

# **Experiential Consumption Behaviour in Sport: A Suggested Methodology**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper outlines a suggested methodology for experiential research into sport consumption. Experiential sports consumption research currently lacks a strong theory base. A major challenge in developing such a base is selecting appropriate methodologies which are able to capture the dynamic and holistic nature of the responses and behaviours of consumers before, during and after a sports event. This study examines the experiential consumption of televised NFL (American National Football League) games by NFL fans and advocates the use of a combination of phenomenological and positivist paradigms in conjunction with qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Such approaches may be applicable to wider contexts involving sports consumption experiences of both match attendees and television viewers. A deeper knowledge of experiential sport consumption is of interest to both administrators and marketers of sport as well as to advertisers and sponsors of sport and sport events.*

Keywords: sport, experiential, methodology

## **Literature and Methodology**

This study, concerned with theory development in a field lacking clear definitive theory (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987; Johnson Morgan, 2000), has exploited the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative research designs (Creswell, 1994; Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989). Furthermore, in order to capture the holistic nature of experiential consumption while achieving statistical reliability and internal and external validity, both positivist and phenomenological paradigms have been utilised (Johnson Morgan, 2000). This approach is supported in the literature (Cooper-Martin, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Thomson, Locander and Pollio, 1989).

The methodology in this study is comprised of four steps. 1. quantitative survey 2. qualitative in-depth interviews 3. qualitative focus groups and 4. quantitative survey. In essence, the first three steps, in conjunction with the literature review, were used to develop a theoretical framework to depict the experiential consumption of football, while the final step was designed to test the hypotheses derived from the framework in order to build theory (Johnson Morgan, 2000).

**Step 1:** Evaluation of the literature highlighted the relevance of conducting a descriptive quantitative study, in order to identify the most popular spectator sport in the United States and to determine the demographics and attitudes towards spectating of the fans of this sport (Johnson Morgan, 2000). A series of in-depth interviews of six sports enthusiasts preceded the design of a self administered questionnaire which was distributed to a convenience sample of 761 adults (a full profile of the respondents is available from the authors). Appropriate validation and

screening techniques were applied to arrive at a final 705 usable responses within which age category, annual household income and occupation types were adequately represented (Johnson Morgan 2000). The main findings from step one included: football was by far the most popular spectator sport, a suitable scale to measure sports enthusiasm was confirmed, insights into aggression and arousal among sports spectators were gained and demographic profiles of football spectators produced (Johnson Morgan 2000).

**Step 2:** The findings from both the literature and step one were used to design a semi-structured interview pro forma which sought to further explore the individual football consumption ‘experiences’ of an appropriately selected group of 20 sports fans. In particular, each interviewee was asked to relate actual ‘good and bad’ experiences of football spectating, to explain how he/she derived enjoyment from watching football games and to recall feelings and emotions evoked before, during and after the football game (Johnson Morgan, 2000). Appropriate techniques for seeking detailed accounts of experiences from a respondent were adopted (Dale 1996). Interview transcripts were produced from the audio-taped interviews and appropriately analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques (Arnould and Price, 1993; Cotte, 1997; Holt, 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). It was found during analysis that the emergent themes from study two could be organised within the a priori concepts generated from the literature and study one. These emergent themes included:

*Emotion:* Football spectating evoked numerous strong positive and negative emotional responses within the group. Such responses appeared to be dependent upon a number of variables including interactions with others, game characteristics, importance of the game and a priori individual ‘characteristics (Johnson Morgan, 2000). The importance of emotion in experiential consumer behaviour is well established (Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

*Social situation:* Strong tendencies for social interaction to impact upon football spectating experiences were revealed through the in-depth interviewees. Some relationship between social situation and satisfaction may exist where the presence or absence of others must be examined in interpreting the experiential consumption of sport. Numerous authors have linked social situation and experiential consumption behaviour (Arnould and Price, 1993; Melnick, 1993; Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

