Ridinger (2002) explored possible gender differences with respect to sport consumption motives. Funk and James (2006) offered a Revised Psychological Continuum Model (RPCM) that suggests that marketing communication efforts attempting to evoke nostalgia will be most effective in maintaining and strengthening fans' psychological attachments to a team when targeting those fans already at the highest levels of team identification. Funk, Filo, Beaton and Pritchard (2009) offered a 10-item scale that measured five facets of motivation: Socialization, Performance, Excitement, Esteem, and Diversion (SPEED). Their model was able to explain 30% of the variance in the frequency of game attendance and 75% of the variance in team commitment. Other research by James and Ross (2004) compared sport consumer motivations across multiple non-revenue intercollegiate sports and found that interest in the three sporting events was based on factors associated with the sports in general. Drea & Nahlik (2016) explored dynamic pricing strategies in a professional sports context yet their results are highly suggestive college-level sporting events as well.

Kim and Trail (2011) have proposed a conceptual framework of sports consumer-organization relationship quality. Their model consists of five components of relationship quality: trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity. Long ago, Maehr and Branskamp (1986) proposed a personal investment theory that provided a platform to examine sports consumer motivation and which is still referenced in recent related literature. Peetz (2011) contended that in order to better understand the factors of motivation in personal investment theory; one must begin with an understanding of a person's perceived options. Study of psychographic features of the fan/spectator experience is undoubtedly important for the field and remains particularly salient of college-level sports.

Cultivating Relationships with Sports Fans

Although relationship marketing is a well-researched subject in the general marketing discipline, its application to sports marketing is considerably sparse (Futrell, 2015). The importance of building relationships between sports consumers and sports organizations is greatly emphasized in both academia and practice (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012; Gladden and Sutton, 2009); however, there remains a lack of empirical research on the subject (Kim and Trail, 2011). One recent study examined various constructs for enhancing relationships with fans of a college football team (Birim, Anitsal and Anitsal, 2016). This study generated four significant factors (satisfaction, perceived value, brand equity and behavior intentions) that spectators consider when evaluating a sports team (Birim, Anitsal and Anitsal, 2016, p. 1). In another slightly older study, the effects of trust and commitment on perceived corporate social responsibility and donor behavior were investigated in college athletics (Ko, Rhee, Kim and Kim, 2014). Whereas institutional identity and team/athlete notoriety present opportunities for fan creation and engaged spectators, the relationship between team pride, team loyalty, and increased consumption behavior has also been studied and deemed significant for various venues (Decrop and Derbaix, 2010). The potential impact of two factors—team identification or “loyalty” and

satisfaction—has been addressed in long-standing research on customer/fan retention (Wakefield, 1995). Data on fans from more than 40 teams involved in seven sports revealed that both team identification and satisfaction with team performance have an impact on fans' intentions to engage in future consumption (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012).

Promoting College-Level Sporting Events

Recent research explored the use of new team rivalries to both generate competitive enthusiasm and promote sporting event attendance (Hutchinson, Havard, Berg and Ryan, 2016). DeSarbo and Madrigal (2012) investigated marketing to college football fans on a segmented basis. Peetz (2011), in turn, detailed the (largely successful) results of a student rewards program in marketing college basketball games. His research stems from the need for colleges and universities to become innovative in their marketing activities given the realities of rising expenses and budget reductions. Peetz (2011) declared that one of the benefits of a rewards program is that it allows an organization to observe the attendance behaviors of a particular and targeted segment. This insight is consistent and supports the findings of Boyd and Krehbiel (2006) who concluded that much of the current research on game attendance and spectator motives may provide insight into the causes of attendance but too often focuses on factors that are not easily controlled or easily acted upon by sports marketers and athletic programs.

