

THE ROLE OF PLACE ATTACHMENT AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN TAILGATING

By

Charlotte Pearsall

A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

By

Charlotte Pearsall

Greenville, NC

May 2017

Approved by:

Dr. Paige Viren

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies

**Abstract**

Tailgating is a specialized form of tourism that surrounds most major sporting events. These major sporting events have been studied countlessly to try to understand the behavior of the consumers that attend them, but none of these studies have looked at the specific aspect of tailgating. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that place attachment has on tailgaters. Place attachment is defined as the bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments – in this case outside of a university stadium (Giuliani, 2003 and Low and Altman, 1992).

Data was collected during the fall of 2016 at all ECU home football games through the collection of email addresses. An email link to an online questionnaire was then sent to those agreeing to participate in the survey once the season was completed. The survey was sent a total of four times and the results were gathered and analyzed through Qualtrics. After the responses were analyzed it was determined that overall the respondents reported a complete sense of community score showing that East Carolina University tailgates gave them the highest levels of membership, influence, reinforcement of needs, and shared emotional connection possible.

## **Introduction**

In the United States, football programs are not only a point of pride, but also an important economic generator for the host community. Tailgating prior to, during, and after football games allows alumni to connect with the University and the larger community. In tailgating tourists must “build” the heritage site and interact with other visitors through story telling, camaraderie, and a sharing of tangible items (e.g. food, drink, games, etc.). Drenten, Peters, Leigh, and Hollenbeck (2009, p. 92) suggest tailgating is “not just a party in the parking lot”. Tailgating is a specialized form of tourism that surrounds most major sporting events. These major sporting events have been studied countlessly to try to understand the behavior of the consumers that attend them, but none of these studies have looked at the specific aspect of tailgating.

Tucker (2004) found that successful football programs and surrounding tailgating activities have positive effects on alumni giving, thus their contribution to universities goes well beyond ticket sales. Psychology has discovered that a sense of community is integral to a person’s sense of belonging, and this sense of community may arise from shared experiences (McMillan, Chavis, 1986). In order to better understand tailgating and the activities and feelings that go with it, it was determined that the sense of community they had at the tailgate and the sense of place that they felt while tailgating should be studied.

Place attachment is defined as the bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments – in this case outside of a university stadium (Giuliani, 2003 and Low and Altman, 1992). Sense of Community is “a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by the commitment to be together” (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986, p. 11). Chavis

proposed that there are 4 dimensions of a sense of community – membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection – and these dimensions also apply to a relational network as someone experiences at a tailgate.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study gave insight into the attraction of tailgating here at East Carolina University. Being able to understand the tangible and intangible aspects of tailgating at football games at East Carolina University gave insight into the attraction of tailgating at football games and also gave perspective on why other sporting events do not have this same type of culture surrounding their tailgates. It also shed light on the aspects that the tailgaters like about the entire experience. Understanding the consumer's behavior as well as their likes can help planners and marketers attract more consumers to the university and help understand what sustains a tailgaters' involvement in tailgating and commitment to the university. It will also ensure that the consumers will still enjoy their experience through different changes to the stadium and to the tailgating experience throughout the next few years.

This research can be replicated for many different tailgating sites – such as different universities – and it can be used to assess the status of tailgating throughout the years. Being able to better market to consumers and ensure an enjoyable experience will bring more participants to tailgating and result in a positive economic correlation for the stadium, university, and surrounding areas.

### **Methodology**

This study was completed on game days in different tailgate lots around Dowdy Ficklen Stadium at East Carolina University. There are eighteen different tailgate lots recognized by the university, and seventeen of these lots were split into five zones for the purpose of this study.

The eighteenth lot was the public handicap parking lot where no tailgating occurs, therefore it was not included in the study. The seventeen tailgating lots were split into five zones loosely by how much money an individual has to donate to get a spot in each respective lot. Separating the lots into zones like this ensured that an equal amount of participants could be collected from each zone, ensuring the most even demographic response possible.

Data was collected from each of the six home football games of the 2016 season. Participants were asked to provide email addresses and to respond to an online survey about their sense of community and place attachment at tailgates at East Carolina University football games. Their participation was completely voluntary, and once they provided email addresses a link to the online Qualtrics survey was sent to them after the season had been completed. They could stop the survey at any time, and their decision to take the survey was also completely voluntary. IRB approval was gained in August of 2016 before the data collection started.

