

# *Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management*

*Topical Essay – Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, Event*

## **Where the Sidewalk Ends: A Call to Action for Investigating the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Fans and Consumers**

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### **Abstract**

The current topical essay addresses the need for future researchers to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumers, fans, and supporters, and how organizations adapted to the health crisis. Specifically, background and ideas for research regarding the impact of COVID-19 are presented for the areas of sport, entertainment, hospitality, and event management.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Research, Consumer Reactions, Organizational Strategy, Closures, Consumer Behavior

### The Issue

There is a popular book, and poem entitled, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein. The book features musings and drawings by the author, and has been enjoyed by people around the world as it takes readers (and listeners) on journeys of wonder, excitement, and into the unknown. The poem tells about traveling to “where the sidewalk ends” as a way of finding a path through an unknown future (at least in this contributor’s interpretation). There is also a song by George Strait under the same title that serves as a promise made to a love interest that the protagonist will wait for them “where the sidewalk ends, and the road begins.” At its core (again in this contributor’s interpretation), the song also addresses leaving the comfortable and traveling to the unfamiliar in search of happiness and discovery.

The two pieces tell listeners and readers that it is sometimes, often-times, necessary to travel an unfamiliar path in order to find what one is looking for (thank you U2 *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For*). The two pieces took on more importance amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, when sport leagues went on hiatus (Goodman, 2020; Kimball, 2020; Otterson, 2020; Zillgitt, 2020), movie theaters and production companies went on temporary leave (Faughnder, 2020; Kit & Couch, 2020), theme parks closed (Rizzo, 2020) and day-to-day amenities like grocery stores, convenience stores, and restaurants had to adapt to the necessitated slowdown of society (Dixon, 2020). Because of the contagious and unknown nature of the COVID-19 virus, local, state, and national governments were forced to implement strict guidelines (and in some places, mandates) in the interest of public safety (Lee, 2020). These events left all parties, companies and consumers, staring at the end of the sidewalk,

wondering where the path that lay before them would lead. The current topical essay places a call to action for researchers to investigate how the pandemic impacted, and will continue to impact, fans and consumers as we navigate through the public health crisis and the relevant lasting effects.

### Background and Need for Research

When cases in the United States (US) seemingly dropped after the “flattening the curve” initiative, some claimed it was safe to reopen businesses to stir respective economies (Ascarelli, 2020). Then, when cases rose sharply (Croft et al., 2020), surpassing original daily counts, many feared that things had reopened too soon (Partlow & Miroff, 2020). Further, many also wondered how an economy moves forward amid such a public health crisis. (It is important to note here that the US was among the minority of countries facing increasingly rising cases and fatalities as other countries took more strict measures to contain outbreaks).

Theme parks reopened at limited capacities (Cofey, 2020), sports leagues resumed seasons with no or limited fans (Kim et al., 2020; Lauderbach, 2020; Ramos, 2020; Ward-Henninger & Maloney, 2020), and some in controlled environments such as the NBA and MLS at Walt Disney World, and the WNBA at the IMG Academy (Chiari, 2020; Quinn & Wimbish, 2020; Zgoda, 2020). Restaurants again began offering dining room eating on a limited basis (Tyko, 2020), and movie theaters opened with restrictions in place to protect consumers and workers (Bailey, 2020). The adaptations organizations and companies made, along with the impact of the virus on workers and employees, received attention in both popular media and academic literature (see the special issue on this topic from the

*International Journal of Hospitality Management*, expected to be published December 2020).

However, the impact of the pandemic on fans and consumers is an area where future academic research and understanding is in great need. Even as the topic has received attention in popular media, little is currently known regarding how the pandemic and resulting changes will impact fans and consumers moving forward. Investigations into the pandemic's influence of fans of sport (Grieve et al., 2020) and Disney (Havard et al., 2020) provide initial glimpses into potential impacts on fan and consumer behavior; however, much more investigation is needed. Such research is important from several reasons. First, as a consumer society, we are entering unknown and unfamiliar territory, and working to better understand how the current public health crisis will shape short- and long-term consumer behavior is very important for organizations and the public. Further, investigating how consumers and fans will react to the evolving situation will better help people predict future behavior. Finally, and perhaps most important, investigating how consumers and fans react to challenging times also provides a glimpse into the human condition and how society can be influenced by local and worldwide events.

