

Designer Perceptions on the Pro-Environmental Movement in Sport: An Innovation Diffusion Perspective

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In recent years, the issue of environmental sustainability has emerged as a popular topic of conversation within the sport management literature (e.g., Casper & Pfahl, 2012; Chard, Mallen, & Bradish, 2013; Dolf, 2012; Inoue & Kent, 2012; Mallen, 2010; Nguyen, Trendafilova, & Pfahl, 2012). Increasing awareness of the intersection of sport and the environment has not been limited to the academy, as sport leagues and organizations at all levels have begun championing pro-environmental initiatives in an effort to promote their businesses and inspire social change among their fans (Kellison & Kim, 2012). A growing trend in collegiate, professional, and international sport is the incorporation of pro-environmental elements in the designs of new or renovated arenas, ballparks, and stadiums (Porteshawver, 2009). In this study, we consider the rise of sustainable design in sport as an example of innovation diffusion and fill a gap in the existing literature by providing a qualitative account of the decision-making process managers undertake when deciding whether to adopt an innovation.

The increasing rate at which sport organizations have adopted sustainable facility designs suggests the industry is on the brink of what Rogers (1983, 1993, 2003) referred to as innovation diffusion. An innovation—exemplified in this study as the incorporation of pro-environmental design—is defined as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or unit of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 2). The rate of adoption by other organizations can be called diffusion, which Rogers (2003) described as a “process by which the adoption of innovation by member(s) of a social system is communicated through certain channels and over time triggers mechanisms that increase the probability of its adoption by other members who have not yet adopted it” (p. 20). The diffusion-of-innovations theory has served as a fundamental theoretical base of innovation-adoption and -diffusion research in various disciplines, including management, marketing, public administration, communications, social psychology, technology, and sociology (Gopalakrishnan & Damanpour, 1997; Ramamurthy & Premkumar, 1995; Tornatzky & Klein, 1982). Despite its prominence in other disciplines, however, there has been little attention paid to innovation adoption and diffusion in the sport management literature (e.g., Caza, 2000; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; O’Brien & Slack, 2004).

Although it is clear sport organizations are becoming more responsive to calls to reduce their environmental impact, less is known about how the processes of innovation adoption and diffusion actually occur. Within the diffusion-of-innovations literature, scholars have identified a number of individual, organizational, and environmental determinants theorized to lead to innovation adoption (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Vincent, Bharadwaj, & Challagalla, 2004). Given that the incorporation of eco-friendly design in sport facilities is a relatively recent development, we seek to identify the unique factors that are contributing to the widespread adoption, and subsequent diffusion, of this pro-environmental innovation. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into how the decision to incorporate eco-friendly features into the design of a new or renovated sport facility is made.

In the spirit of discovery, description, and theory development, a qualitative research design is used to examine innovation adoption and diffusion of sustainable sport facility design (Rudd & Johnson, 2010). Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted in late 2012 with a convenience sample of lead designers of renowned collegiate, professional, and international sport venues identified as pro-environmental (either through official certification or through substantial media recognition). In sum, 13 individuals agreed to participate in the study. These individuals were responsible for the design of more than 25 eco-friendly sport facilities across North America, Europe, Australia, and Africa. The facilities discussed were used for a variety of leagues and events, including college football and basketball, MLB, NFL, FIFA World Cup, and the Olympic Games. Each interviewee held the title (or a derivative of) Principal, Associate Principal, Senior Architect, or Project Designer. The accuracy and significance of the data collected are strengthened by the expertise of these respondents. The data were transcribed and stored using NVivo

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10 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2012), and themes were extracted from the interviews following the guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (2008). To address the interpretive validity of the analysis, the results (summarized below) will be presented largely through verbatims, thereby allowing readers to “experience the participants’ actual language, dialect, and personal meanings” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 277).

As the discussion of our results will show, the architects and designers interviewed in this study identified a number of individuals and groups responsible for the increasing incorporation of green features in sport facilities. These actors include the design firms, team and/or facility ownership, political leaders, environmentalists, local citizens, and the media. When asked to identify the individual or group most responsible for innovation adoption, more than half identified the ownership. Many interviewees went into great detail in discussing the role of team owners, facility managers, and civic leaders in the decision-making processes to adopt sustainable measures. Additionally, a number of benefits of building green facilities to both the design firm and facility owner were described. For the firm, these benefits included: increased visibility and experience working with new technologies, confirmation of moral expectations, additional income generated from certification fees, the maintenance of a competitive advantage over other firms, and positive public perception. For ownership, the predicted benefits included: decreased operations and lifecycle costs, positive public relations, tax incentives, increased visibility to a variety of audiences, enhanced patron comfort, and new leads to environmentally conscientious sponsors. The interviewees also commented at length about the perceived rate of innovation diffusion; the expectation that the adoption of pro-environmental strategies would continue at a fast rate was unanimous. Additional analysis and interview testimony will be provided during the presentation.

Through this study, we seek to expand the existing scholarship on sport and the environment by identifying underlying issues that influence decisions to incorporate sustainable design in new or renovated arenas, ballparks, and stadiums. These findings are especially relevant to organizations considering adoption of the eco-friendly-facility innovation, as the results of the study suggest owning an eco-friendly sport facility holds distinct advantages over ownership of facilities constructed in the traditional manner. Additionally, we endeavor to contribute to the innovation diffusion literature by contributing a qualitative illustration of how innovation adoption and its subsequent diffusion are sparked. Our access to the architects directly involved in the design and construction of pro-environmental facilities provides new insight to assist in understanding the decision-making process of facility owners. Such an understanding is necessary in order to encourage further diffusion of socially responsible innovation in sport.