

DESTINATION MARKETING AND SPORTS TOURISM: AN EXAMINATION OF ATLANTA FOOTBALL CLASSIC ATTENDEES AND THE DESTINATION CITY OF ATLANTA

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ABSTRACT

Destination marketing is a widely used strategy in the sport business industry to attract and host sporting events. In the USA, a category of universities known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were created after the abolition of slavery during the 1860s primarily for higher education for blacks. Today, there are more than 100 HBCUs. They are open to all races now, but are still a special place for African American education and history. College sports are a phenomenon in the USA, and the football games between certain HBCUs grew to become annual cultural experiences. Soon, they were labeled as the “HBCU Classics.” Many HBCU Classic football games are now hosted in a city large enough to accommodate the growing number of spectators and the many other events and activities around the game. The city of Atlanta is host to one of the largest Classics – the Atlanta Football Classic. However, there is little research on HBCU sports or the Atlanta Football Classic. It would be helpful to the sport management professionals as well as city officials and other stakeholders who organize this event to understand the market and destination demand variables. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the attraction of a city and a specific population of that city as a ‘destination’ for staging a targeted sports event. Key findings of this study show that the City of Atlanta is a premier destination for African-Americans and that culture and history is a most influential factor.

KEYWORDS

Sports destination marketing, Atlanta Football Classic, African American sports consumers

INTRODUCTION

Even though the recession of the world economy affected tourism and travel, changes in management and marketing kept the industry from falling into dire times. Nonetheless, travel and tourism continues to be one of the world’s largest industries: after a few difficult years, in 2012 it accounted for 9% of global GSP (Gross Domestic Product), a value of \$6 trillion USD and was

responsible for 255 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2012). Two of those strategies that now receive particular attention are destination marketing and sports tourism. Although sports and sports tourism have always been a focus of the travel and tourism industry, increasing numbers of cities and countries worldwide now compete aggressively for sports events as well as anything sports-related, such as becoming the location for a sports hall of fame. Moreover, destination marketing is used increasingly and widely for sports tourism and travel. Sports event organizing entities pay more attention to everything that a destination location has to offer that will enhance the desirability of sports tourists - participants, spectators, or attraction-seekers – to make the effort and spend the money needed to travel to the destination (Byon & Zhang, 2010; Chalip & Green, 2001; Gibson & Fairley, 2010; Hede, 2005; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Pitts & Ayers, 2000).

Destination marketing is a strategy used widely used especially by DMOs (destination marketing organizations) across many metropolitan and micropolitan areas. DMOs are primarily a convention and visitors bureau (CVB) and a city sports commission (CSC). The CVB's mission is to promote the location as an attractive destination for travelers and tourists. The CSC's mission is to attract sports events to the location and to help the CVB establish the location as a highly attractive 'sports destination'. The CVB serves stakeholders and constituents such as hotels, restaurants, attractions, transportation, tours, and all other businesses that gain a great proportion of their business from travelers. The 'culture' of a location is used in destination marketing strategies by CVBs and CSCs, but has rarely been the focus of research in sport marketing literature. There are a handful of studies on Hispanic, LGBT, and African American culture as a factor considered in the decision to travel to a destination to engage in a sports activity. However, there are no studies that have looked at destination marketing and sports tourism, and culture as the primary factor for the African American sports consumer market. Thus, the present work will add new and pertinent knowledge to the literature.

Culture is one of the factors that sports consumers consider when engaging in sports tourism and travel (Armstrong, 2008). When countries compete to host a mega-sports event, such as the men's or women's FIFA World Cup, or the Olympics and Paralympics, culture of the location and country is an emphasis (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008). In Armstrong's (2008) study of the 'culture' of attending sports events, she states "...sport marketers have long sought to accentuate the attributes that allow sport venues to be defined as platforms of symbolic expressions..." and they do this "...by creating dynamic stadium and arena climates that promulgate 'cultures' with ambiances that add value that transforms the core of the actual sport experience..." (p. 218). Culture in the United States of America is increasingly critical to sports marketers as the population of the USA is dramatically changing. The NBA (National Basketball Association) works to understand the Hispanic/Latino culture, for example, to better market their games to the increasing Hispanic/Latino sector. And one study on the African American sports consumer market found that cultural factors influences sports event attendance (Armstrong, 2002).