In promoting college sporting events, marketers must determine the optimal media mix to use to engage with fans and spectators. Surprisingly, very few studies on media effectiveness appear in the literature. Dixon, Martinez, and Martin (2015) investigated the perceived effectiveness of social media in accomplishing organizational objectives and found that it is used primarily for raising awareness and supporting marketing objectives. An opportunity for learning more about social media and college sports promotion therefore exists.

In summary, there is much to be learned by extending the study of promotional activities of sports teams into an examination of how spectators and fans react to different types of media, offers and incentives. To cut through the noise in this busy, “always on” digital world, savvy sports marketers need to understand their audience and deliver more relevant content and messaging at every touch point possible. Good content marketing breaks through the mass communication clutter that surrounds us today, grabs the consumer’s attention, engages with the spectator or fan, and motivates action. The challenge for sports marketers, therefore, is to create and distribute valuable, relevant, and consistent content to engage spectators and fans, and ultimately, to drive loyalty and commitment.

Research Method

Using a paper questionnaire, data were collected from 600 undergraduate students enrolled in a small southeastern state university (total student body = 5,186). A quota sampling method was used and was informed by the publicly available institutional data listed on the university’s external website. The quota sample included 50 surveys per group gathered from each of the following student segments: social fraternity members (males); social sorority members (females); male freshman; female freshman; male sophomores; female sophomores; male juniors; female juniors; male seniors; female seniors; male athletes; and female athletes. All respondents participated on a voluntary basis within a two-week period during the spring academic semester.

All data collection was conducted on campus and in person by senior marketing students trained to execute the survey in a consistent and similar fashion. Both the survey instrument and research methodology were approved by the institution's IRB (Institutional Review Board) prior to data collection. The survey instrument was pretested on two classes of junior and senior-level students, and edits were made to the survey instrument on the basis of the pretest findings prior to the main data collection.

Of the 600 surveys, 559 surveys were considered complete and included in the data analysis for this study. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the study participants.

Table 2
Characteristics of the Study Participants (n=559)

Variable	%	Variable	%
Gender		Greek Social Organization member	
Male	46.5	Yes	18.9
Female	53.5	No	81.1
Class rank		University Honors Program member	
Senior	17.9	Yes	13.1
Junior	26.5	No	84.3
Sophomore	28.6		
Freshman	27.0		
Full-Time Student Classification		University Leadership Program member	
Yes	100.0	Yes	29.2
No	0.0	No	68.3
Geographic residence		University Intramural Sports participant	
On campus	63.7	Yes	38.1
Off campus	34.3	No	57.6
Varsity Athletic Team member		University Club Sports participant	
Yes	27.0	Yes	12.2
No	73.0	No	81.4
Non-Athletic Student Organization member		High School sports team participant	
Yes	55.8	Yes	69.4
No	44.2	No	27.7

Measures

The questionnaire was developed (in part) from a literature review of sport marketing studies and consisted of demographic variables (Bristow, Harris, Gulati & Schneider, 2014). Demographic variables include gender; academic level or rank; geographic residence; membership in a student organization; social fraternity/sorority membership; honors program affiliation; university leadership program; and varsity/club/intramural sports team affiliation. The questionnaire also attempted to isolate factors related to sports games attendance, such as motives and barriers to attend the game; needs for event enhancement; responses to promotional items; and contact preference. A screening question was used to guarantee that all study participants were attending college on a full-time basis and to ensure that each respondent participating was completing one, and only one, questionnaire.

Results

The findings of this exploratory empirical research are categorized by motives and barriers to attend a live-action sports events, need for event enhancement, spectator/fan reaction to various promotional items, and spectator/fan preference for various types of communication channels.

