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## Not Just a Party in the Parking Lot: An Exploratory Investigation of the Motives Underlying the Ritual Commitment of Football Tailgaters

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# Not Just a Party in the Parking Lot: An Exploratory Investigation of the Motives Underlying the Ritual Commitment of Football Tailgaters

Jenna Drenten, Cara Okleshen Peters, Thomas Leigh, and Candice R. Hollenbeck

## Abstract

This study examines the underlying motives within the ritual of football tailgating and the influence of these motives on ritual commitment. Employing an ethnographic approach, methods include participant observation, informal conversations, and formal interviews. Findings indicate that four basic motivations and the dual nature of these motives perpetuate the tailgating ritual: involvement (preparation and participation), social interaction (camaraderie and competition), inter-temporal sentiment (retrospection and prospecting), and identity (collectivism and individualism). The data illustrate that the duality of these motives perpetuates consumers' commitment to the ritual of tailgating and thus motivates participants to continue tailgating over time. Theoretical and sport marketing implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

In 1869 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, the first intercollegiate American football game occurred between Rutgers and Princeton.

A cold wind was blowing that frosty afternoon as Princeton kicked off. There were some two hundred spectators, some watching from their buckboards, others perched on a board fence. During the game two players ran into the frail fence full tilt in pursuit of the ball, and it crashed, spilling the people to the ground. (Danzig, 1956, p. 8)

Before the inaugural game, the crowd of enthusiasts gathered to drink, eat, and socialize in what many consider the first tailgate party in America (Drozda, 1996). Since then, the ritual of tailgating has become a mainstay of college football.

Considerable focus has been placed on identifying factors that motivate consumers to attend sporting events (Caro & Garcia, 2007; James & Ross, 2004; Koo & Hardin, 2008; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002; Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003; Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008); however, only one study to date has specifically examined the motives and culture of social pre-game rituals surrounding sporting events. In a two-stage study at the University of Illinois, James, Breezeel, & Ross (2001) identified two primary motives that individuals continue tailgating: 1) to escape their normal routines and 2) to enjoy social interaction. Although important, the work of James et al. (2001) is limited because it focuses more on the act of tailgating as a leisure activity and less on the enduring and meaningful importance of the ritual. The present study takes a different approach toward the examination of tailgating in that it seeks to unpack the deeper, theoretical motivations of such a consumption ritual.

Consistent with Rook's (1985) definition of ritual, football tailgating is a consumption driven ritual in that it is "a type of symbolic, expressive activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behavior is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity" (p. 251). Football fans strongly identify with the ritual of tailgating. For example, in January 2007, NFL officials announced that tailgating within a one-mile radius of Dolphins Stadium would be prohibited at Super Bowl XLI. Upon realization of the ban, avid fans posted quotes on the AOL Sports FanHouse Blog, offering evidence of the ritualistic nature of tailgating.

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*"By identifying the underlying motives of long-term ritual commitment, we can begin to develop more effective marketing strategies to foster such loyalty behavior in tailgaters and other sports fans."*

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Posted at 10:38PM on Jan 26th 2007 by Brian:

We spend our weeks from September through December configuring menus, showing up before 8 a.m. (at least for a 1 p.m. game), to get ready for the big game every Sunday, not just Super Sunday. The coals go on by 8:30 a.m., with eggs and sausage, and by 10 a.m. the steaks, brats, chicken, and adult beverages are being served. Man, I am already missing it! Let them tailgate!

This quote is just one example of an individual's commitment and connection to the ritual of tailgating. The purpose of this paper is to examine the tailgating culture from the consumer's perspective, revealing underlying motives with a dual nature that drives ritual commitment. First, we review the conceptual foundation for the study, grounded in ritual commitment and the duality of motives. To explore the tailgating ritual, the authors adapt Apter's (1982, 2002) reversal theory, which suggests that an individual's experience is a product of sets of contradictory fundamental motive states. Second, we describe the interpretive qualitative method used to investigate the tailgating ritual. Third, the authors propose and provide support for a framework of four basic motivations with yin-yang type features that drive performance of the tailgating ritual over time: involvement (preparation and participation), social interaction (camaraderie and competition), intertemporal sentiment (retrospection and propection), and identity (collectivism and individualism). Fourth, we discuss theoretical implications and specific sport marketing strategies. Finally, we provide directions for future research. Overall, the primary contribution of this paper lies in providing a framework of interactive

and iterative motivational states which extends beyond past studies that look at individual motives in isolation, independent of one another.

## Conceptual Foundation

### *Ritual Commitment*

Tailgating offers marketers an established setting to gain insight about the enduring nature of rituals. Just because a person begins tailgating does not mean that he or she tailgates over a long period of time or with continuing fervor. Rook's (1985) seminal research shows that by definition ritual necessitates repetition over time. In the case of collective ritual behavior, repetition is just one part of the attitudinal and behavioral commitment attached to an act (Boyer & Liénard, 2006). For example, a recent study of consumer devotion of sports fans presents evidence of desacralization, or the decline of previously associated sacredness and commitment to a sports team (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004, p. 42). Arguably, this desacralization could also diffuse into the pre-game rituals of tailgating; however, James et al. (2001) found that 66% of the tailgaters they interviewed had been tailgating for more than 10 years, while 54% reported that they tailgated at all home games. Unraveling what differentiates a life-time tailgater from a fair-weather fan is certainly of interest to marketers as it relates to the overall commitment of the consumer to the ritual and offers insight into other sport-related rituals.

Just as sport consumers display varying levels of commitment with particular teams (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 1993) and consumers develop varying levels of relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998), tailgaters differ in their levels of commitment to the ritual of tailgating. The present study is primarily interested in examining highly committed tailgaters, in order to better understand what motivates their behavior over time. By identifying the underlying motives of long-term ritual commitment, we can begin to develop more effective marketing strategies to foster such loyalty behavior in tailgaters and other sports fans.

