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Gameday Food and Beverage: The Perspective of College Football Fans

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ABSTRACT

This study examines sport spectators' food and beverage experience through the lens of service quality, targets of quality, and standards of quality in sport-based services. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 1,495 adults attending at least one American college football game. Thematic analysis produced five themes of price, variety, quality, service, and amenities while comparison analysis found several demographic differences. Findings reveal food and beverage to be critical in overall experience at sporting events. The overwhelming majority of comments were negative and findings provide feedback as to how important this aspect of the game experience is.

Keywords: Service Quality, Concessions, Qualitative, Thematic Analysis, and College Athletics

INTRODUCTION

Evaluating the fan experience has taken on new meaning during the second decade of the 21st century. Sport organizations are not only competing with other entertainment options, such as movie theaters, theme parks, and restaurants, but also the at-home viewing experience (Hardin and Taylor, 2013). Technology has made the at-home viewing experience a desirable alternative to attending the game, as fans can enjoy a multiple screen experience. Fans can watch the game on television, but can also interact on social media platforms and message boards or watch another game via a mobile device (Hardin et al, 2012; Giglietto and Sevla, 2014; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010). The at-home viewing experience also eliminates traffic congestion, parking, and waiting in lines as well as offering unlimited food and drink.

Technology constraints have limited the use of smartphones, as wireless networks and mobile network providers do not have the capacity to have upwards to 100,000 fans on a network in such a concentrated area. National Football League (NFL) teams and many American colleges are searching for solutions to boost network connectivity (Casey, 2013; Muret, 2013; Rittenberg, 2013). Collegiate athletic administrators are well aware of the issue of declining attendance and are developing strategies to combat the recent drop (Cohen, 2013, Rittenberg, 2013). The Southeastern Conference has developed a task force comprised of representatives from all 14 members to study the fan experience at football, men's basketball and women's basketball games as attendance has been declining (Solomon, 2013). A *Wall Street Journal* report just prior to the start of the 2014 college

football season showed student attendance at college football games down 7.1% since 2009 (Cohen, 2014). This is true among all of college football, including the premier programs such as Ohio State, Michigan State, Florida, and Florida State (Cohen, 2013). This is of concern because current students are seen as future season-ticket buyers and donors.

Attendance is important in collegiate athletics because it is one of the three primary sources of revenue for athletic departments. Ticket sales, along with donations and conference distributions, account for 75% of generated revenue of Division I athletic departments. Ticket sales alone account for 26% of generated revenue (Fulks, 2014). With that, ticket sales and attendance are vitally important, but even more so because only 20 members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) actually had generated revenue outpacing expenses (Fulks, 2014). These sport organizations are, for the most part, operating at a loss and the primary source of revenue is declining. Collegiate athletic departments are only generating 80% of their total revenue with the other 20% comprised of institutional support and student fees. This is occurring at a time when head coaches are making millions per year and athletic departments are spending hundreds of millions on facility upgrades. Forty-two NCAA Division I-FBS coaches made more than \$2 million per year during the 2012 season, and the average annual salary of head baseball and basketball coaches was \$1.62 million (Steinberg, 2012). Facility enhancement is the visible financial expenditure and the so-called “arms race” has universities trying to build the best and most modern facilities for student-athletes and fans. 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 and Rosen, 2009; Stinson and Howard, 2004.). 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)

Season ticket holders help fund the core activities of sport organizations and attract outside funding through sponsors who want to reach those people (McDonald and Stavros, 2007). Having a large season ticket holder base enables sales and marketing staff members to approach potential sponsors who want to reach those fans. It is important to understand the fan experience, which enables athletic department administrators to better serve the needs of fans, and creates a positive experience. One way to increase attendance is to ensure fans are having a positive and desirable experience at events. This would lead to higher ticket revenue and possibly more donations.

Research on sport event 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 (Menzis and Nguyen, 2012). The focus of this research is the external perspective and will be examined in terms of service quality, specifically examining the food and beverage aspect of attending a sporting event.