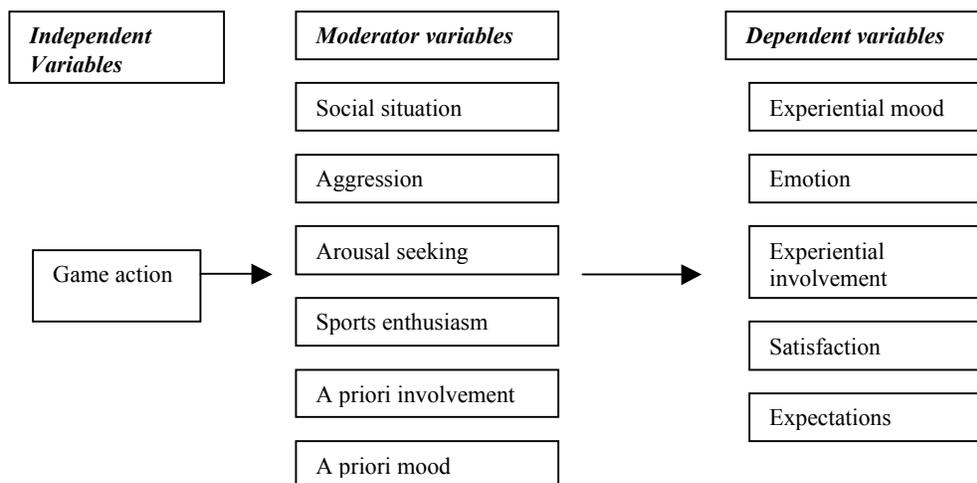
*Sports enthusiasm:* Findings here confirm the literature which suggests that the degree to which an individual is a sports enthusiast impacts significantly upon the sports spectating experience (Johnson Morgan 2000, table 4.2, p. 73).

*Involvement:* Involvement emerged as a significant but complex and multidimensional feature of experiential football consumption. Level of involvement may relate to the game itself or to other contextual factors such as fellow spectators. The level of involvement may also vary with game conditions. Involvement as a factor in experiential consumption has been previously identified as being important in consumers construction and enjoyment of an experience (Arnould and Price, 1993; Mittal and Lee, 1989; Mano and Oliver 1993; Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

**Step 3:** To evaluate the findings of the previous research steps and to address problems with recall and retrospectivity inherent in study two (Allen, Machleit and Klein, 1992; Cooper-Martin,

1992; Mano and Oliver, 1993), step three employed a methodology which collected data during an actual event. Using both phenomenological and traditional positivist focus groups (Calder 1987) this study examined actual football consumption experiences and clarified the variables at play in such experiences in order to address ‘gaps’ in understanding to date (Johnson Morgan, 2000). A total of four focus groups were conducted. The first three were existential-phenomenological focus groups (Dale, 1996), with the first two conducted during an actual NFL game experience and the third conducted in a relaxed setting but not in conjunction with a game. The final focus group was conducted along traditional logical positivist guidelines, dissecting issues and asking for confirmations and/or explanations of all previous findings, including those from the literature (Johnson Morgan, 2000). Snowball sampling, drawn from football fan enthusiasts, was used to recruit participants for the focus groups (Calder, 1987; Zikmund, 1997). With the recommended phenomenological interviewing method, a bracketing interview process was used to identify potential researcher/moderator biases which may influence focus group conduct and outcomes before the focus groups were conducted (Dale, 1996). A rigorous process was adopted in audio transcript production, interpretation and analysis of the outputs from the focus groups, using an appropriate three person ‘research expert’ panel (Johnson Morgan 2000, p. 86). After analysis of findings from the focus groups, a theoretical framework depicting the experiential consumption of football was constructed. This framework was comprised of three sets of variables (fig.1).

**Figure 1: Theoretical framework for experiential consumption**



Essentially the identified dependent variables (descriptors of the football consumption experience) are determined by what happens during a game (game action), but moderated by numerous intervening variables. Among the most interesting and significant findings at the completion of step three was the discovery of variables operating on multiple levels in the holistic framework of experiential consumption. For example, both mood and involvement were found to exhibit a priori states (that is those that fans ‘brought’ to the experience) and experiential states (that is those that manifested as a result of the experience itself and were therefore dynamic during the experience). Appropriate hypotheses were derived from this theoretical framework to test the relationships depicted within it and a quantitative study (step four) designed to test them.

**Step 4:** To capture the holistic and dynamic nature of experiential consumption, the Phenomenon Sampling Method (PSM) was designed for the confirmatory stage of this research (Johnson Morgan, 2000). This approach allowed the collection of critical data throughout the actual course of a sporting event. This method sought to capture the many descriptors of experience as well as to account for variability between one experience and another. This approach represents an advance upon the Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1987) Experiential Sampling Method in that measures can be taken at multiple times during an 'experience' but also at comparable points across multiple experiences. In this research the PSM was designed to collect data before, during (at half time) and after the televising of a football game, for three separate games over a three-week period. A questionnaire was designed to collect the data needed to test the hypotheses developed from the theoretical framework. The targeted population of interest in this study was the body of regular watchers of televised football games. A self-administered mail survey was used which required no more than three to four minutes (approximate commercial break length) to be completed by each respondent at each 'sampled' point. This resulted in a total of nine questionnaires to be completed by a single respondent over three NFL games.