### *Reversal Theory and the Duality of Motives*

This paper aims to expand the view of ritual consumption motives from a sociological perspective by examining tailgating through the lens of Apter's (1982; 2001) reversal theory. Reversal theory suggests that as individuals interpret their experiences, their motivation continually oscillates between sets of contradictory states. In other words, people reverse back and forth between dual motivational states. For instance, a skydiver may shift between the motive of playfulness (e.g., need for excitement, moment driven) and the motive

of seriousness (e.g., need for achievement, goal driven; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993). According to reversal theory, people seek to balance the two ends of each motivating spectrum, in a yin-yang type negotiation.

The role of duality and contradictions are relatively new to the marketing literature. For instance, Rose and Wood (2005) argue that viewers who delighted in the contradictory nature of reality television were most likely to identify with and be engaged in the experience itself. Mick and Fournier (1998) suggest that consumers learn to cope with contradictions in technology (e.g., control v. chaos, freedom v. enslavement) through confrontative mechanisms such as negotiation. The authors of the present study propose a similar process for the duality of motives which lie beneath

the tailgating ritual. Commitment to the ritual of tailgating is driven by motives that consist of yin-yang type contradictions which tailgaters negotiate and attempt to balance over time. Hence, the authors of the present study propose that the tailgating ritual is not driven by single motives but rather by the process of negotiating the related contradictions (e.g., camaraderie and competition) that embody particular basic motives (e.g., social interaction). These dualities are negotiated over time and form the meaning underlying the tailgating experiences.

## Method

The present study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach through observations and depth interviews.

**Table 1.**  
**Interview Demographics**

Respondent Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Years Tailgating Consistently
Ellen	23	Female	Registered Nurse	5
Ashley	25	Female	Middle School Teacher	5
Anna	25	Female	(Not Specified)	5
Brad	26	Male	Lawyer	5
Doug	27	Male	Salesperson	5
Paul	48	Male	Sanitation Engineer	5
Greg	36	Male	(Not Specified)	5
Diane	48	Female	Homemaker	6
Nancy	59	Female	Homemaker	6
James	61	Male	(Not Specified)	6
Joe	39	Male	(Not Specified)	9
Keith	39	Male	Artist	10
Debbie	34	Female	(Not Specified)	11
Brent	37	Male	State Hospital Director	11
Scott	28	Male	(Not Specified)	11
Janice	41	Female	(Not Specified)	14
Rodney	52	Male	Social Worker	15
Steve	38	Male	(Not Specified)	20
Beverly	55	Female	Elementary School Teacher	21
Ray	79	Male	Retired	21
Alan	40	Male	College Professor	22
Ruth	56	Female	Dental Assistant	26
Danny	57	Male	Baking Chef	26
Margaret	47	Female	County Coordinator	30
Mitch	50	Male	(Not Specified)	30
John	64	Male	Law Enforcement Officer	30
Bill	61	Male	Alcohol Distributor	30
Terry	60	Male	(Not Specified)	32
Richard	58	Male	Management Consultant	34
Patsy	72	Female	Civic Volunteer	40
Fred	82	Male	Retired Navy Captain	40
George	88	Male	Retired	68

Few studies to date have specifically unpacked the meaningful consumption rituals in football tailgating. This study explores the motivational factors that are present in ritual of football tailgating. The ethnographic approach, as described by Wolcott (1994), guided data collection, analysis, and interpretation because it allows the authors to delve deeply into the richness of the tailgating culture, capturing the meaningful nature of the actions, language, and experiences of tailgaters.

Methods include participant observation, informal conversations, and formal interviews. Data were recorded via field notes, audiotape, photographs, and videotape.

Following the ethnographic observations and informal interviews, the authors sampled the cultural frame of tailgating. The researchers began by immersing themselves in the culture, observing, participating, and informally interviewing as many individuals as possible.

Observations and informal interviews took place on six separate tailgating occasions. At various tailgating venues, individuals were informally interviewed with respect to their tailgating experiences. These observations and conversations were documented via field notes and subsequently transcribed into electronic journals.

As the authors became more involved in various tailgating experiences, interviewing became more systematic. At the informal tailgates, the researchers asked veteran tailgaters if they would be willing to participate in a formal interview related to their tailgating experiences. Informants were selected for their extensive experience and long-term participation in tailgating. A total of 32 depth interviews (from one to three hours each) were conducted with tailgaters (11 females and 21 males) over a one year time frame.

**Table 2.**  
**Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

General Topic	Semi-Structured Interview Questions
Tailgating Connection	What is your relationship with the University (e.g., alum, local resident)? How connected do you feel to the tailgating ritual? How do you demonstrate your connection with tailgating and with the team?
Tailgating Memories	When did you first start tailgating? How do you think tailgating has changed of the years? What is your most memorable tailgating experience? What is your worst tailgating experience? What are some of your tailgating traditions?
Tailgating Preparation	When do you start preparing for tailgating season? How do you get ready for tailgating? Where do you tailgate? Describe the set-up of your tailgate site (e.g., décor, organization).
Tailgating Relationships	Who tailgates with you (e.g., friends, family, coworkers)? Why do you choose to tailgate with these people? Describe your interaction with tailgaters from the opposing team. Describe your interaction with fellow tailgaters from your team.
Tailgating Experience	Describe a typical tailgate. What kinds of things go on? Why do you enjoy tailgating? How long do you normally spend tailgating? How often do you attend tailgates? Why do you feel it's important to tailgate? How does tailgating influence your enjoyment of the game?
Tailgating Reflections	How do you feel once the football season is over? What do you think you gain from tailgating? Why do you continue tailgating each year? How long do you think you will continue tailgating?