Motives to Attend the Games

In total, the most dominant reason students attend Division III college basketball games was that their “Friends attend” (74.2%), with “Enjoyment of the sport” (58.5%) as a distant second. Other motivations for game attendance included “Mandatory attendance” (25.5%), for “Escape from daily routine” (24.6%), and “Free giveaways during the game” (20.2%). The least motivational factor in game attendance was the “Halftime show” (11.3%). Chi-square tests for each motive revealed significant gender differences. Female students reported “Friends attendance” (Female = 81.6% vs. Male = 68.9%; $\chi^2(1, N = 337) = 6.89, p < .01$) and “Free giveaways during the game” (Female = 27.0% vs. Male = 15.3%; $\chi^2(1, N = 337) = 6.90, p < .01$) were the primary game attendance motives, whereas more male students chose “Mandatory attendance” (Male = 30.1% vs. Female = 19.1%; $\chi^2(1, N = 337) = 5.18, p < .05$) as the reason to attend the game than female students. As Table 3 shows, there were no significant demographic differences for the other game attendance motives.

Overall, the majority of students reported enjoying watching basketball games, however, male students enjoyed watching the game more than female students, and male students also attended more games than female students. Specifically, 84.2% of male students said they enjoyed watching the game of basketball compared to 63.2% of females ($\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 31.17, p < .01$). In terms of the game attendance, males students ($M = 2.90$) attended more games than female students ($M = 2.15$) during the 2012-2013 season ($t(557) = 5.60, p < .01$). Also, using the 4-point measures, male students indicated more excitement during the game ($M_{Male} = 3.48$ vs. $M_{Female} = 3.10$, $t(555) = 3.23, p < .01$), and expressed higher likelihoods to attend future games ($M_{Male} = 3.02$ vs. $M_{Female} = 2.82$, $t(541) = 2.68, p < .05$).

Table 3

Which of the following reasons best explain why you attend men's basketball games?*

	Male (n=196)	Female (n=141)	TOTAL** (N=337)
Friends attend ^a	68.9	81.6	74.2
Enjoyment of the sport	58.7	58.2	58.5
Mandatory attendance ^b	30.1	19.1	25.5
Escape from daily routine	20.9	29.8	24.6
Free giveaways during the game ^a	15.3	27.0	20.2
Halftime show	9.2	14.2	11.3

* Unit: Percentages of respondents who choose each item in multiple choices

** N = Respondents who attended at least one basketball game during 2012-13

^a Significant gender difference ($p < .01$)^b Significant gender difference ($p < .05$)

Barriers to Attend the Games

Several extrinsic factors to the game itself were identified as major barriers to game attendance. These included "Time conflicts" (58.1%), "Lack of awareness of the game schedule" (47.0%), and "Too much academic work" (44.2%). Other barriers were "Not enough of your friends attend" (34.3%), "Alcohol policy" (30.6%), and "Talent of the athletes" (10.6%). Few students chose "Don't know the rules of the game" (5.5%) and "Negative comments about the game" (2.7%) as barriers to game attendance.

Again, Chi-square tests were performed to explore possible demographic differences in factors that deter students to attend Division III sports events, and the results show that, in fact, there are gender differences. Specifically, 40.5% of female students chose "Not enough of your friends attend" as the primary barrier, compared with only 27.3% of male students ($\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 11.75, p < .01$). Also, there were very few male students (0.8%) who chose "Don't know the rules of the game" as the barrier of the game attendance, however significantly more numbers of female students (9.7%) chose that as the barrier ($\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 21.17, p < .01$). There were no significant demographic differences for the major barriers including "Time conflicts," "Lack of awareness of the game schedule," "Too much academic work," and "Lack of interest." Table 4 shows the results in detail.