The survey was five pages long and contained thirty-six questions. The first page of the survey was the confidentiality information and gave background into the study as well as gave the contact information of the researcher. The second page contained eleven questions about how often the participant tailgates, who is part of their tailgate, and what affiliations they have to the university. This was a mix of yes/no, check all that apply, numerical, and short answer questions. The third page contained eight questions that added more insight to the sense of place they feel at their specific tailgate. This included questions about their reasons for tailgating as well as specific questions about their tailgating area. The fourth page contained the twelve questions modified from Chavis' Sense of Community Index. For each of these items the participant was asked to respond if they agree or disagree with the statement. This was measured on a five point scale with the responses being: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor

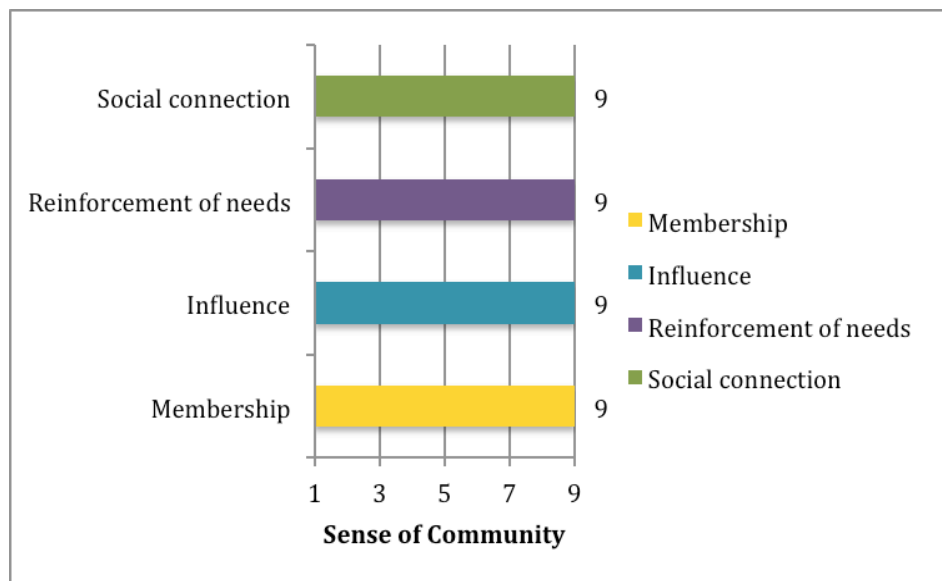
disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. The fifth page was comprised of five demographic questions about age, gender, income, and area of residence.

**Results and Discussion**

The sample consisted of approximately 80 responses. 52% of these respondents were female (*n*=39), 48% were male (*n*=36), and the majority of the respondents were between 28 and 58 years old (68%). The largest group of participants, 40% (*n*=30), responded that they live within 15 miles of the stadium and the second largest percentage (18%) stated that they lived within 75 and 90 miles of the stadium. The majority of this sample, 33% (*n*=20), reported earning a yearly income of \$0-\$50,000, while 31% (*n*=19) reported earning a yearly income of \$51,000-\$100,000. The smallest percentage, 8% (*n*=5), reported earning over \$200,000 yearly of income.

To assess sense of place, a modified version of the sense of community index presented by Chavis was used. This index states that there are 4 dimensions of sense of community – membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and social connection. Each of these dimensions is represented by a different set of questions. These 12 items on the survey measured the extent to which tailgaters felt

that they belonged at and had control over their tailgate. It can be seen in in Table 1 (to the right), that the majority of participants reported



that they felt the highest levels of social connection, reinforcement of needs, influence, and membership. In order to assess sense of community from these modified questions, scores were taken from individual answers of survey questions. Questions that had mostly “Strongly agree” answers – or the equivalent as stated by Chavis – were scored with the highest score of a 3. The scores continued to decrease as respondents stated that they felt more disagreement than agreement towards the statement. It is apparent from these results that tailgaters at ECU feel a very high sense of community while participating in tailgating at East Carolina University home football games and that their tailgates fulfill all of their needs as well as all of their wants.