In one example, Miami, Florida, known as the Magic City, is a major metropolis in the Southeastern United States and a popular tourist destination for people around the world. A tropical, coastal city situated on the Atlantic, Miami is a hub for commerce, culture, arts, entertainment, and sports. According to the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, Miami-Dade County welcomed more visitors to the area in 2012 than ever before (Sampson, 2013). Overnight tourists totaled 13.9

million and those visitors spent \$21.8 billion in the area (Sampson, 2013). Miami Beach, the island located just off downtown Miami and home of the famous hot spot, South Beach, hosts over 35% of the visitors that come to Greater Miami each year (Miami Beach, 2013).

Miami Beach tourism is made up of 55.9% U.S. residents and 44.1% non-U.S. residents. Of all the non-U.S. residents, 52.8% are from South America and 32.4% are from Europe. The average length of stay for Miami Beach visitors is 6.6 nights with an average party size of 2.3 people. The majority of tourists are male (67.9%, female, 32.1%) and the average age is 42.6 years old. Tourists to the city spend an average of \$145.28 per night on lodging and \$53.24 per meal in restaurants. The daily per person expenditure is \$197.99 and the total per person expenditure is \$1,396.61 which not only includes hotel and dining, but other expenditures like transportation, parking, shopping, and entertainment (Miami Beach, 2013).

A major form of entertainment for visitors to Miami Beach and Greater Miami is professional sporting events. Miami boasts a broad array of professional sports including the Miami Dolphins (National Football League), Miami Marlins (Major League Baseball), Miami Heat (National Basketball Association), Florida Panthers (National Hockey League), Homestead-Miami Speedway (NASCAR), as well as professional tennis and golf with the Sony Open and World Golf Championship. For fans of elite intercollegiate sport, the Miami Hurricanes (National Collegiate Athletic Association) provide Division-I athletic events. These large-scale spectator events draw significant attendance numbers. The average attendance numbers for 2012-2013 for the Greater Miami area professional sporting events were as follows: Miami Dolphins - 62,995 (ESPN, 2013c); Miami Heat - 19,982 (ESPN, 2013b); Miami Marlins - 19,584 (ESPN, 2013a); Florida Panthers - 15,697 (ESPN, 2013d); Miami Men's basketball (versus Clemson 7,972; Casagrande, 2013); and Sony Open - 16,689 (Sony Open Tennis, 2013). Entertainment activities in Miami are also strong drivers of tourism. For example, the Ultra music festival that occurs over two weekends each spring draws 330,000 attendees (Heitner, 2013). With a large percent of Hispanic/Latino population, all event management and city destination marketers are especially attentive to the culture of that population and it is heavily used as a marketing tool for all destination marketing and in sports events marketing in Miami.

Atlanta is labeled as a "Black Mecca" in the USA. A 'Black Mecca' is a city to which African Americans are attracted to live, work, and visit (Black Mecca, 2013). Indeed, the black population of Atlanta is 54% (Census Bureau, 2014). Factors associated with this label include economic opportunities, leading black educational institutions in the city, political power, harmonious black-white relations, and black arts, entertainment, historical, civil rights, and other cultural elements. As such, the cultural factors are used by the CVB for attracting numerous events and organizations to the city. The events will attract the local black population as well as attract black tourists and travelers to the city. The Atlanta Sports Council is the commission whose sole purpose is to bring sports and sports events to Atlanta. The ASC is a "non-profit division of the Metro Atlanta Chamber that facilitates the growth and development of sports in the Atlanta region by serving as a sports event recruiter, creator and marketer" (Atlanta Sports Council, 2013). The Georgia Dome is a major sports facility in Atlanta, Georgia and is a sports hub for various sporting events to serve local and regional markets, as well as national and international events and their markets, for decades. The Georgia Dome typically hosts more than 250 events annually. Of those, sports events are a key category and can include such events as the Atlanta Falcons football games, NCAA sports events,