Table 4
What deters you from attending men’s basketball games?*

	Male (n=260)	Female (n=299)	TOTAL (N=559)
Time conflicts	58.1	58.2	58.1
Lack of awareness of the game schedule	43.5	50.2	47.0
Too much academic work	40.4	47.5	44.2
Lack of interest	40.0	45.5	42.9
Not enough of your friends attend ^a	27.3	40.5	34.3
Alcohol policy	33.5	28.1	30.6
Talent of the athletes	13.1	8.4	10.6
Don’t know the rules of the game ^a	0.8	9.7	5.5
Negative comments about the games	2.3	3.0	2.7

* Unit: Percentages of respondents who choose each item in multiple choices

^a Significant gender difference ($p < .01$)

Need for Event Enhancement

For the question that asked what students would like to see more of at the games, 53% of students chose “Giveaways” followed by “Interaction with the fans” (31.3%), “Better halftime shows” (26.7%), “Different music” (16.6%), and “Better refreshments” (16.6%). Once again, significant demographic differences for event enhancements were reported. More female students (59.5%) wanted to have more “Giveaways” at the games than male students (45.4%) ($\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 11.17, p < .01$). There were more male students (20.4%) than females (13.4%) who wanted “Different music” at the games ($\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 4.92, p < .05$). Please see Table 5 for the results.

Table 5
Which of the following would you like to see more of at the games*

	Male (n=260)	Female (n=299)	TOTAL (N=559)
Giveaways ^a	45.4	59.5	53.0
Interaction with the fans	34.2	28.8	31.3
Better halftime shows	26.2	27.1	26.7
Different music ^b	20.4	13.4	16.6
Better refreshments	15.4	17.7	16.6

* Unit: Percentages of respondents who choose each item in multiple choices

^a Significant gender difference ($p < .01$)

^b Significant gender difference ($p < .05$)

Responses to Promotional Items

A portion of the survey asked questions about 18 possible promotional items to attract students into attend Division III sporting events. Participants were asked to rate the degree of impact that each item had in encouraging game attendance using four-point scales anchored with “Strong impact” (4) to “No impact at all” (1). In general, several of the monetary promotions received the highest ratings of impact, including: “\$100 tuition reimbursement checks” ($M = 3.50$), “Free refreshments” ($M = 3.32$), “Free sports merchandise” ($M = 3.28$), “Discount at local restaurants for attending a winning game” ($M = 3.24$), and “Dining dollars” ($M = 3.16$). Compared to those monetary promotions, special events like “Dunk contests” ($M = 2.84$), “Halftime concerts or performance” ($M = 2.68$), and “Halftime challenges” ($M = 2.59$) received relatively lower ratings in regard to their impact on student game attendance. Descriptive results showed that male students reported impact of 14 promotional items (out of 18) on the game attendance more highly than females. In particular, a series of *t*-tests revealed statistically significant differences for the following items: “Free refreshments” ($M_{Male} = 3.47$ vs. $M_{Female} = 3.20$; $t(547) = 3.56$, $p < .01$); “Dining dollars” ($M_{Male} = 3.27$ vs. $M_{Female} = 3.06$; $t(547) = 2.48$, $p < .05$); “Dunk contest” ($M_{Male} = 3.17$ vs. $M_{Female} = 2.56$; $t(546) = 6.87$, $p < .01$); “Halftime challenges” ($M_{Male} = 2.72$ vs. $M_{Female} = 2.48$; $t(547) = 2.60$, $p < .01$); and “Preferred courtside seating” ($M_{Male} = 2.59$ vs. $M_{Female} = 2.27$; $t(546) = 3.56$, $p < .01$). See Table 6 for detail.

TABLE 6

Rate each of the following activities with regard to the degree of impact each would have in encouraging you to attend a men's basketball game*

