Toward an Integrated Approach in Examining the Cultural, Social, and Psychological Meanings of Sport Consumption

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This paper develops a theoretical framework that encompasses social, cultural, and psychological meanings associated with sport consumption. The paper also describes promising research tools for mapping and comparing sport consumption meanings across cultural settings.

Sport is laden with symbolic meanings (Chalip, 1992). Consuming sport inevitably involves meaning representation and interpretation (Derbaix, Decrop & Cabossart, 2002; Holt, 1995). The meanings consumers obtain from sport consumption render personal relevance and affect consequent consumption choices (Christensen & Olson, 2002). Therefore, an understanding of meanings in sport consumption informs researchers and practitioners about the underlying dynamics of sport consumption.

Sport, as cultural performance, is often patterned by culture to manifest local values and meanings (Thomas & Dyall, 1999). For example, Geertz’s (1973) account of the Balinese cockfight demonstrates that by interpreting the culturally grounded behaviors in a sport context, the local cultural fabrics through which people make meanings and express their values can be appreciated. Thus, in addition to understanding systems of representation and meaning that may be shared across cultures, it is also essential to locate patterns of culturally grounded difference.

Meanings obtained from sport consumption are intricately related to consumers’ perception of the self (Ciadini et al., 1976; Derbaix et al., 2002; Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999). Meanwhile, sport consumption provides consumers with emotive and hedonic experiences that are multi-sensory, imaginative, and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Madrigal, 2006). Both the self-significance and psychological experiences of sport consumption are socially framed as consumers make sense and interpret the sport world through social interactions with fellow consumers (Holt, 1995). Further, the relationships between culture and consumption are symbiotic. Consumption meanings are patterned by culture while consumption activities enable the manifestation of cultural principles and categories (McCracken, 1986, 1988, 2005). Consequently, meanings of sport consumption are holistically integrated and span the social, cultural, and psychological spheres. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of meanings in sport consumption, attention should be accorded to all three aspects. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) is a research tool that can map sport consumers’ mental models thereby capturing social, cultural, and existential significances associated with sport consumption (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

Studies examining sport consumer behavior are often grounded in one set of cultural contexts, Western cultural contexts, yielding theories that are fundamentally Western in their assumptions and relevance (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). In sport consumer research, for example, it is typically the case that psychological measures, such as fan motivation scales, have been developed in the West and then translated and administered in other cultural settings (e.g., Cohen & Avrahami, 2005; Kwon & Trail, 2001; Melnick & Wann, 2004; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002). Studies of this type are liable to two fundamental errors: the error of commission and the error of omission (Kim & Berry, 1993). Errors of commission might include items that reflect characteristics unique to sport consumer behavior in the culture from which the scale originated. Errors of omission cause dimensions that are unique and important in a (different) cultural setting to be ignored. Hence, it is useful to study sport consumers in multiple cultures simultaneously in order to develop more generalizable models and theories. To achieve this purpose, a combination of emic and etic approaches is necessary (Berry, 1989; Walker & Deng, 2003/2004).

In conclusion, meanings in sport consumption are multi-sensory, symbolic, experiential, and relevant to the self (Ciadini et al., 1976; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Holt, 1995). While these facets of the sport experience can be conceptually differentiated, they are intrinsically associated. To understand their effect and the meanings they engender, consumers’ mental models including both the meaning constructs and the connections among those constructs should be mapped and integrated (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). ZMET provides a
handy technique to emerge sport consumers' mental models in this context. Further, the cultural embeddedness of sport consumption mandates the spontaneous emergence of meanings grounded in the local cultures, and therefore require emic study. In order to develop theory which can be useful across cultures, these locally derived mental models should be compared and contrasted, which requires etic examination (Berry, 1989; Walker & Deng, 2003/2004). Thus, emic and etic study of sport consumers must be undertaken simultaneously and iteratively. Details of the ZMET technique and emic and etic study design will be discussed.