SERVICE QUALITY

Understanding and implementing high quality service is important as consuming a sport-based product can be more than simply watching a game, bowling in a venue, or purchasing running shoes from a retail store. Service quality relies on more than the product itself and the delivery of high-quality service is one of the important aspects of any service organization. Chelladurai and Chang (2000) outlined targets and standards of quality in sport-based services. Targets were identified as the following: Core Service, performance of the intended service (e.g. expert coaching in a sport club or golf club fitting at a sport retail shop); Context, quality of the facilities, location, equipment, and other amenities; Client-Employee Interactions; Inter-Client Interactions; and Client Participation, activities where the clients participate in an activity (e.g. bowling, tennis, and golf). In addition to targets, Chelladurai and Chang (2000) updated Reeves and Bednar’s (1994) four definitions of

quality. The first is quality as excellence, which is referred to the “best attainable standard” (Chelladurai and Chang, 2000, p. 9). Next, quality as value focuses on quality as it relates to price paid; this is described as the “optimal combination of product and price” (p. 9). Quality as conformance to specifications focuses on the consumers’ needs and desires and how the specifications of the product live up to the consumer wants. Lastly, quality as meeting or exceeding customers’ expectations is simply judging quality based on how it is perceived by consumer expectations.

From another perspective, consumer perception of service quality can be viewed as multi-dimensional and examined from three basic premises: (a) functional, (a) technical, and (c) environmental (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Koo, Andrew, and Kim, 2008; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985, 1988; Rust and Oliver, 1994). The functional attribute involves fan evaluation of how service is delivered. This is based on fan 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 and Oliver, 1994). Money management guru, Dave Ramsey, refers to this front-line employee as Director of First Impressions (Ramsey, 2011). These service providers include 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 and Chang, 2000; Greenwell, Fink, and Pastore, 2002; Kelley and Turley, 2001; Koo et al., 2008; Murray and Howat, 2002; Shapiro, 2010; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield and Sloan, 1995; Zhang, Smith, Pease, and Lam, 1998).

The technical attribute is the fan 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 and Turley, 2001). Sport administrators must maximize the fan experience in the functional and environmental dimensions to ensure the highest level of fan satisfaction because they have no control over the outcome of the event (Baker and Jones, 2011; Larson and Steinman, 2009).

The environmental attribute has been shown to be the overall perception of quality in the service encounter (Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1990; Wakefield, Blodgett, and Sloan, 1996). Especially in the sport context, the service environment (Bitner, 1990) 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 and Blodgett, 1994), spectators’ desire to stay in the environment (Wakefield and Sloan, 1995; Wakefield et al., 1996), and their likelihood of re-patronizing games at the same facility (Wakefield et al., 1996; Kelley and Turley, 2001).

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 et al., 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, and Pastore, 2002; Hightower, Brady, and Baker, 2002; Kelley and Turley, 2001; Koo et al., 2008; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield et al., 1996; Zhang, Smith, Pease, and Lam, 1998). The service environment appears to enhance the consumer experience as sport fans spend an extended period of time observing a sporting event (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996).

One environmental aspect in particular that can influence the level of enjoyment at a sporting event is concessions (i.e., food and beverage items). However, there is limited research on the perceptions and satisfaction of food and beverages being offered in sport venues (Sukalakamala, Sukalakamala, and Young, 2013). Team success and service dimensions are important to fans, but food has become an integral part of the environment and experience (Sukalakamala, Sukalakamala, and Young,

2013). Thus, it is important to understand what factors, involving food and beverage, may lead to an undesirable experience. Research has identified the lack of healthy food options (Thomas, Nelson, Harwood, and Neumark-Sztainer, 2012; Sukalakamala, Sukalakamala, and Young, 2013) as concession items at sporting events have traditionally been quick and easy to prepare items (e.g., hot dogs, pretzels, candy, popcorn, soft drinks, and beer) as an issue in satisfaction (Fabricant, 2009; Platkin, 2006; Zimmer 2009). Wait time in concession lines can also have a negative impact on the fan experience, therefore it is important to limit wait time, have wait time fillers, and move the line expediently (Baker and Jones, 2011). Pricing can also lead to a negative experience as vendors are aware they have a captive audience, a product monopoly and can charge higher prices than consumers normally pay for items (Zimmer, 2009).

Concessions and food service do have an impact on the overall experience of fans and are valued part of the gameday experience (Larson and Steinman, 2009; Tsuji, Bennett, and Dees, 2011). Concessions are a major variable in fan satisfaction and understanding this aspect of service quality is vital (Teed, Delpy-Neirotti, Johnson, and Seguin, 2009). With that, the purpose of this study is to analyze and understand consumer opinions of the food and beverage experience at a major American sporting event. This study is driven by two primary research questions.

RQ1: What are the top-coded themes regarding participant experience with food and beverage?