Existing measurement scales were used for all variables identified in the theoretical framework with the exception of 'sports enthusiasm' for which a scale was specially developed (Johnson Morgan 2000, p. 132). All questions required close-ended responses, comprised of a mixture of dichotomous responses, seven point semantic differential scales and seven point Likert scales. Separate questionnaires were developed for the pre-game, half time and post game data collection points (Johnson Morgan, 2000). Questionnaires for the different games were printed on different coloured paper for ease of distinguishing among the games. Demographic data was collected on a separate sheet for completion at any time before the return of all completed surveys. For each game, the pre-game section addressed social context, a priori mood, a priori involvement, expectations and emotion. The half time questionnaire began with a measure of satisfaction, then measured experiential mood, experiential involvement, emotions and concluded with expectations about the ensuing second half. The post-game questionnaire measured satisfaction with the second half, experiential involvement, emotion, experiential mood, overall game satisfaction and concluded with an estimation of the actual time of the game watched by the respondent (Johnson Morgan, 2000).

The final form of the questionnaire was pre tested with four regular spectators of Monday night televised NFL games under 'real game' conditions with two completed under actual passive observation of the researcher. Minor amendments and clarifying additions were made as a result of the pre tests (Johnson Morgan, 2000). Each complete set of final questionnaires included a cover letter, a return envelope, a competition entry form (incentive), and a different coloured questionnaire for each of the three games being examined (Johnson Morgan, 2000).

A comprehensive pilot study of 117 completed questionnaires (a response rate of 58.5%), which focussed upon a single NFL spectating experience was conducted to both statistically test the measurements of the main survey instrument and also to simulate the proposed PSM methodology. This complemented the measures taken so far in the methodology employed in this study to ensure attainment of reliability and validity. A self-administered survey using convenience sampling was used to distribute the pilot surveys. Strong evidence emerged from the

pilot study supporting internal consistency and discriminant and convergent validity of the measurement scales used (Johnson Morgan, 2000).

The difficulty in specifying the population of interest (all NFL television spectator fans) and in turn deciding upon a sampling frame was addressed by utilising a member list of the Louisiana State University Tiger Athletic Foundation (LSUTAF). While there was no guarantee that members would be NFL fans, the population was made up of committed sports fans (athletics) whose leadership (LSUTAF) especially endorsed the research study. Choosing cluster sampling (Aaker and Day, 1999; Burns and Bush, 2000), three of the total of 16 satellite 'chapters' of LSUTAF were randomly selected, containing a total of 611 people which, after editing, resulted in a final sample size of 518. Several measures were employed to increase response rate for this challenging task of inducing each respondent to complete nine questionnaires over a three week period covering three specified NFL televised games. These measures included reminder cards and sports related competition prizes for those who completed all questionnaires. A total of 78 completed sets of usable questionnaires were obtained, representing a 15% response rate, consistent with 'normal' response rates from mailed surveys (Burns and Bush, 2000). While normal, the response rate was low which may be an inherent limitation of such a complex data collection methodology. Data were subsequently analysed using appropriate univariate, bivariate and multivariate techniques. This analysis was also dependent on the development of a classification of the independent variable, game action. Game action was classified as a factor of several delineators including technical data such as yards scored, and touchdowns, and panel judgements (using sporting commentators & participants from study two) and media reports as to the excitement or otherwise of particular quarters and halves of the game. Data was analyzed according to game half and for overall games. Emotion, experiential involvement, experiential mood, expectations and satisfaction all varied systematically with game action. The analysis of the moderator variables provided support for the concept that people with high sport enthusiasm levels did experience higher experiential involvement with high game action. Finally, people with high a priori involvement experienced higher expectations with high action games.

### **Conclusions and implications**

In order to capture the holistic and dynamic dimensions associated with experiential consumption associated with television viewing of NFL games, this paper has demonstrated the use of methodological approaches which differ in numerous respects from those used in more traditional consumer behaviour contexts. The suggested research approach involved a combination of adopting phenomenological and positivist paradigms and collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings of this study and its theoretical contribution are secondary in this paper to the proposal of the actual method which challenges the traditional approach to both consumer behaviour and sport research in general. The research challenge presented here is one of developing sound theory of experiential consumption behaviour.

The progressive nature of the multi-method four-stage research design resulted in a solid piece of exploratory research in the infant field of experiential consumption. The major contributions of this research include; the utilization of a mixed methodology research design, development of a general measure of sports enthusiasm, the development of the Phenomenon Sampling Method and the identification of the a priori and experiential levels of the mood and involvement

constructs. The findings of this research have implications for marketing practitioners including recognition of the holistic nature of experiential consumption and the dynamic nature of the variables that define a consumer's experience. The limitations of this research include the lack of generalizability of the results to fields outside televised spectating of American football. Results would be expected to differ in the case of live spectating experiences and across different sports due to the elevated emotions created by the live atmosphere and sportscape. Future research should also attempt to develop new experiential measures of variables traditionally used in consumer behavior research which may not adequately reflect the holistic and dynamic nature of a true human experience.

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