

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOOTBALL TAILGATING RITUAL

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Abstract.—The purpose of this study was to document the meanings that individuals associate with the football tailgating experience. Data were collected via photo-elicitation and follow-up interviews with 30 adults. The results indicate that individuals associate a variety of meanings with tailgating: togetherness, food, fun, drinking, Penn State pride, tradition, and football. These meanings, however, are not discrete. Togetherness, for example, represents time with family, friends, other people, and more. Further, people do not assign a single meaning to the tailgating experience. Instead, they recognize that tailgating is rich with meaning and provides multiple benefits to the tailgater. Implications of these findings for theory and event marketing are discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In existence since 1869, tailgating has become a pregame ritual associated with American sporting events (Drozda 1996). For a few entrepreneurs, tailgating is also a successful business. On the Internet, one can find sites dedicated to the Tailgate America Tour (www.tailgateus.com); tailgating recipes (e.g., www.celebrations.com/tailgating); tailgating gear (e.g., www.AmericanTailgater.com, www.mytailgater.com); and the Tailgating Institute (www.tailgatinginstitute.com). Not to be outdone, the American Tailgaters Association (www.americantailgaterassociation.org) has created a networking site for devoted tailgaters.

Why has tailgating become so popular? James et al. (2001) suggest that tailgating's popularity may be based on an individual's need to escape from their normal routines and/or need for socialization. Drenten et al. (2009) believe that the answer is more complicated. They argue that tailgating encompasses a duality of motives. Take, for example, the motive of "social interaction." Individuals may seek camaraderie as well as the opposite (i.e., competition) through their interactions with other tailgaters. The differences of opinion between these researchers as well as the apparent viability of tailgating as a leisure experience suggest that additional research is warranted. Thus, the purpose of this study was to document the multiple meanings that individuals associate with the football tailgating experience.

1.1 Tailgating as a Meaningful Activity

Tailgating, which has been defined as "...a picnic that is served from the tailgate of a vehicle, as before a sports event" (American Century Dictionary 1995), is a well-honed pastime in the United States. It began more than 140 years ago at a football game between Rutgers and Princeton. Boosted by the introduction of the automobile and the industrial revolution, tailgating

grew exponentially, especially in the 1980s and 1990s when it “turned into a social movement of its own sort” (American Heritage 2010, paragraph 5).

Today, tailgating has become a routinized social activity, complete with portable grills and coolers, foods created especially for the experience, flags representing the affiliations of the tailgating group, and tailgaters ready to share their tailgating history. In research conducted by the Tailgating Institute (2010), the average tailgater is defined as a college-educated male between the ages of 35 and 44. He travels less than 1 hour to get to a tailgate about 3 to 4 hours before the sporting event, and he does this about 6 to 10 times per year.

While tailgating is an important leisure activity, few researchers have conducted studies to better understand why individuals tailgate and what meanings or benefits the activity holds for them. In 2001, James et al. addressed why individuals at the University of Illinois begin tailgating, how often they tailgate during the football season, and why they continue to tailgate over time. They found that, regardless of whether tailgating was a new or continuing leisure activity, spending time with friends and having fun were important motivations for tailgating. Other motives included, but were not limited to: spending time with family, wanting to be outside, and enjoying food and drink.

Building upon Stebbins’ (1999, 2001) serious leisure framework, Gibson et al. (2002) found that University of Florida tailgaters exhibited six forms of serious leisure: perseverance, long-term careers, significant personal effort, durable self-benefits, a unique ethos, and identification. In particular, University of Florida football fans: persist in their support of the football team regardless of whether the team is winning or losing, and their persistence is long lived (e.g., some tailgaters had been attending games since they were babies); have developed labor-intensive tailgating rituals and knowledge about the intricacies of tailgating outside the football stadium; describe the time they spend tailgating with family and friends

as “special”; recognize that they are part of a unique social world that has distinct values, attitudes, and norms; and, identify with and have pride in the football team.