RQ2: Are there significant differences based on selected demographics?

RQ2a: Are there significant differences in responses based on consumer age?

RQ2b: Are there significant differences in responses based on consumer gender?

RQ2c: Are there significant differences in responses based on consumer income?

RQ2d: Are there significant differences in responses based on consumers having children at home?

Demographics are commonly used as independent variables in sport management related research. Age was used in an examination of motivations to attend professional conferences (Mair, 2010) and women's professional basketball games (Lough and Kim, 2004). Gender has been used in regards to attendance motivations at mixed martial events (Andrew, Kim, O'Neal, Greenwell, and James, 2009) and professional hockey games (Andrew, Koo, Hardin, and Greenwell, 2009) as well as examining fantasy sport (Ruihley and Billings, 2013). Income was a variable used in examining sport attendance consumption in Spain (Lera-Lopez, Ollo-Lopez, and Rapun-Garate, 2012) and sport-related expenditures of triathletes (Wicker, Prinz, and Weimar, 2013). Having children was shown as a determinant in the attending soccer matches for adults who had not participated in soccer as a child (Casper and Menefee, 2010). Many things can influence the experience at a sporting event. It can be a single characteristic or a combination of things, but there is evidence to show that demographic variables do influence sport consumption behaviors.

METHODS

Procedure and Participants

Data were collected using an online questionnaire to assess the opinions of people that have purchased tickets to a home football game of the sampled university. Active ticket accounts, including season-ticket holders, totalled approximately 55,000. An electronic invitation was sent to anyone who had provided a valid email address. A total of 5,102 people responded to the questionnaire during the 48 hours of data collection. Particular to this research, the questionnaire contained an open-ended question that asked respondents to "Please provide any comments, thoughts, or suggestions about the food and beverage service at [University Football Venue]." The data in this research consists of the demographic profile of the respondents and the responses given to this open-ended question regarding the food and beverage experience. A total of usable responses to this question came from 1,495 adults.

Data Analysis

Open-ended responses were collected and analysed in an attempt to discover themes within such a large group of participant responses. Thematic analysis was used to examine open-ended responses and in order to learn from the words and statements used by the participants in describing experience with food and beverage services at a college football stadium. Thematic analysis focuses on “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis “minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79) and assists in interpreting a research topic. Coding followed open, axial, and selective coding structures as outlined by Creswell (2007). Open coding is the 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 addresses themes about a phenomenon common 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 and Corbin, 1990).

Adapted from Chelladurai and Chang’s (2000) targets and standards of quality, categories were centralized around five themes. The first theme title *Quality* was based on quality of excellence and contained responses focusing on the quality of the food and beverage products and experience. The second theme of *Price* was based on quality of value and contained responses focusing on the price and value of the products. The third theme of *Variety* was adapted from quality of excellence and meeting and/or exceeding customer expectations and contained responses discussing the variety of food choices, beverage selection, and alternatives to traditional stadium selections. The fourth theme titled *Service* was based on meeting and/or exceeding customer expectations and contained responses focusing on policy decisions impacting service, staff interaction, cleanliness, and distribution of food. Lastly, the fifth theme of *Amenities* was based on conformance to specifications and contained responses revolving around offerings and context adding to the experience of the core product (e.g. physical space, condiments, utilization of credit cards or lack of automated teller machines in the stadium). All responses were addressed in the open, axial, and selective form and then coded as either addressing or not addressing each of the themes. They were coded ‘yes or no’ if containing a certain theme. All responses addressed one or more of the themes. To compute demographic differences amongst the themes, a chi-square test of independence was conducted utilizing a significance level of 0.05.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Participants

Category		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	968	64.7%
	Female	527	35.3%
Marital Status	Married/Significant Other	1160	77.6%
	Single	236	15.8%
	Divorced	77	5.2%
	Widowed	22	1.5%
Education	College Graduate	731	48.9%
	Graduate Degree	404	27.0%
	Some College	288	19.3%
	High School Graduate	70	4.7%
	Some High School	2	0.1%
Children at Home	Yes	566	37.9%
	No	929	62.1%
Household Income	More than \$100,000	591	39.5%
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	307	20.5%
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	312	20.9%
	\$25,000 - \$49,999	201	13.4%
	Less than \$24,999	84	5.6%

RESULTS

The 1,495 participants of this research were predominantly male ($n=968$, 64.7%), married or having a significant other ($n=1254$, 77.2%), college educated ($n=1135$, 75.9%), and coming from a household income of \$100,000 or more ($n=591$, 39.5%). The average age of the participants was 45.4 years ($SD = 13.6$) and a majority reported not having children, under 18 years of age, at home ($n=929$, 62.1%). See Table 1 for a complete list of demographic information. Many of the comments expressed more than one idea, comment, or opinion, and with that, some individual responses were assigned two or more codes. With that, the 1,495 responses included 1,872 codes. Each of the following sections will provide coding themes that emerged from the data (see Table 2), supported by comments from the participants.

