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Abstract

The Effect Of Fear On Sport Event Attendance – Using The Example Of Covid-19

Aim and Research Question

The World Health Organization classified Covid-19 as pandemic in spring 2020. Since then, policy makers around the world cancelled or postponed all kinds of sport events in front of spectators. This is a major problem, not only because the atmosphere during the competition suffers, but also because ticketing is an important source of revenue for sport event organizers. We assume that even after successful vaccination, many people will be sceptical about attending mass gathering such as sport events. The "new normal" will not go away, especially since it seems that people have become more fearful in general. We now live in what sociologists call a "culture of fear" (Furedi, 2018).

Therefore, our research questions are as follows:

1. How can we conceptualise the effect of fear on sport event attendance in order to manage it?
2. What appropriate countermeasures should sport event organizers take to mitigate the negative effect of fear on sport event attendance?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Fear is a human basic emotion resulting from perception of threat to one's well-being (Izard, 1991). Its intensity ranges from worry (low level) to panic (high level). The effect of fear on customer behaviour can be understood conceptually through Appraisal Theories such as the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT; Floyd et al., 2000). Accordingly, people experience fear when confronted with uncertainty and uncontrollable threats. Based on their "threat appraisal", their judgments and choices are likely to be influenced heavily. Fearful people, for example, tend to become more risk-averse which in turn might decrease their likelihood of attending a sport event. PMT is also based on the idea of offering countermeasures that comprise protective behavior. The customer's "coping appraisal" evaluates their efficacy: Do these countermeasures really help to control the danger? PMT has been applied in various contexts, such as IT security (e.g., Boss et al., 2015), flood mitigation, financial decision making and health-related issues (e.g., smoking and AIDS), but not yet in sport events so far. PMT is generally suited for contexts in which consumers require additional motivation to protect themselves or others against a serious personal threat.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

We plan to survey consumers that are generally interested in attending sport events, including the ones that decided not to go due to current circumstances. An exploratory study will be conducted to determine the intensity of fear they experience at sport events with respect to Covid-19. Fear of Covid-19 will be measured by using the appropriate descriptors of the Consumption Emotion Set (CES; Richins, 1997). CES is designed to determine consumption-related emotions, among them fear, and aligns with PMT as both have the same theoretical foundation (“cognitive theory of emotion”; Reizenzein, 2020). The survey will include questions about the respondent's socio-demographics, sport consumption, threat and coping appraisal (the task of evaluating countermeasures such as corona rapid tests). We will analyse the data applying multidimensional scaling and confirmatory factor analysis. The PMT nomology will be tested by appropriate model-fit statistics (covariance-based SEM).

Results/Findings and Discussion

We have not collected the data yet, but plan to present our findings during the conference. It is expected that customers’ fear would have to have a significant impact on their willingness to attend sport events again. According to PMT nomology, we expect to find that the higher the level of perceived threat and associated fear, the higher the protection motivation will be (e.g., to do a corona rapid test). Severity of threat and vulnerability (the degree to which an individual believes the threat applies to her or his specific circumstances) would have to predict fear. Furthermore, we should find fear to be a partial mediator between threat and protection motivation. For a positive coping appraisal, it is required that the individual considers the countermeasure to be effective and not too costly. The more a person feels able to cope with the threat because of the offered countermeasures, the higher the intention to attend the sport event will be. In addition, we will discuss possible interventions that sport event managers could use to target their customers depending on their intensity of fear.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

Covid-19 has affected many aspects of life globally, including spectator behaviour and attendance of sport events. With this research, by examining the influence of fear on sport event attendance, we hope to contribute to ensuring that sport events can once again be held in front of large audiences. We expect to provide suggestions for appropriate measures mitigating the effect of fear significantly. In addition, we apply PMT to sport event attendance for the first time. Through this conceptualization, we extend the theoretical understanding of customer behaviour in a sport event context. We will conclude with some thoughts on the applicability of our measurement model for future research.

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