National Figure Skating Championships, the SEC College Football Championship, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) sports events, SuperCross, Professional Bull Riding, and others. These events attract the in-town residents as well as regional, national, and international sports tourists. Furthermore, it has strengthened the brand image of Atlanta and the Georgia Dome as one of the top destinations for sporting events in the Southeast region of the USA. Black college football classics are games that take place between historically black colleges and universities that compete in football in the USA. Currently, there are 15 "classics," of which all are held in states heavily populated with African Americans. The Atlanta Football Classic (AFC) is an annual football game between two HBCUs. The AFC has a long history with staging the event at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta. Atlanta is known to be a significant cultural destination for the African American market as there is a viable and vibrant local African American population and marketplace. The Atlanta Football Classic has been held in Atlanta for over two decades. Historically, the match-up has featured Florida A&M University (FAMU) and Tennessee State University for a majority of games. The AFC is sponsored and organized by the 100 Black Men of Atlanta organization. Several events are held in conjunction with the football game such as a youth symposium, a robotics showcase, healthy living fair, a college fair, fan experience, and a parade in downtown Atlanta. Additionally, numerous businesses sponsor other events and activities. These additional activities offer further evidence that businesses of Atlanta are engaged in actively marketing to the African American market to attract them to the city.

SIGNIFICANCE AND PURPOSE

Although the Atlanta Football Classic event has taken place for over two decades (started in 1989), little research has been conducted on this event or its consumers to examine the many factors that have made this event consistently popular and successful. Moreover, no research has looked at destination marketing, sports tourism, and specifically culture as a factor. Therefore, there is a need to study this event; specifically, there is a need to examine whether Atlanta and the Georgia Dome satisfy the needs of the spectators who travel to this destination for this event. Furthermore, there is a shortage of research about HBCU sports and sports events in the sport marketing literature. The few studies provide a mere glimpse of the current status, as well as the rich cultural, sociological, and market information that would be valuable for organizers and marketers for decisions and strategic planning and marketing (Armstrong, 2001). Hence, additional research will add to and enhance the current literature.

METHODS

The Instrument

The self-reported questionnaire used in this study was revised from previous studies developed by Lu (2002), and Pitts, Lu, Lucas, Atkins, and Johnson (2007) and subsequently modified by the researchers. The questionnaire was pretested for suitability in a previous Atlanta Football Classic (AFC) game, which consisted of similar demographic background and was deemed appropriate for this year's survey distribution.

There are five categories in this questionnaire. The first part had twelve questions, which examined factors that influenced attendance at the AFC; the second part of the questionnaire had fifteen questions concerning economic factors; the third part evaluated the Georgia Dome Amenities; the fourth part assessed Atlanta's amenities; and the fifth category was demographics. A 5-point Likert Scale was used for scoring the survey instrument. The 5 point influencing rate was translated as

follows: 1= no influence to 5=Strong Influence. A "Not Applicable" option was also provided. The variables used in the instrument received content validity through previous studies (Lu, 2002; Pitts et al., 2007; Pitts, Lu-Anderson, & Brison, 2011) and by a panel of experts of two sport management professors and three Georgia World Congress Center Authority (GWCC) Executives. Cronbach's alpha reliability factors for the categories of attendance factors, Georgia Dome, and Atlanta were .92, .89 and .88 respectively. Thus, the instrument had an acceptable level of reliability.

Procedures

A convenience sampling procedure was deemed the best sampling method used to obtain a diverse array of participants while attending this large event. The researchers worked with Georgia Dome management to conduct the on-site survey. A team of graduate student researchers trained in sport marketing research and one professor attended the AFC at the Georgia Dome. Surveys were conducted by mall approach technique, and by using four survey tables set up at strategic locations inside the Dome. Guests who were over 18 years old were offered a free soda coupon (value \$4.50) in exchange for completing the self-report survey. After data collection, descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the data. Procedures from the Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS 21 version) were used to conduct the statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Profile of Participants.