Table 2
Theme Statistics

Theme	Codes	% of Participants (n=1,495)	% of Codes (n=1,872)
Price	882	59.0%	47.1%
Variety	418	28.0%	22.3%
Quality	258	17.3%	13.8%
Service	159	10.6%	8.5%
Amenities	155	10.4%	8.3%
Total	1,872	-	100.0%

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 inquired about the top-coded themes within the participant responses. The themes, ranked from most-coded to least-coded, are as follows: price ($n=882$, 59.0% of participants), variety ($n=418$, 28.0%), quality ($n=258$, 17.3%), service ($n=159$, 10.6%), and amenities ($n=155$, 10.4%). The following sections will detail each of themes and provide examples of each.

Price. The top-coded theme was *price* ($n=882$, 59.0% of participants) and comments involving this theme centered on this comment, “The common fan on the street has been priced out of the concessions/souvenir market and nearly priced right out of attending events at [venue]. Some of the other key responses within this theme are as follows:

“I am aghast that you charge \$4 for a bottle of water. I buy 32 bottles of spring water (not purified) for \$4.99. You are robbing the public with that price, plus you have very few water fountains. Drink prices are way out of line with food prices. I am encouraging all in my section and my friends and colleagues to boycott buying drinks - it is ridiculous!”

“I believe that the rising of the prices on food and drinks is crazy. I know that the economy is bad but some of the prices in [venue] has caused me to boycott buying anything. The price of...drinks is what really bothers me. \$5 for a large drink is insane.”

“I can buy the same popcorn for \$1 at the [student union that] you want \$4 at the stadium. Just how much did that bottle of water cost you? Since you gave up control of concessions, the prices have gone up, up and up. I now try to avoid buying anything in the stadium.”

“I paid \$5.00 for a cup of ice water, which is disgraceful. The food & drink prices are way too high. You hold fans captive, knowing they will pay the high price...You are keeping big families and families that use all their money to buy tickets and make the ticket donation hard to come to the ball games. You might want to think when you see the empty seats that the food prices may have something to do with that. You could lower the food and especially the drink prices and make a lot more money. A bottle of water outside the stadium is \$1.19 and inside it is \$5.00. That is highway robbery.”

Variety. The theme of *variety* ($n=418$, 28.0% of participants) was comprised of comments focusing on variety of food options, variety of beverage choices (specifically alcohol), and ability to purchase healthier alternatives. When focusing on the variety of food selections, participants were very specific in their requests. One comment suggests, “Consider allowing various BBQ restaurants inside stadium or home cooked food style. Lower the price of drinks especially for water. Include Gatorade or beverages [that] are better for hydration especially on hot weather games.” Other comments read:

“Could use more variety, especially in the hot drinks. The cocoa mix is awful. Need to find another brand. Suggest hot apple cider and hot teas for cool fall games...Perhaps some healthier items such as fruit and cheeses.”

The issue of serving alcohol and beer in the stadium appeared, from the responses, to be a controversial topic to this particular fan base. With some fans stating they prefer not to have it, many voiced a preference in having this as a beverage option while attending a game. One participant states, “I know it will never happen, but it sure would be nice to have cold beer in the stadium.” Another comment reads, “I would buy beer at games if it were sold. Don't feel too strongly about it either way and certainly appreciate the concerns that arise when selling alcohol to such a large crowd.” Finally, a participant discusses the issue this way, “It would be nice if beer could someday be served in the stadium, and the moralities of other people were no longer enforced as a blanket on all fans.”

When addressing healthier alternatives, comments making up this category range from the simple, “would like to see healthier choices,” to the more complex, “I am a non-insulin dependent diabetic. Whole grain buns would be a big help.” These comments ask for more diet drinks, leaner meat, vegetarian/vegan/gluten-free options, and better selections for children. One of the notable comments spoke of being a diabetic, “I am diabetic, and there are no food choices for me at the stadium, unless I choose to go into diabetic coma...”