**Table 3.**  
**Framework of Motives in the Tailgating Ritual**

Basic Motives		Underlying Dualities	
	Brief Description	PREPARATION	PARTICIPATION
<b>Involvement</b>	This motive concerns an individual's type of involvement in the tailgating ritual rather than his/her level of involvement (i.e., high v. low).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tedious planning; takes weeks or even months</li> <li>• A lot of organization; requires a routine</li> <li>• Stressful and hectic</li> <li>• Restrictive</li> <li>• Laborious; burdensome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All about the game day &amp; on-site experience</li> <li>• Escape from the organized, "routine" daily life</li> <li>• Stress-free and relaxing</li> <li>• Indulgent</li> <li>• Privilege; it's all "worth it"</li> </ul>
<b>Social Interaction</b>	This motive concerns the role of other people in value creation within the tailgating ritual.	<p><b>CAMARADERIE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic unity</li> <li>• Welcoming and hospitable</li> <li>• Meet new people; "unofficial friends"</li> </ul>	<p><b>COMPETITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic rivalry</li> <li>• Territorial and possessive</li> <li>• Exclusivity; "Us-them" mentality</li> </ul>
<b>Inter-Temporal Sentiment</b>	This motive concerns the affective influence of past experiences and future expectations on tailgaters' present behaviors.	<p><b>RETROSPECTION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgia</li> <li>• Longing for the past (e.g., childhood, college); tradition</li> <li>• Sacred, simplistic</li> <li>• "Old school"; back to basics</li> <li>• Reflective</li> </ul>	<p><b>PROSECCION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progression</li> <li>• Making new memories; embracing change</li> <li>• Materialistic</li> <li>• Technological innovation</li> <li>• Anticipatory</li> </ul>
<b>Identity</b>	This motive concerns the process by which an individual's identity is formed in relation to the tailgating ritual.	<p><b>COLLECTIVISM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unifying school clothing, colors, site decor</li> <li>• Emphasis on community (e.g. team, tailgaters nationwide)</li> <li>• Communal-identity; "We" are all one with the team</li> </ul>	<p><b>INDIVIDUALISM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing out from the crowd through clothes and site decor</li> <li>• Recognition of individuality</li> <li>• Sense of superiority</li> <li>• Die-hard fans or true fans; authentic fans</li> </ul>

The 32 informants were all fans of a large Southeastern University. They ranged in age from 23 to 88. Consistency in tailgating is a key factor in the present study as we aim to better understand tailgating from a ritualistic perspective, which implies repetition and commitment over time. The informants had been tailgating consistently an average of 19 years each, with 68 years as the longest span and five years as the shortest. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the interviewees. To protect the privacy of the respondents, all data are reported using pseudonyms and references to specific universities or team mascots have been amended.

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*“Throughout the depth interviews, this constant negotiation between preparatory involvement and participatory involvement was prevalent.”*

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The semi-structured interview protocol is presented in Table 2. It should be noted that the interviewer generally followed the protocol and made sure that each question was asked at some point in the interview; however, the structure was also free-flowing and conversational in nature to improve the richness of the data. The informant was probed where appropriate and was encouraged to elaborate whenever he/she was discussing his/her tailgating experiences.

With respect to analysis and interpretation, the authors followed Wolcott's (1994) ethnographic conventions, continually moving among specific transcripts, artifacts, and the evolving data set. Relying on inferences from the data and using reversal theory as a guide, the authors iteratively developed patterned regularities in the data and a thick description of tailgating culture and rituals (Creswell, 1998; Wolcott, 1994). Two methods of validation were used to ensure accurate representation and reliability of the data and analysis, triangulation and respondent validation. Investigator triangulation was incorporated throughout the research process by using three experienced investigators to validate the findings. To achieve respondent validation, one author went back to several subjects with tentative results to refine and confirm the findings.

## Findings

During the process of aggregating and interpreting the data, four basic tailgating motivations and their dual natures emerged: involvement (preparation and participation), social interaction (camaraderie and competition), inter-temporal sentiment (retrospection and prospecting), and identity (collectivism and individualism). Table 3 provides a framework outlining the basic motivational factors and underlying dualities of

the tailgating ritual. The data reveal that the negotiation of these contradictory states underlies an individual's commitment to the ritual of tailgating. The present article provides support for the proposed framework with illustrative examples from selected depth interviews; furthermore, Table 4 provides short quotes that corroborate the findings across the interviews.

### *Involvement: The Duality of Preparation and Participation*

Research shows that involvement is an important factor influencing commitment (Coulter, Price, & Feick, 2003). Simply being present at a tailgating event can imply that one is involved to some extent. For instance, rookie tailgaters may be involved by just taking part in the day of festivities, whereas seasoned tailgaters often considered tailgating a year-round process. However, this study is less concerned with an individual's level of involvement (i.e., high, low) and more concerned with an individual's type of involvement. Committed tailgaters appear to be involved in two primary aspects of the tailgating ritual. The data reveal two underlying dualities of involvement: preparation and participation.

Preparation was a key part of the respondents' involvement in the tailgating process. Respondents planned their tailgates in advance, down to the last detail, in an effort to enhance their actual participation on game day.

Many of the informants went through great lengths to efficiently prepare for their tailgating excursions. For example, Richard (age 58) described in detail the painstaking process of figuring out and practicing how to load and unload his tailgating supplies (e.g., chairs, tables, pop-up tent) into and out of his vehicle, in order to be prepared for the fall football season. The effort invested in preparing for the tailgate reaps its benefit in making the tailgating experience itself easier and less problematic. In previous research, escapism, or the process of relieving daily stress through entertainment or leisure, has been cited as a motivation for individuals to participate in sports-related consumption activities (James et al., 2001; Wann et al., 2004). Likewise, respondents in the present study often referred to their participation in tailgating as an escape from their stressful work week.