With the convenience sampling procedure, 701 usable surveys were collected. Of the total number of seven hundred one (n=701) participants, 93% are African American/Black, 4% are Caucasian/White, 2% are Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 1% are Hispanic/Latinos. 62% are females and 28% are male (refer to Table 1). However, from observation, the true gender make-up is estimated closer to 50-50. Researchers observed that female participants were more willing to complete the survey than males, and males more often tended to pass the survey to their wives/females in the party. In summary, the majority of fans were African American, female, 35 years old (25-44 years old), single (58%), have no children under 18 years old in the household (48%), have an annual income in the range of \$60,000-\$79,999 (21%), is a college graduate or is currently a college student, whose current occupation is in education (12%) or is a college student (11%), and is a resident of Georgia (60%) (see Table 1). African Americans were the primary ethnicity group to attend this annual HBCU tradition. Level of education shows most attendees have a college-level education -- this was expected because this is a university event. Note that the income levels reflect education levels with most attendees reporting higher than the average USA pay at \$60,000 and higher.

In the year of 2011, Florida A&M University of Tallahassee, Florida and Southern University of Baton Rouge, Louisiana played at the AFC. Geographic evaluation revealed that a large majority of the attendees were from the state of Georgia (60%), with 23% coming from the state of Florida. It was surprising that a small percentage came from Baton Rouge, Louisiana-the home of Southern University Jaguars, one of the two teams in the game. It may be possible that many alumni and friends of the two universities live in the state of Georgia; and it may be possible that these numbers reflect vicinity, rather than school. That is, those who live closest to Atlanta were the majority to attend the event. Since the research team has been conducting this survey with the GWCC to collect data at the annual AFC since 2003, the researchers were able to compare the selected demographics with previous years. The demographics were similar every year. Table 2

shows the composition of gender and ethnicities. Although the percentage showed that the female fans have increased from 50% in 2003 to 64% in 2007 and 62% in 2011, again, female participants' willingness to participate in the survey triggered that number.

Factors That Affect Attendance at AFC

Of the 701 respondents, 40.5% strongly agreed that entertaining family was important, while 62% responded that the history of HBCU football was a strong influencing factor. 61% of participants agreed that the halftime entertainment was a strong influencing factor. The renowned marching band and drumline competition at the halftime attracted a number of fans to come to the game. Participants also strongly agreed that the Georgia Dome (49%) and Atlanta as the destination (52%) played important roles to attract fans to go (see Table 3). In regard to repetitive purchasing behavior, 63% of participants stated that they have attended this event before. Surprisingly, 3% revealed that they have been attending the AFC every year since 1989 inaugural, 19% said they have attended more than ten times. Overall, 37% of them attended more than six times. While some sports destinations attract visitors only for the event, in this study 44% of 701 participants reported that visiting Atlanta was not specifically for the AFC. It implied that visitors also went to Atlanta for various reasons such as visiting families or participating in cultural festivals. As for the marketing information channel, the top five mediums are friends (28%), TV (21%), college website (21%), family (17%), radio (11%), and Facebook (11%). This showed the word of mouth is still very important even in this age of technology.

Georgia Dome Amenities

The GWCC operates the Georgia Dome, Centennial Olympic Park and Georgia World Congress Center – these are the premier sport, entertainment and convention center facilities in downtown Atlanta. The complex is next to CNN Center, Philips Arena, and Atlanta Underground. Close by are other popular attractions such as the Georgia Aquarium and the Coca-Cola Museum. Entertainment and cultural opportunities for African American visitors to Atlanta are plentiful. As previously discussed, Atlanta is known as a premier “Black Mecca” in the USA. Results of the current study support this label – among the factors studied, “facility location” of the Georgia Dome received the highest rating (mean=4.25) among the Georgia Dome Amenities. Therefore, location is a primary influencing factor for coming to this event.

Atlanta Amenities

Relative to sport destination marketing for a city that can provide good quality amenities to provide better hospitality to the visitors, the top 5 rating of Atlanta's amenities are “restaurant” (mean=4.27), “entertainment opportunities” (mean=4.24), “hotels” (mean=4.23), “airport” (mean=4.12), and “security downtown” (mean=4.04). For overall satisfaction for City of Atlanta, 52% of participants selected “excellent” and 33% selected “good”. Interestingly, the “average overall satisfaction” in the city of Atlanta item rated higher than any single service in Atlanta. Participants are still positive about their satisfaction with the city even though a few items need to be improved.