Quality. The theme of *quality* ($n=258$, 17.3% of participants) focused directly on the core service of concession, and the topic of this research, food and beverage. One comment reads, “Sodas were very flat. Took mine back, still flat. Spent \$5.00.” Similarly, a participant states, “Sometimes Cokes get very watered down because they put ice in them before ordered. Hard to drink them.” Another response states, “The quality of food is terrible. The hot dogs at high school games are much fresher - and they aren't great. Pizza at [venue] is ice cold.” Another comment states, “I used to love your hotdogs. Looked forward to them even. The past several years they changed. They are barely edible now. Worst hotdogs of any stadium I've been to recently.” A final quality comment reads:

“The food is usually not too bad. Was not quite as impressed this last time with what we got to eat. The hot dog was good but the pizza wasn't as good and the popcorn was way too salty...I understand basic economics so I understand that, but if I am going to pay high prices then I would like for the quality to be higher as well.”

Service. The theme of *service* ($n=159$, 10.6% of participants) was comprised of many areas, but primarily dealt with issues concerning vendors running out of product, policy, food distribution (including lines) and staff. As it relates to vendors running out of food, many of the participants were not speaking about issues late in the game, rather, before and during halftime. One comments states, “At the [opponent name] game, the concession stands near my seats were out of bottle water at half time. Should be well stocked with water for afternoon games, especially games early in the season before the weather cools down.” Another participant details their experience when the concessions ran out of food, it reads:

“The last couple of times we have been to the stadium, the concessions have run out of several items. For instance, we were in line at the opener for 20 minutes waiting to get hot dogs. When we were finally able to place our orders, they had not cooked enough hot dogs and were out. So we then had to settle for nachos and spent nearly \$20 on two things of nachos and two drinks. Very frustrating, especially when you are hungry for a meal and not a snack. I would not complain, but this seems to be a recurring theme. I do understand that these things sometimes happen, but it seems like this happens at least every game whether it's hot dogs, pizza, frozen lemonade, or nachos.”

When examining service, in terms of policy and rules, one rule that was noted in the comments was the prohibiting of bringing in any outside food and drink. One comment reads, “Not allowing guests to bring in a bottle of water during a hot game and then charging them \$4 for water inside is unethical in my mind.” Another policy issue dealt with the decision and conference mandate of not allowing alcohol to be sold at member stadiums. One participant states, “Drinks are way overpriced, especially the iced drinks that tend to be watered down. Let's follow West Virginia (and others?) and serve beer. It's not as if there's no alcohol being consumed in the stadium.”

Cleanliness primarily revolved around the newly implemented condiment station. A majority of the comments read similar to this, “Condiment stations get nasty in a hurry.” Additionally, this participant states,

“I do not like the condiment stations ... The stations get messy and crowded and it is difficult to get what you want on your hot dog and not make a mess of it before you get back to your seat.”

Amenities. The theme entitled *amenities* ($n=155$, 10.4% of participants) and is primarily comprised of topic areas concerning condiments, inability to use credit cards/ATM availability, and physical space. The following sections will provide examples of participant responses. The responses dealing with condiments were very specific. At this particular venue, a recent change in condiment distribution had occurred. As is visible in the following comments, it was not well received.

“Concessions should go back to putting the ketchup packets, mustard packets and relish in all [local name] dogs and hot dogs. Ketchup and mustard packets should be inserted in the burgers when they are packaged as well. The condiment stations make the concourses too congested, as everyone has to take out the hot dogs and burgers, which takes too much time and it too awkward to take these out of the package and put back in the packages.”

“I abhor the condiment station. I know it is more cost-effective, but I put mustard on my hot dog and then I have to stick it back in the bag to walk to my seat and I make a giant mess. I long for the pack of Gulden's mustard inside the hot dog wrapper. I can stick the dog in my coat pocket and go.”

A unique set of comments, while not large in quantity, dealt with the inability to use credit cards within the stadium. One participant states, “I would like to be able to pay for concessions with a credit card as I generally do not carry cash. It is very inconvenient not to be able to use a credit card for these purchases.” While another participant adds, “Not accepting credit/debit cards costs fans a lot of money in ATM fees, and costs the University money when fans just choose not to purchase. Please change this policy.”