	Male (n=260)	Female (n=299)	TOTAL (N=559)
\$100 tuition reimbursement checks	3.53	3.47	3.50
Free refreshments ^a	3.47	3.20	3.32
Free sports merchandise	3.27	3.29	3.28
Discounts at local restaurants for attending a winning game	3.26	3.23	3.24
Dining dollars ^b	3.27	3.06	3.16
School spirit wear giveaways (Examples: T-shirts; hats)	3.04	3.13	3.09
Discounts at local bars for attending a winning game	3.18	3.02	3.09
Wet tailgates (pre-game parties)	3.17	3.00	3.07
Discounted food at Men's Basketball games	3.13	3.01	3.07
Chances to win door prizes	3.01	3.00	3.01
Dunk contests ^a	3.17	2.56	2.84
Greater variety of food vendors	2.86	2.76	2.80
Organizations partnered with the team for a fundraising game event	2.80	2.67	2.73
Halftime concerts or performances	2.58	2.76	2.68
Increased club presence	2.64	2.58	2.60
Halftime challenges (Example: 3v3 games) ^a	2.72	2.48	2.59
Step team performances	2.36	2.51	2.44
Preferred courtside seating ^a	2.59	2.27	2.42

* Unit: Responses to each item anchored 1 being no impact at all to 4 being strong impact

^a Significant gender difference ($p < .01$)

^b Significant gender difference ($p < .05$)

Contact Preference

Students were asked what would be the best way to inform them about upcoming games. In total, 28.1% of participants chose "Facebook", followed by "E-mail" (26.5%), "Text Message" (25.7%), and lastly a "Flyer" (19.7%). However, for male students, "Text Message" (Male = 32.7%, Female =

19.9%; $\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 8.52, p < .01$) was the most popular channel for contact, and significantly more female students chose “Facebook” (Female = 31.6% vs. Male = 19.9%; $\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 4.73, p < .05$) as their preferred contact method than male students. See Table 7 for detail.

Table 7
What would be the best way to inform you about upcoming games?*

	Male (n=226)	Female (n=272)	TOTAL (N=498**)
Facebook ^b	23.9	31.6	28.1
E-mail	24.3	28.3	26.5
Text Message ^a	32.7	19.9	25.7
Flyer	19.0	20.2	19.7

* Unit: Percentages of respondents who choose each item in a single choice

** Cases that provided multiple answers were excluded from total set of 559 respondents

^a Significant gender difference ($p < .01$)

^b Significant gender difference ($p < .05$)

Discussion

Regarding motives to attend the basketball games, female students were more socially motivated to attend the games than were male students. Social motivation is consistent with previous research (Pan, Gabert, McGaugh and Branvold, 1997) which found females had higher social interaction ratings than males, with Bristow and Schneider (2003) who declared that some segments of fans seek the opportunity to socialize with others as the primary motive to attend a sporting event, and with DeSarbo and Madrigal (2012) who named a market segment of female college students “Social butterflies” because their research also revealed that females attend games for the social experience and are more socially active than are male students. In contrast, male students reported greater enjoyment in watching the game of basketball and had attended more games than female students which is consistent with the findings of DeSarbo and Madrigal (2012) who found males enjoy talking sports and are more likely to be avid sports fans at all levels than females. Previous research (Fink, Trail and Anderson, 2002) also supports this insight as females were less likely to track team statistics than were males in intercollegiate sports. Taken altogether, these findings imply gender differences exist with respect to student motivations to attend basketball games.

For factors related to game motives, female students reported: “Not enough of your friends attend” and “Don’t know the rules of the game” as the primary barriers keeping them away from basketball games. These were not barriers keeping male students away from the games. Consistent with previous research (DeSarbo and Madrigal, 2012; Bristow and Schneider, 2003; Pan, et al., 1997) the social interaction motive of females is influencing their decision-making process and behavior when it comes to attending basketball games.

Regarding need for event enhancements to attract attendance at basketball games, more female students desired “Giveaways” than male students. Similarly, previous research studies (Boyd and Krehbiel, 2006) have revealed that giveaways, especially bobbleheads, have been found to have a significant impact on game attendance at Major League Baseball games; however, gender differences were not explored. The fact that “Different music” at the games was preferred by more males than females is an interesting item to consider, as this specific variable has not been previously addressed in the body of published sports literature. However, sports event music may be an aspect of the entertainment value of the basketball game in which differences may, as James and Ross (2004) found, be based upon factors associated with the sport itself. Sports marketers should continue to find ways to enhance the event experience itself as has been suggested by Lapidus and Schibrowsky (1996).