**Margaret:** I work pretty hard and have a pretty hectic schedule and job, so I never usually just sit down at home. I'm usually always washing clothes, washing dishes, paying the bills, you know, and taking work home. So, rarely do I just sit. This is one of the times that I just don't do anything. Just relax. Such escape from the day-to-day routines and stresses involves a trade-off. Although Margaret looks for-

**Table 4.**  
**Selected Supporting Evidence from Depth Interviews**

Motives	Quotations from Depth Interviews
Involvement Participation Preparation	<p>“We’re usually pretty relieved when football season is over. It’s just a lot of work.”</p> <p>“I’m a very organized person, and everything I do is planned weeks and months ahead.”</p> <p>“As soon as one game is over, we start preparing for the next—coordinating menus, planning decorations, that kind of stuff.”</p> <p>“It’s probably one of the few times where I actually sit down and stop without feeling like I’ve got to be doing something work related.”</p> <p>“We eat all day and drink all day. Every Saturday, we just eat, drink, and talk. It doesn’t get much better.”</p> <p>“Tailgating is just an evolution of what goes on. No set things—just whatever happens.”</p>
Social Interaction Competition Camaraderie	<p>“We’ve been tailgating together for so long now, all our friends here are just like family to us now.”</p> <p>“This game used to be a heated rivalry. It’s matured over the years to become a giant party. We don’t give a damn about the game. We’re here to enjoy each others’ company.”</p> <p>“Everybody pitches in. It’s not the material things that are out here. It’s the people—just visiting with them.”</p> <p>“You can get away with just about anything—taunting, throwing stuff—you just can’t touch. If you take a swing, you’re in big trouble.”</p> <p>“It’s wild. There’s a real hatred between the two teams here. You just have to be able to take what they give you.”</p>
Inter-Temporal Sentiment Retrospection Prospecction	<p>“I love tailgating because it puts me right back in the college atmosphere.”</p> <p>“When we first started coming, everyone would dress up in their Sunday best. We still do. I guess we’re old-fashioned in that way.”</p> <p>“I’ve been watching [my team] since I was about five. It’s just something we’ve always done in my family.”</p> <p>“I love having my kids and grandkids out here. It’s like handing down a tailgating legacy to them.”</p> <p>“Tailgating just gets more elaborate every year—bigger trucks, bigger TVs, more food. It’s all about putting on a bigger and better show than you did the year before.”</p> <p>“We’ve already scouted out another spot, looking toward the future, but we really don’t want to change.”</p>
Identity Individualism Collectivism	<p>“You come out here and see everyone in red and black. It reminds you that your part of something bigger. We’re all here for a common cause—to enjoy tailgating and to see the ballgame.”</p> <p>“When we’re here, we feel like we’re part of it, part of the team and part of the group. We won—not just <i>they</i> won.”</p> <p>“I think I’ll tailgate as long as I’m breathing. It’s just part of who I am.”</p> <p>“I’m a true, die-hard fan. I really can’t explain it. It’s just that feeling, just part of my life.”</p> <p>“It’s hard to comprehend, you know. It’s just born in you.”</p> <p>“We’re true tailgaters. It’s something that the people who just bring coleslaw and the buns will never understand. We’ve probably never even gone to anyone else’s tailgate.”</p>

ward to relaxing and recognizes tailgating as a break from her “hectic schedule,” she later comments that the extra energy required to prepare the tailgate was

sometimes daunting. Even so, she would never consider giving up her role as a tailgate hostess.

**Margaret:** I guess the part that gets frustrating to me is when we get home and we have to unload



everything. I usually get stuck cleaning everything up and putting up and getting ready for next time. It gets a little old, but it's still fun. Besides, I think my husband would just die if we didn't host our own tailgate.

In contrast to the escapist nature of participating in tailgating itself, the extensive preparation process that many respondents spoke of can create even more hassle in their lives; yet they continue tailgating. Many of the respondents spoke of the balance that they had found between preparation and participation with almost bittersweet affection. They agreed that just showing up to participate in a tailgate would be hassle-free, but they were not willing to sacrifice their involvement in the preparation process. However, hosting a tailgate can create more stress in one's life.

**James:** I'm happy when the season's over. I enjoy it, but I really don't look forward to it that much. Once I get here, it's a lot like going to the dentist for me. You know, have you ever walked out of the dental office and said, "That wasn't so bad." Well, that's kind of the way I feel sometimes.

Although James clearly gets frustrated with tailgating, he continues to participate. When his wife, Nancy, was asked about their typical tailgating activities, she explained that her husband travels all week so he usually just sits at their tailgating spot to relax. All tailgaters in attendance could be considered participants in the tailgating culture; however, Richard (age 58) would disagree. He and his wife host a tailgate at all home games, except for one each year. He said, "Usually one game a year, we don't tailgate. We just visit people around the stadium." Interestingly, Richard does not consider it tailgating unless he hosts his own site.

Ritualistic tailgating participation involves deeper meaning. Respondents in the present study described tailgating as a flow-type activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), in which they simply enjoy each other's company and live in the moment. The liberating quality that tailgating seemed to have was appealing to tailgaters. Participation in tailgating offered spontaneity and freedom from the controlled, conformity of everyday life. Other escapist activities, such as over-indulgence, were prevalent. For instance, Nancy (age 59) mentioned that her tailgate always prepares a full buffet of food, which is consumed both before and after the game. The indulgent culture of tailgating allows some to feel a sense of freedoms from dietary concerns or weight loss efforts that they may uphold throughout the rest of the week or year. Later in Nancy's interview, she indicated that during the week preceding her Saturday tailgating ritual, she would be careful to make healthy food choices in anticipation of indulging on game day.

Thus, she prepared herself to participate in the indulgent day of tailgating. Throughout the depth interviews, this constant negotiation between preparatory involvement and participatory involvement was prevalent. The respondents recognized the organizational work required to tailgate, yet considered tailgating a relaxing experience to take a break from their regular work routines. Thus, tailgating as a consumption ritual is seen as liberating in participation yet laborious in preparation.