More recently, believing that the tailgating ritual is driven by multiple motives, Drenten et al. (2009) conducted an ethnographic study with tailgaters at a large university in the southeast United States. Their data revealed “...four motivations with a dual nature that motivate long-term tailgating behavior: involvement (preparation and participation), social interaction (camaraderie and competition), inter-temporal sentiment (retrospection and propection), and identity (collectivism and individualism)” (p. 103). In addition, tailgaters are committed to the ritual (i.e., established and unchanging pattern of formal behavior) of tailgating and assign meaning to the experience. It is not clear from their findings, however, what meanings individuals assign to tailgating at a football game. Thus, Drenten et al. suggest that additional research is needed in order to expand our understanding of “...the deeper meanings underlying the tailgating ritual” (p. 105) and, on a translational level, provide marketers with information that can be used to create meaningful tailgating experiences.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Data Collection

Six interviewers collected data from a convenience sample of 30 individuals tailgating outside the Penn State football stadium in October and November 2009. Each interviewer approached a group of tailgaters, introduced him/herself, and asked a member of the group whether he or she would participate in a study about tailgating. If the individual agreed, the interviewer commenced with a two-step photo elicitation approach. First, study participants were given a digital camera and asked to take pictures of “what tailgating means to them.” Second, when they finished taking pictures, they participated in an on-site follow-up interview during which they were asked to “interpret” their pictures. Their interpretation was documented verbatim.

2.2 Photo Elicitation as a Research Method

According to Rose (2000), photographs are "...cultural dimensions offering evidence of historically, culturally and socially specific ways of seeing the world" (p. 556). Photo elicitation research can use photographs taken by the researcher or photographs taken by interviewees who make their own decisions about what to photograph (Banks 1995, Harper 2002).

There are multiple approaches to photo elicitation, but the two most common are reflexive photography and photo novella/photo voice. In the reflexive approach, the interviewee takes photographs and then reflects upon the deeper meaning(s) of the photographs in an interview. In the photo novella/photo voice approach, interviewees are asked to photograph their daily routines and common events. They are then asked to talk about the significance and meaning of the routines and events they photographed. This approach is particularly suitable in situations where the researcher wants individuals to create visual images and use the results to reveal their feelings about the everyday social, cultural, political and economic realities that influence their lives (Clark-Ibanez 2004).

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process was based on the work of Patton (1990) and Stedman et al. (2004). Initially, data analysis was conducted independently by each of the authors, who generated broad categories (n=42) of the meanings study participants verbalized when describing their photos. Next, in an effort to verify the categories developed during the first phase, the authors were divided into three teams. Each team reviewed the data a second time and then met to compare and reduce the number of codes. This action resulted in 72 percent agreement on 33 codes between the teams. Then a third round of coding took place. Again, the teams met separately and then came together to compare codes. The teams agreed on 90 percent of the codes and further reduced them into a smaller number of themes.

3.0 RESULTS

Respondents took a total of 125 photos to portray the tailgating experience. The meanings they assigned to the photos resulted in 178 separate statements/lines of text. After analysis of the text, 15 themes emerged. However, only 7 of the 15 themes included at least 5 percent or more of the responses, which was considered the minimum acceptable level. The seven themes were labeled: Togetherness, Food, Fun, Drinking, Penn State Pride, Tradition, and Football. Photos were used solely as supplemental evidence of the meanings individuals assigned to the tailgating experience.

"Togetherness" was the most important meaning associated with tailgating. Respondents indicated that tailgating for them was being with other people. They described their photos of groups of tailgaters as, for example, "People. Everybody is here having a good time..." and "Tailgating is all about the people, people, people." Family and friends were the most commonly referenced people. As one tailgater said, "This is just amazing being here with our friends and family." Another indicated, "[This is a picture of] my niece... it's family. We do this to get together. We've been doing this for the last 35 years." When describing their pictures of friends, study participants suggested, "[This picture is of a] circle of friends socializing. Socializing is the most important thing when it comes to tailgating" and "[This is a picture of] sharing food and beer with friends."