Many of the comments regarding physical space spoke of the crowdedness in the stadium. One comment reads, “My biggest issue with the condiment stations are their locations. During pregame & halftime, they are not easily accessible. You're almost always going against traffic flow.” Another states,

“The corridors are way, way too crowded as it is. There is not enough room. It would help if the food stands were split and angled so that people could order and pay at one spot, move down, to pick up at the other end and move on out. In doing this, you wouldn't have four lines backing straight backwards, blocking, and people trying to wiggle their way through people waiting to order.”

Research Question 2

The multiple components of Research Question 2 ask if responses differ based on demographic profile. For all comparisons, a chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between the demographic profile and responses with food and beverage themes of price, variety, quality, service, and amenities. When examining **age** (RQ2a) and utilizing a two-group age breakdown (18-44 / 45 and older), results did not indicate any significant difference. When focused on **gender** (RQ2b), the theme of quality produced the only significant difference. The relation between gender and quality was significant, $X^2(1, N = 1495) = 7.37$ $p = .007$. Men were more likely than women to take issue with food and beverage quality. When examining **income** (RQ2c), responses were split between households earning less than \$75,000 USD per year and households earning more than \$75,000 per year. Fittingly, only the theme of price produced a significant relationship, $X^2(1, N = 1495) = 7.67$ $p = .006$. Those households earning under \$75,000 per year were more likely to take issue with food and beverage prices.

Lastly, when testing **children at home** (RQ2d), results indicate two themes as having a significant relationship with having children at home, price and amenities. The relation between having children at home and price was nearing significance, $X^2(1, N = 1495) = 3.43$, $p = .064$. Those with children at home were more likely to take issue with food and beverage prices. The relation between

having children at home and amenities was significant, $X^2(1, N = 1495) = 5.73, p = .017$. Those with children at home were less likely to take issue with food and beverage amenities.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze and understand consumer opinions of the food and beverage experience at a major American sporting event. The research asked participants to describe their food and beverage experience at the college football games and provide any comments about it. The open-ended responses from 1,495 college football spectators produced a rich and informative data set. Utilizing thematic analysis and coding procedures outlined by Creswell (2007), the data set provided an in-depth look into the food and beverage experience and emerged with critical responses or responses suggesting improvement in some way. These results are important to any service provider, but especially those dealing with concessions, food, or beverage service. Anecdotal evidence does exist regarding the food and beverage experience at sporting events, as grumblings can be heard through the crowd about wait times, price, and food quality. Organization representatives may also have feedback from disgruntled fans through phone calls, e-mails or social media. The value of this study's findings is that it provides actual data examining the state of the food and beverage service experience. Decisions can now be made based on scientific evidence rather than anecdotal findings.

The following sections will discuss the sport organization/vendor relationship, highlight some of the major findings, and discuss how these can be viewed and analyzed through a managerial lens. Limitations of this research and ideas for future research will also be discussed.

Policy and Communication

Many things are at play with the results of this study. Most concession operations are now outsourced for a fixed amount, thus, guaranteeing revenue for a college athletic department or a professional sport organization. The organization itself does have *some* input, but there is really no mechanism to address many of the concerns of fans. Fans should be contacting the outside vendor who holds the contract, not the organization, when making complaints and comments. With that, organizations should make this known and provide the appropriate contact information. The same is true for the individual concession stands. A common practice is for the outside vendor to lease concession stands to other groups and split revenue. Once again, there is a gap between the sport organization (in this case, the athletic department) and the fans. The groups are often non-profit organizations with people rotating to work events, so there is no guarantee the same person will work in the concession more than once or twice per year (in the case of American football). With that type of arrangement, there is little incentive for that person to provide high-level service. This is a problem, as these are front-line service providers needing to make a good impression (Ramsey, 2011).

An additional issue with leasing to outside groups is that a money-split is conducted at the conclusion of the event, and accepting credit or debit cards would complicate this. This is most likely why credit or debit cards were not accepted at the venue in this study. There is likely a lack of communication between the sport organization and fans in explaining this type of agreement with the outside vendor. Distributing such information would be beneficial for all parties. The same could be applicable to the policy of not allowing outside food and beverage into the stadium. A clear and honest explanation as to why this policy exists could help reduce hostility. Communication with fans is important and should be a component of any sport organization's public relation strategy (Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold, 2006).