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*"Competition not only occurs between fans of opposing teams, but also between tailgaters of the same team as they compete for tailgating territory."*

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### *Social Interaction: The Duality of Camaraderie and Competition*

The present study identifies social interaction as a basic motive for remaining committed to the ritual of tailgating. Previous studies substantiate social interaction as a motive in attending sporting events (James & Ross, 2004; Wann et al., 2008); however, findings from the current study extend beyond the basic motive of social interaction and reveal the underlying dualities driving social interaction: camaraderie and competition.

Overwhelmingly, respondents demonstrated a welcoming and hospitable nature, juxtaposed with innate rivalry. In fact, during the ethnographic inquiries into the field, many tailgaters invited the researchers of the present study to join them for food and drinks. One respondent, Nancy (age 59), mentioned that she often extended impromptu invitations to fellow fans, law enforcement officers, and other tailgaters that she met throughout the day.

Most of the respondents expressed enjoyment in meeting new people and inviting strangers to join their tailgate. Even fans of opposing teams were seen tailgating together. Most of the respondents described tailgating as a social activity for friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers to share.

**Fred:** It's about meeting your friends and the camaraderie that you have. Then, you meet even more people. You just look for people wearing the school colors and start talking to them. If [fan from the other team] walked by right now, I would speak to them too. We make lots of unofficial friends.

"Unofficial" friendships seem to build camaraderie, which is an important aspect of hospitality (Dickson & Huyton, 2008). Hospitality is an innate part of tailgating, as it is with any festive ritual. Participants in the present study showed uninhibited generosity toward

others without boundaries or discrimination. Many respondents went out of their way to provide food, drinks, and other comforts to their fellow tailgaters. For example, Mitch (age 50) commented that he does not mind hosting a tailgate each week because “it’s convenient for everybody else” and “makes the atmosphere a little better.” Mitch paints a picture of togetherness and unity in his hospitality toward fellow tailgaters. He gladly puts forth extra effort to ensure his tailgate meets others’ expectations and provides a social atmosphere. Juxtaposed with the cordial nature of tailgating are its competitive characteristics. Rivalry is an inherent feature of tailgating, as it is directly related to competitive sports (Mahony & Howard, 2001). Some symbolically demonstrate their competitive natures through the food that they prepare. For example, Margaret (age 47) explained that her site’s menu may change per game. When playing the Arkansas Razorbacks, her husband prepared pork barbecue. When playing the South Carolina Gamecocks, she provides fried chicken. These subtle cues, denigrating the opposing team, contribute to the competitive nature of tailgating. Many tailgaters thrive on publicly antagonizing fans for the opposition. One man, Steve (age 38), who was tailgating for one of the biggest rivalry games of the year attached a noose to a stuffed alligator, the rival team’s mascot, and hung it from the front post of his tent.

**Steve:** We just use [the stuffed animal] as a thing to relieve pressure. If we’ve got frustration, then we’ll just slap it around. I’ve had drinks and cups of ice thrown at me at [a conference rivalry] game. It can get pretty bad. You’ll have a little back and forth. The worst fans I’ve ever seen were at [a rival school]. They are a rough crowd. But at the same time, the rivalry is all in good fun.

Although Steve noted some instances where rivalry may have gotten out of hand, most of the respondents agreed that the rivalry was “all in good fun” and heckling was part of the common cultural experience. Because it is generally considered taboo to physically attack a fan of the opposing team, fans showed their superiority symbolically (e.g., cooking rival themed foods, beating up stuffed mascots). The researchers observed similar displays of public mockery and symbolic competition flooding various tailgating venues. Much of the rivalry that takes place in the tailgating culture appears to be a battle of wits, such as the case above; however, some respondents indicated that more grave acts of retaliation (e.g., stealing material goods, vandalizing property, physical violence) can occur.

Competition not only occurs between fans of opposing teams, but also between tailgaters of the

same team as they compete for tailgating territory. All of the interviewed tailgaters agreed that staking claim on their physical tailgating sites was crucial. In fact, most of the tailgaters had been tailgating consistently in the same geographical location for years.

**Margaret:** We tailgate in the same old spot, by the same old tree. We’ve probably been there almost twenty years. My husband gets really panicky on big weekends. You know, he worries that somebody will get our spot. Honestly I don’t know what we would do if somebody did. He would probably just die. I think he feels personally responsible for the spot. He thinks, “If the spot is gone, how will everyone find us and where will we go?” Even though there’s lots of other good spots, that’s just where we’ve been for so long.

Fighting for ownership of land shows the primitive territorial competition that takes place prior to tailgating. It is interesting that tailgaters willingly extend hospitality to strangers; however, if a stranger “steals” a spot that another tailgater identifies as his own, hostility arises. Furthermore, the tailgaters symbolically marked their territory with such things as tents, flags, vehicles, and chairs, creating a visual and physical barricade demarcating ownership of a physical tailgating location.

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*“By focusing marketing efforts on reflecting the underlying dualities of sport-related rituals, rather than only promoting the ritual itself, marketers can use these latent motives to foster ritual commitment.”*

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On the one hand, football tailgating appears to be innately competitive in and of itself. On the other hand, its festive, social atmosphere seems to promote harmony and togetherness in contrast to the hostility that could accompany such sports rivalry. The data show that the ritual of tailgating epitomizes friendly competition in that tailgaters are dually motivated by camaraderie and competition.

#### *Inter-Temporal Sentiment: The Duality of Retrospection and Prospecction*

Throughout the observations and depth interviews, respondents consistently characterized their motivation for tailgating as a nostalgic quest to connect with their past. In the marketing literature, nostalgia for things past has been shown to influence consumers’ experiences and decisions (Holbrook, 1993; Schindler & Holbrook, 2003), especially with regard to sporting events (Fairley, 2003). Despite their attachment to the past, all of the respondents also embraced the progressive nature of tailgating over the years. Thus, the pres-

ent study identifies inter-temporal sentiment as basic motive for tailgating. Underlying this factor, the data show that tailgaters are dually motivated by their retrospective sentiment for things past and their prospective sentiment for the future.

