Mapping the Sport Consumer: Concept Mapping in Qualitative Research

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As the sport management discipline continues to grow, so too do the methods used by scholars to understand various sport phenomena. Recently, concept mapping has been used as a way to quantitatively assess individuals’ associations (and connectedness of such) with brands, including sport entities. However, scholars have not used concept mapping as a method in qualitative research. In the current study, we used concept mapping in focus groups with soccer fans to understand their socialization into fandom. Subsequently, we qualitatively analyzed participants’ concept maps individually and collectively, allowing us to illuminate advantages and disadvantages of concept mapping as a qualitative method. In doing so, we aim to provide direction to those interested in using concept mapping as a technique in qualitative research.

Concept maps are diagrams constructed by individuals to express various concepts (i.e., words or ideas) associated with a core concept (Novak & Cañas, 2011; Wheeldon, 2011). Oftentimes, the concept maps of multiple individuals are aggregated to form a consensus map. Although scholars in a range of disciplines have used concept mapping in their research, the method is rooted in education (Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2002; Novak & Cañas, 2011). As Novak and Cañas (2011) noted, the use of concept mapping allowed education scholars to move beyond the use of behavioral psychology theories to understand student learning, instead using cognitive psychology (more specifically, conceptual schemes) to understand learning.

Consumer behavior scholars have used concept mapping to study brand associations (John, Loken, Kim, & Monga, 2006; Joiner, 1998). While the use of concept mapping as a research method among sport management scholars is scant, scholars have recently used the method to elicit sport brand associations (Bouzdine-Chameeva, Ferrand, Valette-Florence, & Chanavat, 2015). However, in both consumer behavior and sport management, concept mapping has been used as a quantitative method, relying on software to prepare a consensus map based on the maps of many individuals; scholars have not used concept mapping in qualitative research. Concept maps may be utilized in qualitative research to understand individual perspectives and unique experiences, however much like other quantitative methods, these individual perspectives are lost when aggregated. As such, our purpose in this study was to illustrate the value of concept mapping as a qualitative method.

To understand the value of concept mapping as a qualitative method, we conducted four focus groups with 19 soccer fans, with a goal of capturing how individuals were socialized into and have maintained their fandom. It is important to note our focus in this study was not necessarily the theoretical or practical implications of the information we gathered from participants, but how concept mapping allowed us to obtain it. Participants were undergraduate and graduate students in a business school at a large university in the United States. The students were a mix of male (n=14) and female (n=5) and ranged in age from 20 to 32.

Each focus group lasted one hour. At the beginning, participants were asked to construct a concept map about being a soccer fan; they wrote “soccer” in the center of a piece of paper and drew lines to any thoughts that came to mind. Subsequently, the maps served as the discussion guide for the remainder of the focus group to understand individuals’ experiences as soccer fans. Thus, because we had no dedicated set of questions for respondents, instead relying on the content of individuals’ maps to guide conversation, our use of concept mapping falls under an unstructured approach to interviewing; much like ordinary unstructured interviews, our focus groups were informal in nature (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Following the focus groups, we analyzed participants’ concept maps in two phases. First, we analyzed each participant’s concept map individually (supplemented with digital audio recordings of the focus groups); this allowed us to understand and account for each individual’s thoughts and lived experiences that have contributed to his/her soccer fandom. Second, we analyzed concept maps collectively, using the constant comparison method (Strauss &
Corbin, 1990) to discover themes across all maps; this allowed us to understand commonalities among all participants in regard to key aspects of socialization into soccer fandom.

Separate from our two-phase qualitative analysis of the maps, we analyzed the concept maps to emphasize the distinctiveness of our qualitative approach to concept mapping versus those who have used it as a quantitative method (e.g., Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015; John et al., 2006). We used the NetDraw (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) network visualization tool to build and analyze a network aggregate concept map. Network maps reveal the relationships between concepts for all of the 19 participants, visually displaying the central concepts and the spatial relationships between specific concepts included across the individual concept maps. NetDraw also allows us to adjust the size and shapes of nodes in the network maps to visually demonstrate how often a specific concept was mentioned and how often two concepts were linked together.

In analyzing the concept maps at the individual level, we found that individuals’ thoughts about their socialization into soccer fandom were particular to their own experiences over time. As such, no participants’ concept maps were the same, as they have each experienced the sport of soccer in unique ways. Nonetheless, upon analyzing the maps collectively, we found the following were mentioned most: soccer leagues (specifically the Premier League); star soccer players; soccer teams; passionate soccer fans; and the World Cup. Participants’ thoughts about their soccer fandom were often linked; as one explained, “The first thing I thought of was the New England Revolution because I am from there so we went to the games when I was little and then I thought of the World Cup from watching the Revs to players like Clint Dempsey who moved on to the World Cup.” In the presentation, we will provide additional verbatim responses to illustrate the uniqueness and structure of individuals’ thoughts shared via their concept maps.

Because the purpose of this study was to understand the usefulness of concept mapping as a qualitative method, at the conclusion of each focus group, we asked participants their thoughts on the concept mapping exercise. Generally, participants indicated they enjoyed the activity, as it allowed them to recall their road to soccer fandom prior to engaging in conversation with the group. As one participant explained her experience concept mapping, “I think it helps because you think of one thing and then another thing, it keeps bringing back different memories.” Another commented on the uniqueness of participants’ thoughts, “It was interesting everyone had different opinions and experiences.” These comments illustrate the ability of concept mapping (as a tool) to access the memories of consumers and to visually illustrate how individuals think about concepts particular to their own experiences.

Conclusion

Within sport management, scholars traditionally rely on interview or focus group alone to conduct qualitative research. In this study, we illustrated how researchers can use concept mapping—most often used as a quantitative research method—as a qualitative technique to understand sport consumers. Specifically, our use of concept mapping in this study allowed us to obtain a deep understanding of how a variety of unique experiences intertwine and influence participants’ socialization into soccer fandom. In the presentation, we will provide additional insight into using concept mapping as a qualitative method in sport research.