It is without question that the food and beverage experience was criticized heavily. When learning from critical comments, it is important to note that many of the themes and content categories relate directly back to service quality, with the understanding that they are specific to food and beverage

(Rust and Oliver, 1994). Area cleanliness, condiment distribution, and physical space are part of the overall aspect of environmental service quality. Technical quality can be applied to the comments regarding the quality of the food and the price of the food. Technical quality refers to the product itself, and this research narrowed the scope and focused only on food and beverage and not the entire event. The comments on quality and price are alarming and should cause concern. More than half of the participants (59.0%) complained about the price and 17.3% complained about the quality of the products. It is unclear whether popcorn that is too salty, water that is \$4.00, or hot dogs that are not like they used to be would keep someone from buying a ticket and attending a game, but what is known is that it is easier than ever to *not* attend a game (Hardin and Taylor, 2013). High-definition televisions, multiple viewing options, and ability to use a second screen all make the at-home, less expensive, viewing experience more and more desirable.

Themes and Findings

Many of the critical coding appeared obvious as to why there is an issue and why improvement is needed (e.g. price, variety, quality, running out of food, lines, and cleanliness). The discussion of the critical components will revolve around the consumers, and in turn, provide information and insight for service managers. One of the notable points in analyzing this data was the fact that the participants were very specific. The first example of this involves the highest coded category of price ($n=882$, 59.0% of participants). It is clear that price becomes an issue at events or spectator attractions (e.g., theme parks, movie theatres, and sporting events), but the details that participants responded with were impressive. Many of the responses described the exact price paid for concessions on a given day. The participants knew the exact price of bottled water, a cup of ice, nachos, and popcorn. Many of the participants even accurately compared the price between purchasing at a grocery store and the stadium. This attention to detail is mentioned here because it shows that these are not just blanket statements from disgruntled fans, these are concerns of active and knowledgeable consumers, that are willing to rally support and boycott, and that recognize price changes and understand value.

In the case of sport, people consuming concessions are also paying customers to the gameday experience in areas that can consist of season tickets, parking, or merchandise. Concessions are a part of that gameday experience and one aspect that continues to cost more money. Zimmer (2009) noted this and stated that vendors know they have a captive audience, therefore creating a monopoly on goods and services. It is time for vendors and sport organizations to reevaluate this strategy and consider what obligation they have to provide a quality product at a fair price, especially such a basic item as bottled water. In addition, as noted in the findings, price was a major factor for those households making \$75,000 or less per year (RQ2c) and those with children at home (RQ2d). Two points are important here. First, you do not want to alienate a consumer base because of income level. There are many factors in income, but this could be a young professional just entering the workforce, a family making ends meet, or those that are retired on a fixed-income. These are important life-cycle components in a fan base. Secondly, a sport organization cannot distance themselves from families with children. Sport is a part of family tradition. Grooming young sport fans into adult sport fans is more difficult if children are not able to attend or consume similar to their parents (i.e. coming to the game, affording food and beverage, and purchasing merchandise). Creating an affordable atmosphere is very important for families with children carrying the potential of becoming lifelong fans.

Variety. When commenting on variety in their experience ($n=418$, 28.0%), participants were detailed and mentioned specific types of food, drinks, and local and national restaurant brands that would be nice additions to the standard gameday food. In addition, participants mentioned adding healthier alternatives with reasons ranging from concerns of overall health and diabetes, to providing food for children and those with alternative diets. The comments regarding the lack of healthy food options are consistent with previous research (Thomas et al., 2012; Sukalakamala, et

al., 2013). Consumers are becoming more discerning, in regard to food options, and are seeking healthier options, especially when there is a medical condition to consider such as diabetes or a food allergy. It would be beneficial to include one or two gluten-free concession stands. This would eliminate the need to add product to existing concession stands and expand the amount of products offered in the stadium. In regards to accommodating consumers with allergies, a relatively new feature is peanut-free nights occurring at sporting events. This allows fans with peanut allergies to attend worry-free, as peanut is an allergy that can have fatal consequences.

Quality. The participants were specific when commenting on the quality of the food and beverage experience ($n=258$, 17.3%). Issues with quality were fairly standard and common (e.g. watered-down drinks, dated nachos, hot dog changes, etc.). When examining demographic differences in critical mentions (RQ2b), men commented significantly more often than women in relations to food and beverage quality. This could be that men are more finicky than women in terms of food and beverage quality or it could be that women will not even try the products because of past experience. Perceived product quality is perhaps keeping women from even trying the product.