Respondents in the present study were often motivated by their longing for the past. For example, Richard (age 58) commented that the tailgating ritual allows participants “get back the feeling of schools days from long ago.” Beyond reuniting with college friends, many of the respondents indicated a lifelong connection with tailgating and supporting the football team. The interviewees indicated that they had been raised in the culture of tailgating and sports fanaticism. In fact, one individual, Fred (age 82) had not pursued his education at his favorite team’s University but had been attending this team’s football games since 1928, when he was just 10 years old.

**Fred:** My football memories go way back. Post ‘29 was prohibition, and most refreshments consisted of concealed flasks. They were really popular back then. During the early ‘30s, tailgating mainly involved box lunches, and a large coca-cola that was spiked. For the game, tailgating really had its own start sometime in the 1950s, but as far back as there has been college football, people from out of town brought box lunches. It wasn’t as complex as it is now though. All I can remember is bringing some box lunches and going to the game.

Fred remembers his childhood tailgating experiences, but he recognizes that modern tailgating did not emerge until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. He indicates that tailgating has progressively changed over the years. Fred’s wife, Patsy (age 72) also began following her favorite football team at a very young age and strongly associates tailgating with family tradition.

**Patsy:** It’s just an excitement that you have to be there to understand. I can’t explain it. It’s just that feeling. It’s a tradition. It’s like going to your grandmother’s house on Thanksgiving or going to church on Christmas Eve. I mean, this is a big part of your life like any family tradition.

Patsy equates tailgating with traditional holidays that previous studies have shown to be highly ritualized and sacred (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). In the marketing literature, research indicates that traditional rituals are intrinsically sacred and performed with seriousness (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). The interview data offer evidence of the seriousness with which participants performed their tailgating rituals.

**Mitch:** To me, you can’t go to the game unless you tailgate. It’s just the way it is in the south. It’s part of life down here. We take football seriously

and this is part of football. It’s part of the game. In fact, it is sometimes more fun than the game.

Consistently, respondents like Mitch spoke of their reverence toward the game of football as well as the sacredness of the tailgating experience. The previous statements show the importance of retrospective sentiment as an influential motive in commitment to tailgating; however, respondents indicated that prospective sentiment also serves as a motive for tailgating. In other words, the tailgating ritual is just as much about the past as it is about the future.

Besides the growth in tailgating popularity, innovations appear to have drastically changed the tailgating culture. Observational data show that many of the tailgating sites featured technological advancements such as satellite televisions and motor homes. While respondents indicated a nostalgic longing for the past, they simultaneously enhanced their tailgating traditions with modern innovations. With multi-million motor homes, flat screen televisions, and satellite dishes, modern tailgating does not require its participants to sacrifice on comfort. Not all tailgates are quite so elaborate, but many enjoy at least a few creature comforts. Despite claiming that being outdoors is an attractive characteristic of tailgating, most tailgate participants essentially transfer their indoor lifestyle to the outdoor setting. They establish a makeshift home from protective shelters to on-site meal preparation. For instance, Richard’s (age 58) tailgating set up included an eight-foot tall pop-up shelter, more than a dozen chairs, some tables, and a brand new gas grill and stove combination appliance. Unlike the pioneering tailgaters of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Richard and others use innovation to enhance their tailgating experiences. These tailgaters simultaneously partake in a nostalgic tradition while joining the quest for progression. If these tailgaters were truly nostalgic, they may have tried to replicate the original tailgating experiences of their childhoods or of their predecessors; however, none of the respondents did this. Nonetheless, not all alterations in the tailgating ritual are welcomed. For example, Mitch (age 50) and his fellow tailgaters had occupied the same site for nearly 30 years, since attending the University as undergraduates. When asked about the future of his tailgate, Mitch expressed reluctant acceptance of inevitable changes in his tailgating future as a result of University expansion.

**Mitch:** The long-range plan of the University is to build a dorm right here [on my tailgating spot], so I’m going to lose this place. That’s going to be hard. It’ll be sad, but life has to go on. We’ll find another place and we’ll continue.

Mitch’s ability to strike a balance between his retrospective sentiment for his traditional tailgating and

acceptance of the prospective future of the University presents evidence for his enduring commitment to the ritual of tailgating. Committed tailgaters are dually motivated by the past (e.g., childhood memories, University history, back to nature) and the future (e.g., creating new memories, University advancement, technological innovation). Loyal tailgaters are both resistant to change and flexible. They are committed to the tailgating ritual as a way to connect with their own personal histories and the history of the University. Yet, even with their strong retrospective connections, they recognize and embrace (or in some cases tolerate) prospective changes within the tailgating ritual.

***Identity: The Duality of Collectivism and Individualism***

Identity is a key factor in motivating ritual behavior (Otnes & Lowrey, 2004). The present study substantiates that identity motivates the ritual of tailgating and extends the literature by suggesting that the tailgating ritual is characterized by two underlying dualities: collectivism and individualism.

The respondents in the present study exhibited a strong sense of community, not only through their interviews, but also symbolically in their actions. During field observations, tailgaters predominantly wore their team colors and decorated their sites with team related paraphernalia, such as banners and flags. Clothing and site adornments (e.g., flagpoles, magnets, tablecloths) were key markers of a collective identity. For instance, Richard (age 58) indicated that his tailgating site décor was important because it represented the colors of the University and signaled his team identity to others.

While tailgaters seek to connect with their fellow tailgating community, they also show evidence of their quest for self-identity through individuality. For instance, the researchers inquired about some unique items seen at tailgating sites, and found that one tailgater had ordered his vintage pants covered in his favorite team's logo from a seller on eBay. Another man had a sign custom-made for his tailgating site. Within the collective confines of the representative team colors and logos, some fans emphasized their individuality. However, all of the respondents simultaneously emphasized the importance of collectivism and unity in remaining committed to their respective teams and to the ritual of tailgating in general.

