Concept Mapping in Sport Management Research

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When endeavoring to obtain individuals’ thoughts about a particular topic, sport management researchers have often relied on thought elicitation exercises. Although thought listing can be advantageous in exploratory research and scale development, such an exercise does not permit researchers to understand how individuals’ thoughts about a particular topic are connected. In this paper, I discuss the value of using concept mapping in sport management research to understand how individuals’ thoughts about a phenomenon are structured and connected. After reviewing concept mapping, I discuss how I have employed this technique as a method in qualitative research to elicit individuals’ brand associations with a sport entity. I conclude by offering suggestions for future use of concept mapping in qualitative and/or quantitative sport management research.

Concept Mapping: An Overview

Sport management researchers have typically used thought elicitation exercises to understand individuals’ thoughts about a topic. The thought-listing technique entails individuals listing everything they are thinking about a given topic; this can include thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and images (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Cacioppo, von Hippel, & Ernst, 1997). The stream of thoughts obtained from individuals through thought-listing exercises can be telling of their cognitive structuring regarding a particular topic. Considering the use of free-thought listing in previous work, various sport management researchers have successfully employed this technique for scale development and theme generation (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006; Yoshida & James, 2011). Despite its advantages, thought listing does not afford researchers the opportunity to understand how individuals’ thoughts are connected; use of concept mapping could potentially fill this void.

Concept mapping has been used extensively in education (see, e.g., Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2002), as it allows for the evaluation of knowledge. Beyond its value in educational assessments, concept mapping can be used in research settings to understand the complex way in which an individual thinks about a particular phenomenon. Concept maps are diagrams constructed by individuals to express various words and ideas associated with a central concept (Wheeldon, 2011). Because the ideas included in a concept map are generated freely by the individual, the use of concept mapping as a research method can reduce the potential for biased responses influenced by traditional interview or survey protocols (Bitoni, 1993). Considering the fit of concept mapping with other research methods, it can be used in qualitative or mixed methods research, or as a pilot test in quantitative research (Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2002). Thus, concept mapping can be of value to a range of researchers, regardless of methodological, epistemological, or ontological orientation.

Concept mapping can range from relatively unstructured in which individuals are encouraged to generate maps based on their own thoughts, to a structured procedure in which specific concepts are provided for individuals to construct maps from (John, Loken, Kim, & Monga, 2006). Concept maps may be utilized to understand individual perspectives, but can also be aggregated to construct a consensus map. Individuals can also be instructed to convey the strength of related (i.e., linked) concepts with lines—single, double, or triple—with a greater number of lines signifying a stronger relationship (John et al., 2006).

To date, the sport management literature does not include any empirical work using concept mapping as a research method. However, the use of concept mapping can be found in the consumer behavior literature. For example, Joiner (1998) and John et al. (2006) used concept mapping as a method to understand consumers’ brand associations. In both instances, the researchers illustrated the value of concept mapping in capturing the often complex structuring of individuals’ knowledge of and thoughts about brands, and the ability of concept maps to capture the relationship between and strength of particular brand associations. As such, sport management
researchers might benefit from using concept mapping as a method to better understand individuals’ thoughts about a sport entity.

**Using Concept Mapping to Elicit Sport Brand Associations**

As mentioned, researchers may use methods such as thought listing and concept mapping in qualitative or quantitative research. In the research I conducted, I used concept mapping to guide phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) with sport consumers to obtain an understanding of how individuals construct the meaning of “team” and the sense of self they derive from the entity. A National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Men’s Basketball team was used as a case study in the research. Adults who identified themselves as fans or spectators of the basketball team participated in the research; informants ranged in age from 19 to 70 years old, and each was interviewed for at least one hour.

After answering questions about their background and identification with the team, informants were asked to construct a map regarding their thoughts about the team; they were told to write the team name in the center of a piece of paper, and draw lines to any thoughts that came to mind (if necessary, an example map of an unrelated concept was provided). Subsequently, rather than relying on an interview protocol, I used informants’ concept maps to guide conversation to understand the extent to which particular associations may be essential to individuals’ conceptualization of the team. Thus, the use of concept mapping in this scenario allowed me to obtain a deep understanding of the complex relationship between various entities and experiences thought to comprise the team; the use of lines in the concept mapping activity illustrated how individuals seam together various objects, symbols, and experiences to construct the team they are psychologically connected to.

Upon conclusion of the interviews, I followed a part-to-whole analytical process (Thompson et al, 1989, p. 141), examining concept maps at the idiographic level as well as universally (see, e.g., Fournier, 1998; Joy & Sherry, 2003; Thompson & Arsal, 2004). Specifically, I analyzed each informant’s concept map individually to understand his/her unique construction of the basketball team (supplemented by field notes and audio recordings from the interview). Analyzing each concept map on a case-by-case basis allowed me to understand and account for each individual’s thoughts and lived experiences and the potential influence of such on his/her construction of the team. I then analyzed informants’ concept maps across all cases, using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to allow for the discovery of themes emerging through the research; this allowed me to discover commonalities in individuals’ construction of the basketball team in regard to their connection to the entity.

**Conclusion**

Because individuals’ thoughts about a particular entity often drive subsequent behavior, sport management researchers are continually interested in understanding how individuals think about sport entities; concept mapping might be an additional means to this end. My use of concept mapping to capture the complex structuring of consumers’ brand associations with an intercollegiate basketball team is one example of how this method can be employed in sport management research; in this presentation, I will provide an in-depth discussion of the ideas generated by consumers in this activity. As well, I will discuss the potential usefulness of concept mapping in other areas of sport management research (e.g., sponsorship effectiveness, employee identification) for theory development and practical application.