Exploring the Move Away from Cable TV: Are Sport Fans a Threat to Cut the Cord?

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For the better part of the last five decades, cable television has proven to be the optimal platform for the consumption of sport content (Hochberg, 2011). However, in recent years, a growing number of individuals have begun cancelling their cable and satellite subscriptions in favor of a bevy of cheaper digital options (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, etc.) that allow them to consume much of their desired content for a fraction of the price (Travis, 2015). It has been suggested that many of these cancelled subscribers (or “cord-cutters” as they have come to be known) are likely non-sport fans who feel they can access their favorite television programs on demand through alternative sources (Travis, 2015). It is widely believed that live sport content could be the one programming category that would at least keep sport enthusiasts from cutting the cord (Ourand, 2010; Brown, 2014); however, in a recent study conducted by technology company Clearleap, 67% of respondents indicated sports were not their reason for keeping their service (Clancy, 2015). Moreover, nearly half (49%) of respondents who watch at least one sport reported a willingness to pay to stream their favorite sport without a cable subscription. This may be particularly pronounced for younger generations, leading commentators to suggest that “while televised sport has thrived in the post-DVR era as a last bastion for live unscripted drama, the threat of cord-cutters and cord-nevers is real” (Cobb, 2015, para 4). While it may not be as easy for sport enthusiasts to replace sport content with cheaper alternatives as it is for those watching traditional television programs, a growing number of alternatives exist (Kovach, 2013; Snider, 2015). As such, this has become a serious concern in the sport industry (Cobb, 2015). Despite the escalating prominence of this issue, very little is known about the cord-cutting sport enthusiast segment, their motivation for cord-cutting, the extent to which their sport fandom needs are being met with alternative options, and how it compares with their sport consumption under a traditional cable or satellite platform. Furthermore, the implications of cord-cutting amongst sport enthusiasts are unclear. Accordingly, we aim to answer these questions in a qualitative study featuring semi-structured interviews with avid sport fans who have recently cancelled their cable or satellite television subscriptions.

Theoretical Framework

According to Wood and Benigni (2006), fans’ enjoyment of sport on cable television has traditionally been understood from a uses and gratifications perspective. However, we argue that understanding the move from sport via cable television to alternative options requires a theory focused more on motivation and needs. To that end, cognitive evaluation theory (CET) is a theoretical framework for understanding types of motivation we feel are relevant in this cord-cutting context. Within CET, motivation can be considered either internal (autonomy-oriented) or external (control-oriented) (Decharms, 1972; Deci, 1975; Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012). Autonomy-oriented motivation is exemplified by engagement in activities for the sheer enjoyment produced by the activity itself (Funk et al., 2012). Control-oriented motivation, on the other hand, “treats engagement in an activity as a vehicle to obtain an instrumental outcome which is separable from the activity itself” (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Funk et al., 2012, p. 359).

With respect to cord-cutting, we posit that sport consumers who perceive cable to be a means to an end (control-orientation)—that is they have cable strictly so they can watch their favorite teams’ games and be abreast of their progress—will be more apt to cut the cord because they can find other means to that end (e.g., Kovach, 2013; Snider, 2015). On the other hand, Wood and Benigni (2006) explained sport cable television programmers go to great lengths to provide supplementary coverage, information, and analysis of teams, players, and coaches, which serves to cultivate fans’ sentiments with regard to these sport entities. This in turn drives the demand for cable televised sport. To that end, we posit that those consumers who perceive sport cable consumption to be an end in itself (autonomy-orientation)—that is they derive considerable pleasure from the experience and the value added from watching the supplementary programming provided by sport programmers—will be less apt to cut the cord because they would be sacrificing an experience they so value. Accordingly, we suggest that cable cord-cutters likely perceive cable to represent a means to an end—a tool that has traditionally allowed them to keep abreast of their
favorite teams—but with the emergence of a growing number of options that provide an alternative means to that end at a cheaper cost, a cable subscription may no longer be justifiable. These fans, for example, might choose to purchase a digital high-definition tuner, which is essentially a modern-day set of rabbit ears, enabling sport fans to consume content on networks such as ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX in high-definition (Kovach, 2013). The upfront investment would allow fans access to all NFL games except Monday Night Football, as well as a host of MLB, NHL, and NBA games each week. In addition, league-wide on demand network services offer subscriptions granting access to an entire league or team’s games at a fraction of the cost of a monthly cable subscription (Snider, 2015). In sum, it has become clear that sport fans’ consumption options beyond cable are more substantial and diverse than at any other point in history, leading a growing number of sport consumers to leverage these alternative options as an alternative means to meeting their sport consumption needs.

Proposed Method and Implications

To explore these research aims, we are currently conducting semi-structured interviews with cable cord-cutters using a snowball sampling approach. Questions are guided by the theoretical framework explained previously (e.g., Decharms, 1972; Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Funk et al., 2012) as well as literature on sport cable consumption in both academic (e.g., Wood & Benigni, 2006) and trade (e.g., Cobb, 2015; Ourand, 2010) publications. Interviews will proceed until saturation is reached. The research is intended to make a number of contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically speaking, the current research is intended to extend the growing body of literature exploring substitution in sport consumption contexts (e.g., Larkin, 2015; Larkin, Fink, & Trail, 2015; Pritchard & Funk, 2006). While past literature has examined substitution from the standpoint of fans watching at home in lieu of attending, the current work explores substitution of alternative sport media consumption options for traditional sport consumption via cable. With respect to practice, we attempt to provide insight into the needs and motivations of sport cable cord-cutters. This should help sport cable networks better tailor their offerings (both traditional and via the internet) to sport fans moving forward.