**John:** I think tailgating is exactly what it is: people getting together, your friends, for a common reason. You want your team to do good, and I think all over the country it's done for the same reason. It goes to different degrees in different places, but I'm sure everybody does it for the same

reason. It's everywhere. To a degree, it's different. But it's everywhere.

John's quote suggests that the universalism of tailgating offers people a collective identity beyond their team affiliations, a bond with football tailgaters across the country. Later in his interview, John mentioned that he even tailgates for baseball and basketball games with a different group of people, suggesting that the collective tailgating identity transcends a specific sport or social network. Still, the data show that tailgaters who are extremely committed to the ritual derive their identity on an individualistic level and recognize themselves as "die-hard" fans.

**Margaret:** We're pretty much die-hards at my house. My husband only missed one game in the '90s. We go to all the home and away games. He missed one away game in the '90s. I really don't remember why. I don't think that everyone is as hard core as us.

This concept of die-hard tailgating contributes to the theme of individualism. Throughout the interviews, respondents took great pride in their near perfect records of tailgating attendance and suggested that not all tailgaters were so devoutly committed to the ritual. In other words, the die-hard nature of their commitment appeared to be a factor of their individual identity, rather than their collective identity. Their self-identities lie in not just being fans, but rather being what they consider a "true fan," one that made tailgating an integral part of their lives. For instance, Richard's (age 58) description of his most memorable tailgating experience demonstrates his identity as a true fan.

**Richard:** I had woken up that morning with a fever of approximately 102. It was raining outside, just a tremendous rain. I said, "I don't care. I'm going to the game." It was raining so bad that you couldn't even enjoy the tailgate, and [our team] lost at the last second. That was even more disheartening—the last-second loss.

It took about two or three months to completely get over that flu. It just would not go away. I probably had walking pneumonia and didn't even know it. But, if I had to do it all over again, I would. Absolutely, I'm a fan. True fans do that. You suffer the consequences later.

Richard recognizes himself as a true fan, and thus, fulfills his duty as such, regardless of the circumstances. His story shows evidence of the personal responsibility that he feels he has to perform his role as a tailgater and supporter. For some, this personal responsibility even extends into the game itself. Several respondents superstitiously suggested that their performance of tailgating rituals influences their teams' victory on the field. For instance, Patsy (age 72)

explained that her pre-game superstitions included parking in the same spot and being careful to walk on the same side of a tree as her husband. George (age 88) had been tailgating since he was 20 years old, and indicated that regardless of his team's performance on the field each week, his individual commitment to the tailgating ritual itself remained constant.

The tailgaters interviewed were often emotionally invested in their teams' successes and failures. When respondents spoke of the team they supported, they often used the first-person plural pronoun "we" (i.e., "we lost" instead of "they lost"). While this shows tailgaters' strong identification with the football team, it also shows evidence that they, in some way, feel that the team's loss is equivalent to their own personal loss. Consistently, the data show that tailgaters possess strong personal connections to tailgating through their collective identity that simultaneously interacts with their individual identities as they participated in and continued to enact the tailgating ritual over time.

## Discussion

The findings of this study make both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing literature. Within the field of marketing, the literature on rituals is steadily growing and making important contributions, but few studies to date have examined consumers' long-term commitment to rituals and what motivates such behavior. This study unpacks the factors that contribute to consumers' ritual commitment. Drawing from theory on ritual commitment and reversal synergy, the findings show that motives with a dual nature and the negotiation processes that accompany these factors influence a tailgater's commitment to the ritual over time.

While several studies examine fan and spectator motives (James & Ross, 2004; McDonald et al., 2002), few have examined the motives underlying the pregame rituals of tailgating. The present study builds upon and extends the previous research of James et al. (2001) by identifying a richer, more meaningful set of sociological factors that motivate tailgating. The data from this study reveal 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). The present study also extends the literature by finding that it is not just individual motives that underlie ritualistic consumer behavior. The findings of this study identify a deeper and wider process at work with respect to the perpetuation of the tailgating ritual over time. For instance, it is not simply social interaction that drives

tailgating commitment. It is the underlying negotiation of camaraderie and competition that fosters commitment to the tailgating ritual. The existence, interaction, and negotiation between the dualities that make up the motives are key to understanding the tailgating ritual.

### *Implications for Marketing Theory*

Arguably, the most important theoretical contribution made by this paper is not the identification of a richer set of variables that represent motivating sociological factors underlying the tailgating experience. The primary contribution lies in taking a more holistic view of the overall tailgating experience. The individual themes identified in the paper, such as camaraderie and nostalgia, while important, do not complete the theoretical picture with respect to the consumer's commitment to ritual over time. Rather, the constant negotiation due to the dual nature of the motives is essential to ritual commitment. The findings of this study show that it is the overall experience itself that is important, not an individual act or individual motivating factor. The process by which the dual themes interact and are negotiated creates meaning and motivates the consumer to perpetuate and commit to the ritual over time.

Theoretically, this study also sheds light on the growing marketing literature on authenticity (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Rose & Wood, 2005). The informants in this study indicated that their commitment to the ritual over time made them "true," "die-hard" fans, implying superiority over less committed fans. The implication of this comparison is that the committed fan is more "authentic" in his/her actions, when compared to others who are also enacting the ritual. This finding suggests that recognizing and embracing the duality of motives in rituals and experiencing the related negotiation process is what characterizes a committed consumer. Thus, ritual commitment serves as a demarcation for some members of the subculture who are able to identify and exhibit legitimate cultural capital; however, it does not appear that fans are explicitly aware of this fact.