It comes as no surprise that monetary incentives, as opposed to non-monetary promotions, received the highest student ratings with regard to desired incentives to encourage game attendance. However, the gender differences revealed by our study provide some interesting twists for sports marketers to consider. Male students are more interested in food-related incentives, such as “Free refreshments” and “Dining dollars”; and behavior-related incentives, such as “Dunk contests,” “Halftime challenges” and “Preferred courtside seating” than are female students. The behavior-related incentives may go hand-in-hand with the finding that more male students enjoy the game of basketball than female students.

Finally, the findings regarding students’ contact preferences to inform them about upcoming games are not surprising given our modern digital revolution with an emphasis on smart phone and social media technology. However, gender differences revealing that more males prefer text messaging while more females prefer Facebook posts offer some fruitful information for marketers to consider in interacting and building relationships with spectators and fans.

Theoretical Implications

Sports marketing is service marketing where the service provided is entertainment. Previous research (Trail, Robinson, Dick and Gillentine, 2003) suggested that all college students – both spectators and fans – may be more motivated to attend a game to escape from the responsibilities of everyday life and to socialize with others before, during and after a game. However, our empirical research points out that a segmented relationship marketing approach may be needed whereby the offers or value propositions being presented to the students should vary based on gender. First and foremost, friends matter when marketing to female students. Female students need to hear more about the social aspects of the game and the free giveaways—which if possible, should be tied to activities with friends such as a gift card for two free lunches for them and a friend at a local restaurant versus a single lunch. Marketers might want to target females with group offers to promote the game as a social activity, such as bring two of your suite-mates or sorority sisters and be entered into a special giveaway drawing.

Likewise, sports marketers should target male students with behavioral offers and experiential enhancements that promote dunk contests, half-time challenges and preferred courtside seating. Give them experiential enhancements while attending the basketball game. Also, since male students enjoy the sport of basketball more than females, male students may be targeted with promotions that are associated with team statistics quizzes. Finally, since male students attended more games, they are a more appropriate target market to appeal to with a

rewards program or frequency card to entice their continued support and to thank them for their patronage.

Sports marketers might consider employing text messages and mobile contests for male students and Facebook posts and contests when communicating with female students. Email blasts may still be effectively used for communication with all college students, and the development of a mobile app may be explored as well. Of course, in order to maximize the effectiveness of these marketing communication strategies the development of a spectator or fan database is strongly recommended. The bottom line is that much can and should be done to deliver customized offers and communication to college students to enhance the effectiveness of sports marketing at the Division III college level.

Limitations and Future Research

This study employed non-probability quota sampling procedures of student-spectators, and like most sports marketing studies, our study focused on a single sport: basketball. Thus differences may exist with respect to the actual sport as well as with non-student spectator preferences. Future research may be conducted with other sports, such as football, soccer or lacrosse, (for both student and non-student populations) to see if the findings differ according to the type of sports event. Also, our study only examined men's varsity basketball games, whereas future research could investigate and compare student promotional preference differences between men's and women's varsity basketball games. In fact, Fink, Trail and Anderson (2002) studied intercollegiate men's and women's basketball games and found a number of significant differences between fans of women's and fans of men's basketball games. Moreover, our research, unlike most college sport marketing studies, was conducted on a Division III college-level sports game. Our findings may be unique to Division III and thus may not be effectively generalized to Division I or II college-level games.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore the various promotional methods that may be used to motivate college students to attend Division III sporting events and to determine how to increase the level of excitement at the game. Our research points to the use of specific event enhancements, promotion items, and contact preferences to communicate with and engage student-spectators. In addition, the research findings suggest that gender matters in sports marketing. While there remains more work to be done, our research contributes to the limited body of literature focused on understanding the role and effectiveness of customized sports marketing activities.

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