Of the participants in this study, a significant amount reported that they or their tailgating group had personal connections to the university. Of the 76 respondents to these questions, 72% ( $n=55$ ) stated that they themselves were alumni/students and 99% ( $n=75$ ) stated that the group they were tailgating with were ECU alumni/students. Only a small number of respondents indicated that they did not have a personal attachment to East Carolina University through alumni status or student status. These results combined with the results from questions 12 and 15, give insight into motivations behind tailgaters reasons for participating in game day events.

Question 12 on the survey asks about the respondents “favorite part of the East Carolina tailgate experience”. The results from this question showed that socializing and camaraderie is the over all favorite part of the tailgate experience ( $n=58$ ) while location ( $n=2$ ) seemed to be one of the less important aspects of the experience. This data is repeated in question 15 which asked respondents what “tailgating at East Carolina football games means to you”. In this question 62% ( $n=44$ ) of respondents stated that socializing with friends and family and the camaraderie are what tailgates at ECU mean to them, and 0% ( $n=0$ ) of respondents stated that the location was what tailgating at ECU meant to them. The only significant difference in the responses of

these two questions was that when asked their “favorite part of the East Carolina tailgate experience” 0% ( $n=0$ ) of participants responded “fun” but when asked what “tailgating at East Carolina football games means to you” 42% ( $n=30$ ) responded “fun”.

While there was no significant data stating that location was an important part of the tailgating experience, there was data that pointed towards the fact that location did play a role in the tailgating experience. 91% ( $n=68$ ) of respondents said that they tailgate in the same area not just in one season, but every year. This data, coupled with the fact that 62% of the survey participants stated that they do not tailgate at East Carolina away games suggests that the location outside of Dowdy Ficklen Stadium on the campus of East Carolina University does have a role in the tailgating experience. The data further suggests that there may be barriers or differences between tailgating outside of Dowdy Ficklen Stadium rather than outside of other athletic stadiums at ECU because only 23% ( $n=17$ ) of respondents stated that they tailgate for other sporting events.

This is worth exploring to identify what the barriers are that are stopping football tailgaters tailgate for other ECU events. When comparing this data to the other data obtained from this study, the ECU athletic department could use the results from what tailgaters liked best about their experience and try to give them an opportunity to experience this at other sporting events. This could not only build a bigger culture around ECU sports but it could also become a consistent economic generator for the town of Greenville, North Carolina. Currently this culture and atmosphere centers around football season which is primarily during the fall, but if this culture were to spread to other sporting events there would be an influx of people coming to, staying in, and buying products in Greenville in the spring as well as just in the fall.



**Future Research**

This research can be replicated for many different sports and can be used to assess every sport over the years to ensure that the consumers are satisfied and to address any new areas that the university's athletic department could capitalize on. A consideration when trying to re-create this atmosphere with other sports is that while football only has 6 home games per season, many other sports – such as baseball – have up to 34 home games per season. For many tailgaters this may be more than the amount of time that they are able to dedicate, so you may need to focus efforts on one home game per week – such as a Saturday game – when first starting this initiative.

Research could also be done on the effect that social media marketing may have on these sporting events. Maybe putting a heavier social media importance and presence on other sports as is put on football may help people buy into the tailgating atmosphere. Along with this there should be a study done on the perceived differences between tailgating at football games and tailgating at other collegiate sporting events. Season outcomes may need to be a factor in this research. Additionally research could be done on the environmental and economic impacts that a heavier tailgating presence would have on the surrounding community.

**References**

- Chavis, D.M., Hogge, J.H., McMillan, D.W., & Wandersman, A. (1986). Sense of community through Brunswick's lens: A first look. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 24-40.
- Drenten, Jenna, Peters, Cara, Leigh, Thomas, and Hollenbeck, Candice (2009). Not just a party in the parking lot: An exploratory investigation of the motives underlying the ritual commitment of football tailgaters. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 18(2), 92-106.
- Giuliani, M. V. (2003). Theory of attachment and place attachment. In M. Bonnes, T. Lee, & M. Bonaiuto (Eds.), *Psychological theories for environmental issues* (pp. 137–170). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Low, S. M., & Altman, I. (1992). Place attachment: a conceptual inquiry. In I. Altman, & S. M. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment* (pp. 1–12). New York: Plenum Press.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of community psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.
- Tucker, I. B. (2004). A reexamination of the effect of big-time football and basketball success on graduation rates and alumni giving rates. *Economics of Education Review*, 23(6), 655-661.