DISCUSSION

Consumer behavior research is a critical start in the process toward understanding the consumer in order to develop strategic marketing strategies (Braunstein, Zhang, Trail, Gibson, 2005; Byon &

Zhang, 2010; Lu, 2002; Pitts & Stotlar, 2013). Therefore, it is vital to examine specific event and destination characteristics to generate better marketing strategies to meet the needs of market.

Factors Affecting Attendance

The findings of this study indicate that the most influential factors for fans attending the AFC games are cultural, historical, and destination. 'The Georgia Dome as a venue for hosting this event' and the 'City of Atlanta as a premier destination for African-American culture and history' are listed as the top five most influential factors. The findings were different from other factors that affect attendance studies in other studies at different sporting events at the same Georgia Dome or other facilities (Lu, 2002; Lu, Pitts, Ayers, & Lucas, 2005; Lu-Anderson, Pitts, Boreland, Haynes, Rodgers, Shuyler, Staten, Taylor, 2012; Pitts, Lu, Ayers, & Lucas, 2004; Pitts, Lu-Anderson, & Brison, 2011; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995). In the previous studies, game factors (e.g., a chance to see the championship, high level of competition, star coach, star players, and reputation of the team) were strong influential factors to attract fans. The common game attendance factors such as win/loss records of teams, opponent, entertaining clients, media advertising/promotion of the game, and ticket price are the least influential factors.

When compared to the same event from previous years the results have been shown to be similar (Pitts et al., 2007). Pitts et al. stated that from 2003 to 2006, the "halftime entertainment" was the greatest factor that strongly influenced attendance of the AFC. Also, enjoying the chance to see historically black college football and overall atmosphere were strong influences. The team's win-loss record and the price of tickets had the highest incidence of "no influence". This explains that the AFC has been successfully positioning the game as the HBCU football festival in sport consumers' mind that attendees would enjoy the overall atmosphere and even call it "the Super Bowl of Black College Football". Particularly, the event is preceded by a week of cultural events, such as workshops, seminars, college fair, job-fairs, and socials and attendance during the game week was estimated at 250,000.

The AFC is a family oriented event and about 22%-47% of participants chose to go with families from 2003 to 2011 (see Figure 1), while 17%-36% of participants chose to go with friends only. This number is different from previous studies (Lu, et al., 2005; Lu-Anderson et al., 2012; Pitts et al., 2004; Pitts, et al., 2011). Because the AFC is beyond a college football game and Atlanta is the premier destination for African Americans, visitors enjoyed their time going with their families and friends. As a result, more family-oriented activities can be programmed to enhance the experience. Though the rating of repetitive attendance is high (82%-84% from 2006 to 2011), it is important to address the needs of attendees. For example, half of the participants drove to the event and nearly half of them took MARTA (public transportation/subway). The City of Atlanta can coordinate the related departments to organize the route to the facility making it easier for patrons to use public transportation or alternative transportation methods. Promoting alternative methods of transportation to alleviate traffic congestion is pragmatic.

While the sporting event spent a large portion of marketing budget to promote the event, interestingly, word-of-mouth (WOM) from family and friends is still the top rated information distribution channel for participants to learn about AFC in this study. This finding confirmed previous studies decades ago that WOM communication is one of the most effective marketing sources for consumers and it does influence purchase behavior (Arndt, 1967; Richins & Root-

Shaffer, 1988). In fact, WOM is still an effective marketing tool. The electronic WOM (eWOM) channel, Facebook, was listed as the fifth most frequently used information source at 11%, and 3% of participants retrieved game information from Twitter. Together, 60% of event information was obtained from WOM and eWOM.

In addition, media advertising and promotion of the game was perceived as one of the top five least influential factors. This result was similar to another popular sporting event "SEC Men's Basketball Championship" in the Georgia Dome that advertising and sales promotion are the least influential factors (Lu-Anderson et al., 2012). For high-profile sporting events, sport consumers were not influenced by media advertising and sales promotion as much. Perhaps the game organizers can strategically allocate their traditional advertising and sales promotion budget to another section, which can bring more positive impact to the sport consumers more.