Individuals associated food with tailgating by referencing food equipment and food. For example, respondents' pictures were of the "food table [which] is a big part of tailgating" and the grill. As one respondent stated, "How can I say tailgating without grill and food?" Individuals also mentioned that "Food. Lots of food" "...is the reason [they tailgate]." Yet, the amount of food was not the dominant issue. To many, specific types of food are just as important: "Nothing like waking up early to pork roll. Can't get it here, further east, [it is] vital tailgate food."

While being together with family and friends and eating were integral to the tailgating ritual, so too was having fun. Study participants took pictures of “everybody... having a good time,” of traditional games—“This is corn hole, the classic game for tailgating”—and people who were simply having a good time tailgating. Individuals having fun was, according to one respondent, “...[an] important aspect of tailgating.”

The fourth theme was drinking. Beer, pictured as a lone can or as a cooler full of beers was, according to one respondent, “...the essence of tailgating.” It “makes everything more fun. It’s tradition. It’s a man’s drink.” But drinking is not limited to beer. For some, it’s simply about alcoholic beverages that “[they] just have to have...”

Pride in the University and the football team was also an important meaning associated with tailgating. Pictures of flags waving in the wind under darkened skies represented for a few tailgaters, “dedication and loyalty to the team in good and bad weather.” A respondent described a picture of a fellow tailgater decked out in the team colors as “...a tailgating man. He just loves tailgating. It’s all about Penn State pride...”

The notion of tradition was linked closely to pride and was represented by pictures of the team, the spot where groups tailgate every season, and symbols such as the tailgating flag. Referring to a picture of the team, one respondent said, “Before every game... we welcome the Penn State team.” This tradition extends to the area in which groups tailgate. They enjoy “...the tailgating atmosphere” that has developed over time. And, in an effort to make the tailgating spot visible to new and old friends, one group flies “the Jell-O flag... [which has] become a tradition...”

The last theme, “football,” was represented through pictures of the stadium and the game of football. As one respondent suggested, “Without football and our great stadium we would not have a need for tailgating.” Football for other tailgaters “...is the reason we do this” and “...is the meaning of life.”

4.0 DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that individuals assign multiple meanings to the football tailgating experience. The ritual of tailgating brings with it a sense of pride in the team as well as an opportunity to share the social experience of tailgating. Food and the associated beverages also contribute to what appears for many to be an incredibly meaningful experience that, as one respondent suggested, is about a “...spirit of belief in something that is at the heart (or should be) of not only college athletics, but of life generally.”

The theme with the greatest number of responses was related to being together with family and friends, and socializing. This finding supports research by Drenten et al. (2009) and Gibson et al. (2002) which documented that some of the major benefits of being a sport consumer or tailgating were the friendships made and the time spent with family. Surprisingly, respondents did not directly associate time spent with friends and family with their pride in the university. Instead, they talked about the two meanings separately. According to Dunning (1999), “Identification with a sports team can provide people with... a source of ‘we feelings’ and a sense of belonging in what would otherwise be an isolated existence” (p. 6).

In a few cases, respondents expressed the meaning they associate with tailgating through photos of family and friends and linking these photos to past experiences. This, according to Fairley (2003) should be considered “nostalgia.” She suggests that “...nostalgia can arise in relation to identification with a relatively small social group... that uses sport as a context through which to create liminoid space in which to celebrate their identity as a group” (p. 298). Further, the memories that generate nostalgia are derived from the group and the camaraderie members share. As one respondent suggested, “[This picture is of my friends] playing a game—drinking game. These are all good memories, you know?” Another respondent’s memories were linked to what the tailgating area was like in the past: “When I was a student here, this was just fields we had to walk across to get to class...”

