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EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING AND SPORTING EVENTS: A SPECTATOR PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Research question

How extra-ordinary experiences provided in sporting events are lived by spectators and what are their consequences in terms of consumer behaviour.

Theoretical background

Since about twenty-five years, experiential marketing has become for numerous researchers and practitioners, the answer for companies and brand to fulfil contemporary customers' expectations and then creating and maintaining competitive advantages (Carú and Cova, 2006; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). The main principle of this marketing approach relies on customer immersion in unforgettable and extra-ordinary experiences based on a new category of additional offers associated to the original products and services (Carú & Cova, 2006).

As for sporting events, the games occasionally organised by *Stade Français Paris Rugby Club*, at *Stade de France* (the French stadium with the biggest capacity) represent perfect illustrations of this marketing approach with the implementation of many pre and post-game entertainment. These shows and displays, more and more unique and extravagant have allowed the Parisian club to attract numerous spectators (around 80,000 each time) and then regularly break international attendance records for regular-season rugby games (Bodet, 2009).

Although many practitioners estimate that experiential marketing, through the creation of personally relevant and emotional experiences, can generate brand advocacy, loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, little empirical work have been conducted to challenge these assumptions (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Furthermore, even if many observers acknowledge these successes based on quantitative evaluations, few have been interested in understanding the nature of the consumption experiences lived by these spectators, the deep reasons of such successes and the potential outcomes in terms of loyalty and commitment.

Methodology

Therefore, in order to better understand the subjectively-based aspects of the consumption experiences lived by the *Stade de France*'s spectators during the rugby games organised by *Stade Français Paris Rugby Club*, a series of individual interviews (n = 27) was conducted with individuals having, at least attended once, one of these events. Individuals were selected based on the three categories of fans (i.e., casual, regular and fanatical) and the main relevant socio-demographic characteristics identified by Tapp & Clowes (2002) in order to cover the widest scope of the spectator profiles. The number of interviews was determined following a semantic saturation criterion per fan category.

Results and conclusion

A thematic analysis revealed the presence of the four sport spectator profiles measured by Bouchet, Bodet, Bernache-Assollant and Kada (2010) but with more permeable boundaries than theoretically postulated. Many interviewees, often rugby players or amateurs, could be identified within the *Aesthetic* profile with a strong interest in the game itself but with varying interests in the pre and post-game entertainments. Some appreciate them as bonuses

to the event but some are not interested in them and only arrive for the start of the game. For this specific group, many similarities can be found with individuals falling into the *Supporter* profile which mainly focuses on their favourite team's performance. This result seems to differ from the theoretical relationship between the two profiles which was assumed to be in contradiction (Bouchet et al., 2011). Many spectators, often non-regular fans and women, were also identified as *Interactive*, looking for an overwhelming ambiance. For these spectators, the collective, friendly and tribal dimension was often highlighted in their consumption patterns as they often belonged to a group of people. This feature corresponds to what Bouchet et al. (2011) noted when acknowledging tribal marketing as an appropriate strategy for this kind of spectators. However, many of them could also be considered as *Opportunist*, as they emphasised on the importance of the low-pricing and the fact they had often been given free-tickets. Even if the utilitarian motivation does not seem dominant for them, this feature is not classically associated to the *Interactive* profile. Finally, few of the spectators were found to have developed any strong attachment and loyalty towards the *Stade Français* brand and, for the most regular spectators to these experiential events, the perceived quality of the game featured by the opponent team seemed to play the biggest role.

In conclusion, these results confirm the heterogeneity of the spectator profiles identified in the literature and provide further knowledge in the definition of the relationships between the profiles measured by Bouchet et al. (2011). From a managerial perspective, these results do not hinder practitioners to adopt such approaches, but tend to limit the scope of its benefits as no relationship has been found between experiential marketing and attachment and loyalty. They also suggest that price should not be underestimated and then question the value of experiential marketing in comparison with traditional marketing.

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