



Managing co-creation in professional sports: The antecedents and consequences of ritualized spectator behavior



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ABSTRACT

Ritual behaviors connected to sporting events and teams are a commonplace example of 'co-creation'. While largely positive, some of these ritual behaviors can be against team and public interests. This raises the issue of if, and how, teams should seek to manage rituals. This paper reports on two studies of sports fans undertaken to examine: (a) how widespread ritual behavior is; (b) how rituals form and why; and (c) the relationship between engagement in ritual behavior and other desirable attitudes and behaviors. The main findings are that ritualized behaviors are very common, largely fan-developed, and can form very quickly. A positive relationship was found to exist between ritual behavior and outcomes such as satisfaction, team identification, merchandise expenditure and game attendance. Longitudinal tracking of individual fans suggests that ritual behaviors drive those outcomes, rather than the inverse.

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1. Introduction

One of the features of the sport industry is the ritualized way in which products are consumed. Fans² of every sport have rituals and superstitions to help them enjoy the spectacle, socialize with like-minded fans, and reduce the anxiety of watching their team play. In sports, as much as any industry, consumers take responsibility for enhancing their consumption experience, adding value through the enhancements they make to the product, and through their degree of identification and commitment. Fans of the Texas A&M University football team perhaps represent an extreme case in point. Up to 20,000 fans regularly gather at the stadium the night prior to a game to practice chants or 'yells' under the instruction of fan-elected cheer-masters. During the game, in excess of 80,000 people are encouraged to employ the rehearsed behaviors, including standing for the entire game (Drehs, 2009). Following team losses, it is common for large parts of the crowd to remain behind and practice again. Along with bonfires, induction camps and different chants and behaviors for different tiers of the student body, this practice has been an ongoing feature of football games at Texas A&M for many decades (Hallett, 2005).

Consumer behavior of this type is an exemplary form of co-creation – where organizations and customers act together to create value (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The examination of co-created rituals fits within the

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² Throughout this paper we use the term 'spectators' to refer to anyone who consumes a sports product, and we have adopted the definition of 'fans' as being those spectators with a distinct connection and identification with a specific team (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Our primary focus is on fans, as ritual behavior typically requires connection to a team.

broad framework of ‘stakeholder theory’, where firms are encouraged to create as much value as possible by utilizing the capabilities of an interlaced network of stakeholders. A stakeholder is defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s purpose” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). In our context, the team (or firm) has a range of strategic outcomes including financial, social and promotional goals. They aim to create and deliver collective value for network partners including fans, season ticket holders (STH), stadium owners, sponsors and the wider community. In adapting stakeholder approaches to identifying organizational networks (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007), the sporting team is the central or focal body in its network, or the actor around which interests rotate (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). An investigation of the process by which rituals develop around sports organizations, and the benefits of encouraging co-creation, can assist in developing an understanding of how fans and teams can align within a network, and how value can be created, shared and owned.

Co-creation is increasingly recognized as a key component of recent theoretical developments in marketing that build upon stakeholder theory, known as ‘Service Dominant Logic’ (S-D Logic hereafter). The basic premise of S-D Logic is that service (not ‘services’ as is commonly mistaken) is the “common denominator of exchange” (Lusch & Vargo, 2006, p. 282), and is therefore endemic to the marketing of all outputs (goods and services). S-D Logic rejects the traditional bifurcation of participants, such as organizations and customers or producers and consumers, preferring to recognize the production of outputs as a process involving resources and resource actors who operate together and separately throughout the production-consumption cycle. Organizations are encouraged to move from marketing to customers toward “marketing with customers, as well as other value-creation partners in its value network” (Vargo & Lusch, 2013, n.p.), thus blurring the lines between stakeholders. S-D Logic provides us with a new way of viewing the interaction between fans, sports teams and sports-related outputs.

The relationship between fan and team should be reciprocal (Friedman, Parent, & Mason, 2004), where both benefit from co-creation. The enthusiasm displayed by consumers like Texas A&M fans suggests they are benefiting greatly from being involved; however, co-creation is not without its managerial challenges. In practice, co-creation is problematic and challenging for managers, given that it involves such a shift from traditional producer-consumer dyadic thinking, and intrinsically involves the relinquishing of control by organizations.

Paramount among these challenges is the issue of deviant consumer behavior threatening the brand and even the organization’s viability. A pertinent example of this is the hooliganism displayed by fans of national and domestic football (soccer) teams in Europe in the late 1990s (see Giulianotti, Bonney, & Hepworth, 1996; Nash, 2001; Spaaij, 2007). Hooliganism, defined by Spaaij (2007) as “a specific form of competitive violence organized by fan groups” (p. 317), clearly involves ritualistic behavior. Both Armstrong (1998) and Spaaij (2007) suggested that relatively harmless ritual behaviors like chanting and flag waving, which are intended to reinforce identity, can play a role in building fan passion among certain supporter groups, to a point where hooliganism is the outcome.

The issue of aggressive fan behavior and hooliganism is a complex one, where many factors outside of the control of team management have an impact. Roadburg’s (1980) comparative examination of US and UK soccer fans led to the identification of a number of factors associated with hooliganism. Some of these, such as exaggerated masculine behavior, always standing at games and pre-match activities like drinking sessions, clearly fit the definition of ritualized behavior. Other aspects such as stadium design and deeper cultural influences like sectarianism are not. The point remains that some ritual behaviors left unchecked can, on occasion, lead to problems.

Fan behavior at events such as the Heysel disaster in 1985 (Chisari, 2005) led to sanctions and bans for all English football teams from continental competitions, an extended ban for a team involved (Liverpool FC), and major government and policy interventions legislating teams and crowd behavior (Carnibella et al., 1996). Drenten, Peters, Thomas, and Hollenbeck (2009) also cited examples of vandalism, intimidation and violence among the consumers they studied who were engaging in ‘tailgating’ rituals pre-game in US sports.

One of the core issues at the heart of S-D Logic is an examination of how value can be developed and communicated with the ‘resource actors’ in any market (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This presents a managerial challenge for those involved in sports management, where large numbers of fans are active participants. Since there is well-documented evidence of how these sports rituals can have both negative and positive impacts on fans and teams, the study of rituals in an S-D Logic context will likely provide some insights into a difficult topic – how is co-creation managed effectively for both parties?

The research presented in this paper is the first step toward addressing the issue of how managers should balance encouraging co-creation via ritual development with the protection of the organization and its brand from deviant behavior that might also result. In particular, the purpose of this research is to explore the positive impact and consequences resulting from ritualized fan behavior for teams. We begin with a brief discussion of S-D Logic, and specifically focus on the concept of co-creation that is central to that doctrine. This is followed by a review of the literature on ritualized behavior, which is the form of fan co-creation most commonly seen in a sporting context.

2. S-D Logic, co-creation and rituals

Vargo and Lusch (2004) argued that traditional marketing logic is dominated by a focus on physical goods, and that this leads to unnatural distinctions between producers and consumers. They proposed the S-D Logic as an evolution of marketing thought, where the focus is on a flow of services that may, or may not, include some physical goods. Their argument was that it is the service component that constitutes the bulk of the value that is typically exchanged. S-D Logic focuses on services rather than goods as the basis for social or economic exchange, and shifts marketing focus toward active resources (including

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