According to Green and Chalip (1998), people participate in activities to affirm the identity they desire: "Meeting and socializing with other [tailgaters] makes that identity and the [tailgating] context salient" (p. 283). Tailgating becomes much more than a time to socialize, it provides individuals with an opportunity to "...relish the components of their identity that they share through [a unique tailgating subculture.] The subculture provides the common language and motifs required for expression and exhibition of identity" (Green and Chalip 1998, p. 282). While our focus was on establishing meanings linked to the tailgating experience, respondents' pictures did highlight a unique identity that has been developed through the clothes fellow tailgaters wore, the blue and white paraphernalia located throughout the tailgating site, cars hosting Penn State flags and decals, and tailgating rituals (e.g., corn hole game, grilling) that had developed over time.

Additionally, fun was important to tailgaters. Indeed, sport consumers most often refer to fun when asked why they attend sporting events (Weiss and Chaumont 1992). Fun was represented through pictures of games, socializing, sharing food and drinks with friends, and more. Thus, it was not a discrete meaning. In other words, having fun is important, but so too, for example, is being with friends and family, eating, drinking, and showing pride in the team. Thus, our results support Drenten et al.'s (2009) research, which showed that individuals express multiple motives for tailgating, and through negotiation of these motives assign meaning to the tailgating experience over time.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Tailgating appears to be a meaningful part of the football experience. The university athletics marketing team could attempt to fill stadium seats by developing initiatives that facilitate and enhance the tailgating experience. For example, promotions could focus on the fun of tailgating and how it enhances the overall game day experience. Promotions could involve: Web sites and blogs that post pictures and stories from

current tailgaters; on-line interactive communities where tailgaters can post their favorite recipes; contests between "tailgating families"; and more.

Additionally, programs could be developed that build upon the meanings people associate with tailgating (e.g., socialization, fun, food, tradition). At Penn State, this has been partially accomplished by hosting activities that promote fun and food at an entertainment venue located next to the stadium. Supplemental opportunities to promote fun and food could be developed in concert with local suppliers (e.g., caterers, grocery stores) who could develop tailgating packages inclusive of local products associated with the football team/experience. Further, promoting Penn State pride could be accomplished by introducing events on game days at the University's branch campuses. These types of initiatives would not only tie in to the needs of tailgaters, but would support the "town and gown" relationship that is critical to colleges and universities.

There are some good economic reasons for universities to support and encourage tailgating (Drenten et al. 2009). Interestingly, many universities are doing the opposite by attempting to control tailgating (e.g., limiting its duration, forcing individuals into smaller spaces, limiting access to alcohol). As a result, universities may see a reduction in the number of tailgaters, which could have an adverse impact on support for sports, the economic impact to the university and surrounding area, and more.

The results of this study provide, to the best of our knowledge, the first glimpse into the meanings individuals associate with the football tailgating experience. It should be noted, however, that this study did have limitations. First, data collection was not systematic. In the future, researchers should adopt a more systematic approach to account for the variety of tailgaters who attend football games. Second, we did not document refusals. It is conceivable that individuals who refused to participate in our study attach different meanings to the football tailgating

experience. Third, we focused only on tailgating at a football game. Comparing the meanings individuals attach to various sporting events (e.g., baseball, NASCAR, soccer) at the high school, college, and professional levels would expand this line of research.

Future research is needed at other universities to determine if meanings associated with tailgating are similar across different types of universities in different locations. Further, Davidson (1996) and Shaw (1992) have found that men and women experience family events differently. Thus, further research could document the ways that women and men articulate the meanings they associate with tailgating to determine whether differences exist. In addition, this research could be extended to address differences across the life cycle. Various authors (e.g., Dupuis and Smale 1995, Gibson et al. 2002, Kelly 1987) have suggested that high investment activities like tailgating may be linked to higher levels of life satisfaction amongst older adults. Finally, we did not ask respondents if they were planning to attend the football game. In the future, it would be interesting to examine why some people choose to tailgate if they are not attending the game, and examine the meanings these individuals ascribe to the tailgating experience.

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