Service. As it relates to service ($n=159$, 10.6%), this sample commented on how the food and beverage provider would consistently running out of food. In comments related to this, participants stated displeasure with waiting in line just to find out the concession stand was out of certain products, in many cases, at or before halftime. While planning an inventory and budgeting based on attendance are great business practices to be efficient, applying those practices to extremes, at the cost of the consumer, is discouraging. In this sample, it was the simple things, hot dogs and water, that were most mentioned. When preparing to serve food for a large crowd (i.e. American college football stadium), it is important to have the logistical plans in place, in the event that food is running low. Having runners deliver additional product to concessions stands, having markers in place to let the concessionaires know they are running low (e.g. the red tape on a receipt role), and backup inventory in the venue are all suggestions to avoid running out of food.

Amenities. The final notable area of participant responses, as it relates to their specific and detailed accounts, involves the amenities of the experience. When discussing amenities ($n=155$, 10.4%), and the comments surrounding the theme, two areas really stand out. The first has to do with condiment distribution. In this particular sample, a new concessions firm decided to not give out condiment packets, and opt for a communal condiment station for consumers to use after purchase. This did not go over well with the participants of this study. Not only was it inconvenient to have to make another stop before going back to their seats, it was messy when having to remove the item from a package, apply the condiment, and then have to put it back in the package. In addition, participants spoke about how untidy the condiment station would become after just a short amount of time. This is one of those ideas that appears great on paper and in theory, but likely would not be implemented if decision-makers would actually try it themselves. The second amenity area that stood out had to do with a simple idea of supplying lids. While not a lot of responses mentioned lids, it was noticeable because of the way participants would describe why lids are needed (e.g. debris blowing into cup, spilling while at condiment station, spilling when getting into seats). While on one side, cutting the cost of lids is likely significant and important, but on the other, it is a convenience aspect for the consumer, a consumer that is already questioning price, quality, variety, and value. Respondents with children were less concerned with amenities than those that don't have children (RQ2d). This may be due to the focus on taking care of the child rather than worrying about mustard packets or cleanliness. An alternative would be in to introduce an "adults only" area with a higher quality product that offers more amenities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations to this research. The first has to do with the methodology and the way the survey item was worded. The item on the survey stated, "Please provide any comments,

thoughts, or suggestions about the food and beverage service at [University Football Venue].” The fact that the word “suggestions” was used, instantly takes the data negative with the offering of ways for improvement. A second limitation is the fact that this was an online survey. While utilizing this surveying method allowed for a great number of responses from a geographically diverse sample, it does not allow for follow-up to specific comments. Use of focus groups and in-depth interviews with mavens and opinion leaders would allow for similar types of data to be discovered and analyzed, but with more time and work. A final limitation is that this data was collected from spectators of one sport, one city, one fan base, and one stadium. While many of the implications have generalizable qualities, these results will not fit every concession situation.

Future research should expand on this research and examine different sporting venues, as well as different seating categories (i.e. club levels and suites). It is imperative for organizations to understand all aspects of the fan experience. This also leads to the notion of examining the aspects of the service quality that comprise each dimension in more detail. There have been few, if any, studies that examine specific aspects of each dimension in such detail. This would be beneficial to sport organizations and lead to a better service encounter for consumers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

The specificity of the comments regarding product price, variety, quality, service, and amenities allow food service practitioners to see what is really important to consumers at their stadium. This can also assist in marketing and promoting in regards to highlighting the memorable, unique, or important components of a gameday experience. In addition to the aforementioned ideas in the discussion, an implication from these findings is that it shows practitioners that they are not in this alone. When creating food and beverage options and menus, understand that there are people, many who have been fans and consuming for decades, that understand what works and what does not. Use these people, ask them questions, seek input, and test the products and promotional campaigns surrounding food and beverage. A second implication has to do with outsourcing food and beverage. Hiring a large concessions firm is financially viable and understood, but it is important that, no matter how large the firm is, they need to understand individual consumer needs and desires. Promoting a cookie-cutter menu to a proud local fan base will present problems. This is amplified within transitions from one firm to another or in-house concessions to a firm. Again, use consumers for their ideas, input, and opinions. The evaluation of any event is important for any understanding of a product and the marketing strategy for continued success. Sport managers often evaluate events as a whole, but it is also advisable to look at the micro-level, and in this case, food and beverage (Parent and Smith-Swan, 2013).

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