### *Implications for Sport Marketing*

Practically speaking, the findings of this study are important for universities, sports leagues (e.g., NASCAR, NFL), and businesses (e.g., corporate sponsors, athletic brands) that would like to create and capitalize on rituals to which consumers are committed over time. The dualities underlying consumption rituals may be transferred into specific marketing strategies to create a more involved and loyal fan base for various sports (e.g., baseball, basketball) and events (e.g., festivals, tournaments). Table 5 outlines key insights and preliminary strategic recommendations regarding sport

**Table 5.**  
**Framework of Motives in Ritual Commitment and Corresponding Strategic Sport Marketing Initiatives**

Motivation	Key Insight	Specific Strategic Sport Marketing Initiatives
<b>Involvement (Preparation/Participation)</b>	Tailgating requires days, weeks and even months of stressful planning, just to enjoy a single day of stress free fun.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop products that simplify the planning process (e.g., tailgating kits)</li> <li>• Create a yearly promotional calendar (i.e., countdown to tailgating season)</li> <li>• Send electronic newsletter about tailgating throughout the year to fans (e.g., alumni, season ticket holders)</li> <li>• Interactive tailgating website to virtually recreate the tailgating experience</li> <li>• Provide text message number to allow tailgaters to send mobile photos of their tailgating experience</li> </ul>
<b>Social Interaction (Camaraderie/Competition)</b>	Tailgating rivalry is all in good fun and serves to unite people while innately pitting them against one another.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize contest between tailgaters of the same team with the prize being the “best” tailgating location on campus</li> <li>• Host on-site friendly competitions between tailgaters of opposing teams</li> <li>• Corporate sponsorship of a “Friends and Foes” tailgate for close rivalry matches (e.g., Georgia v. Florida; Michigan v. Ohio State)</li> </ul>
<b>Inter-Temporal Sentiment (Retrospection/Prospection)</b>	Tailgating thrives on the intersection between the past and the future, between nostalgia and progression.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing promotions emphasizing historical basis of tailgating ritual</li> <li>• Create mentoring program—a big brother, big sister of tailgating—for veteran tailgaters to host current students at their tailgates</li> <li>• Create a website for fans to scan and upload past and current tailgating photos and memorable stories</li> </ul>
<b>Identity (Collectivism/Individualism)</b>	Tailgating is a definitive part of the self-concept for those who see themselves as <i>true</i> fans in the larger sport fan community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create online interactive community of tailgaters (e.g., fans can post advice, stories, pictures)</li> <li>• Provide loyalty program, rewarding consistent tailgaters</li> <li>• Create competition (e.g., Most Valuable Tailgater)</li> <li>• Emphasize marketing of the universalism of tailgating</li> </ul>

marketing initiatives based on the framework of motives in ritual commitment.

By focusing marketing efforts on reflecting the underlying dualities of sport-related rituals, rather than only promoting the ritual itself, marketers can use these latent motives to foster ritual commitment. For example, the duality of retrospection and prospecting that underlies inter-temporal sentiment suggests that feelings toward both the past and the future enhance ritual commitment. Marketers can integrate the past (e.g., nostalgia, history) and the future (e.g., progress, innovation) to better reach sport fans. Specifically, fans could receive mobile text updates with historical facts relating to tailgating or the team. On-site televisions showing highlights from historic games could be set up around high-traffic tailgating areas. Marketing efforts that reflect a collection of dualities are likely to be more effective than those that focus on individual motives. For example, marketing efforts that place camaraderie alongside competition can simultaneously promote rivalry and unity, thus, embodying the basic motivation of social interaction more fully.

Furthermore, findings from this study suggest that universities and sponsor organizations should support the subculture already created by the tailgaters. Contrary the old adage, "If you build it, they will come," tailgating provides an opportunity for fans to come and build "it" themselves. Tailgating allows fans to co-create their experience and offers a consumer-created venue for brands to reach their markets. The sport venue may provide the physical setting for tailgating, but fans create the ambiance and features. Although it seems inherently obvious, universities, sport leagues, and businesses should support tailgating activities and attempt to foster positive experiences (e.g., provide adequate space, transportation to the stadium, and electricity for equipment or appliances). Such support should garner economic benefit. For instance, universities will likely reap long-term benefits in ticket sales, alumni support, and athletic associations. Lodging locations and local restaurants and bars within the surrounding communities also stand to benefit from tailgating.

Overall, marketers should view tailgating as a consumer-created ritual, laden with underlying dualities. Although fans cannot control the quality of the game or team, they can, to an extent, control the success of their tailgate and the satisfaction of their tailgating experience. Consistent with Oliver's (1999) traditional view of consumer loyalty, tailgaters that are continually satisfied with the quality of their tailgating experiences remain committed to the ritual of tailgating.

## Conclusion and Future Research Avenues

For loyal tailgaters, the tailgating subculture transcends beer, burgers, and a ballgame. Tailgating is a year-round event. Fans prepare for weeks or even months in order to ensure a successful tailgating experience. By identifying the deeper meanings underlying the tailgating ritual, this study extends the present conceptualization of ritual commitment and motivation. Future research should examine and compare underlying motives among different segments of tailgaters, for instance, based on university affiliation (e.g., alumni v. non-alumni) or geographical origin (e.g., north v. south). Furthermore, in the present study, non-tailgaters did not have the opportunity to respond. Future research should investigate reasons why some people choose to only attend the game and not tailgate prior to it. Or perhaps more interestingly, why some individuals choose to only tailgate and not attend the game.

In addition to highlighting the need for more studies on tailgating itself, the findings should be validated on a larger sample. More qualitative research should be conducted as well as large-scale survey research. A large quantitative study may allow researchers to make a direct comparison between new tailgaters who are younger in age (e.g., current college students) and older, more experienced tailgaters to examine potential generational differences with respect to ritual and commitment. A researcher may wonder, "Are the somewhat contradictory contents of motives the same for young versus old? Furthermore, are the contradictions and related negotiations the same for different generational cohorts?" The present study of ritual commitment in the context of tailgating identifies motives with a dual nature that could be further expanded in future research across a variety of contexts that would contribute to both theory and practice in the field of sport marketing.

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