### **Call to Action**

The rest of this topical essay will focus on areas of potential future inquiry for researchers in sport, entertainment, hospitality, and event management – all areas that have experienced great amounts of disruption as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Further, it is the goal of this section, and this topical essay, to encourage conversation and the sharing of ideas among researchers and colleagues to help each other better investigate the current situation in an

attempt to conduct better research and thereby better understand the impact on fans and consumers. For clarity purposes, the section will focus on fan and consumer reactions to (1) the pandemic and (2) the *new normal*.

### **Fan and Consumer Reactions to the Pandemic**

Of the many questions that should be investigated regarding the pandemic's impact of fans and consumers, an important one is conducting more investigation into the ways(s) fans reacted and coped with the absence of preferred products and services amid the public health crisis. For example, when sport leagues went on hiatus, many fans were left with limited options to fill the void. A team of researchers lead by Frederick Grieve investigated the reactions and coping mechanisms used by sport fans, and provided a good basis for future inquiry (Grieve et al., 2020). Further, research regarding how fans consume sport upon leagues restarting competition will yield more interesting insight that can provide researchers with additional research questions.

Likewise, within the entertainment space, many fans were left without the option to consume their favorite products and services. For example, movie goers were left without brick and mortar theaters to consume new movies, while vacationers were either advised, or in some cases prevented, from traveling to planned destinations. Investigating how individuals reacted and coped with the absence of options will help people better understand behavior and plan for future contingencies. Exploratory investigation of how fans of Disney reacted to the closures of the company's parks and resorts (Havard et al., 2020), along with how the company communicated with fans and supporters (Baker & Bliznik, 2020) provide initial information regarding consumer

behavior amid the evolving situation. However, more research is needed to help better understand how consumers reacted, and help predict future behavior.

The same questions should be investigated in the hospitality and event management space to better understand how people reacted to the lack of travel, dining, and other hospitality options. For example, fans and supporters had to adapt to consuming products remotely rather than in-person. Whether taking virtual vacations and staycations, or eating prepared food at home rather than in a restaurant dining room, consumers had to find creative ways to engage in diversions they typically enjoyed in-person before the pandemic. Future investigation could focus on individuals' reactions and coping mechanisms based on whether or not they agreed about the pandemic and stay-at-home mandates/orders.

### **Fan and Consumer Reactions to a New Normal**

Once a *new normal* is established in the various settings of interest, investigating how fans adapt to the changes and alterations will help researchers, and in turn practitioners, better understand and predict consumer behavior. For example, how will consumers react to safety measures when using air travel, staying at a hotel, or purchasing an advance ticket to a theater or sport event? Further, what expectations do fans and consumers have regarding an organization's pricing and cancellation strategies? For example, people traveling for business and professional conferences may return to pre-pandemic travel habits at a faster rate than those traveling for tourism or visiting family members.

As products and services are offered again, investigating fan and consumer preferences will take on additional importance. For

example, how comfortable are fans returning to sport arenas, movie theaters, restaurants, theme parks, and hotels based on current and future information regarding the pandemic and public safety? Additionally, what expectations do they have regarding the precautions taken by organizations and companies within sport, entertainment, hospitality, and event management. For example, will the use of new technologies such as service robots currently being used by some restaurants and hotels become a minimal expectation for consumers (Shin & Kang, 2020). Further, as consumers are willing to pay more for increased safety measures (Gurosy & Chi, 2020; Rizou et al., 2020), will more retailers offer more stringent dining regulations (e.g., private dining tables and rooms – Kim & Lee, 2020). All of these areas are ripe with important questions to help better understand the future of consumer behavior as we adapt to the *new normal*. Finally, the use of theories such as planned behavior (CITE) and resilience (Alonso et al., 2020; de Freitas & Stedfeldt, 2020) could assist future investigation.

The current topical essay makes a call to action for researchers to conduct future investigation into understanding how fans and consumers reacted to the pandemic and *new normal* of sport, entertainment, hospitality, and event management. It is the goal of this essay to encourage researchers to ask questions, look for potential answers, and help educate interested parties and a collaborative manner, and this call to action should serve as a potential starting point for conversations and future investigations. As the four areas discussed in this topical essay have metaphorically reached “where the sidewalk ends,” it is now time for society and consumers to see what lies ahead in the unknown, and researchers can assist in this collective journey.

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