Destination Marketing

According to Kotler, Thomas, and Monroe (1999), the five primary reference points should be included to process the destination marketing planning: understand the needs of tourists, successful management of available products and services from the destination, the successful interdependencies of tourism services suppliers, the satisfaction of the long-term needs of the local population, and effective coordinating of public-private interest. The AFC and Atlanta have applied these five elements. The AFC is a historical and cultural sporting event with surrounding events and activities that last for one week every year since 1989. Attendees perceive the AFC event and Atlanta is the premier destination for African-American culture and history and they have been enjoying this festival. With the sold-out college football game, the well-known marching band showdown, and the one week-long activities when the AFC brings thousands of visitors into the city and generates nearly \$30 million in Georgia's economy each year (Atlanta Football Classic, 2013), the AFC is a successful event. However, customers expect a tourism destination to offer them customized products and services that will match expectations (Machlouzarides, 2010). Continuous tracking of changes in the marketing environment of tourist destinations is essential to successfully respond to the changes. To sustain the growth of the event and maximize visitors' satisfaction, it is important for the AFC organizers to evaluate the event and customer feedback annually. In addition to findings that are stated earlier, the participants applaud that the game experience was perfect and the retention rate is over 80% every year. Yet, they did suggest better security, to reduce the 'nuisance of beggars', add a strip mall, and to offer better and more affordable food options.

Practical Implications

According to the findings, the research team suggests the AFC organizer to continue with the spectacle and mystique of the halftime show as a centerpiece of the event, to create more family oriented entertainment opportunities like games or a carnival, to increase the focus on the history of the Atlanta Football Classic and HBCU Football with a museum, to develop relationships with local business to increase interest in entertaining clients, and to increase the number of activities over the whole weekend, because attendees stay for an average of 3 days. Also, the parking and traffic flow to the facility need to be constantly improved to make it more comfortable and less "painful" for the visitors. The City of Atlanta and event organizer can coordinate the resources to arrange more policy/security to make the event safer and enjoyable. As for the target group expansion, the AFC is more than just college football. Therefore, the target group can expand to

offer fans dance and music. The research team also suggests to expand marketing focus on Atlanta's young singles since about 50% of attendees are single every year.

Limitations

The study utilized non-probability convenience sampling method. Thus, the results cannot be generalized beyond the sample participants. Future research may investigate more major sport and cultural events and identify key influential factors. Future research could employ qualitative procedures to explore more psychological factors on the attendance and get more insight from event organizer, the City of Atlanta officials, and Georgia World Congress Center Authority.

CONCLUSION

This study is significant because it provides exploratory insight into the strategy of sports destination marketing for a historical sporting event at a well-known facility and city. The most influential factors for fans attending the games are the cultural, historical, and destination factors. In addition, the Georgia Dome-the facility, and the destination-Atlanta, are important influential factors for these sport consumers. These findings are different from other attendance factor studies. The results showed that Atlanta is attractive to the market as a destination for entertainment and cultural opportunities. Also, this information is essential for the stakeholders such as the event organizers, Georgia World Congress Center Authority, the Atlanta Sport Commission, the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, the 100 Black Men of Atlanta, and the City of Atlanta.

From a practical standpoint, the findings affirmed that destination marketing as a strategy is essential for a city when they host events. Thus, it is important for stakeholders to consider the unique attendance factors that are associated with the historical and cultural sporting events for which they can generate more effective marketing plans and provide better hospitality to the visitors. Moreover, destination marketers for the AFC should concentrate on formulating effective tourism packages and should include the historical and cultural aspects, needs and concerns of visitors (e.g., parking, traffic flow to facility, food variety), and position the Georgia Dome as a number one facility and Atlanta as an primary attractive sport tourist destination.

Armstrong (2008) perhaps states this best in her paper: "...the symbolic value of the psychosocial elements comprising the 'cultured' climate of sport events did not go unnoticed by the Consumers of Color, as it significantly influenced their sport attendance decisions" (p.228). Our current study differs in an important aspect when compared to Armstrong's study: whereas the participants in Armstrong's study were of the general population in a metropolitan area, study participants in the current study were actual travelers to and attendees at a black sports event hosted in a city of cultural significance to the black population. It would appear that the current findings provide evidence that African American sports consumers are attracted and will travel to a sports event in a city of cultural significance.

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