Organized Fan Groups and Their Effect on Sport Spectator Enjoyment

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In the summer of 2015, a large portion of the sporting world was engaged by a prominent sporting event: The FIFA Women’s World Cup. The American Outlaws, a fan group who supports the U.S. men’s and women’s national soccer teams by showing up to all home games, were most famously known for an organized chant entitled “I Believe That We Will Win” (Bonesteel, 2014). The effect on other spectators was evident in the enjoyment shown on their faces. This research applies complexity theory to conceptualize the dynamics of these types of groups – named Organized Fan Groups (OFG) – and investigate the effect of these groups’ production upon the surrounding environment, specifically looking at other spectators’ enjoyment at collegiate sporting events. Organized groups are “complex, adaptive, dynamic, coordinated, and bounded” (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000). The OFG’s studied here are identified by required components: size and collective location, and at least one of the following components: collective apparel; songs; chants. What follows is a conceptualized definitional understanding and categorizations of OFG’s based on Complexity Theory. Further this study offers testable hypotheses on the effects of OFGs on the states of emotions of spectators for the future empirical purposes.

Complexity theory, as understood in this study, is defined as “the study of the phenomena which emerge from a collection of interacting objects” (Johnson, 2007, p. 3). Further narrowing that definition, we adopt the idea of ‘aggregate complexity’ which states that complex systems are “defined more by relationships than by its constituent parts” (Manson, 2001, p. 409). There are three main components of complex systems/groups that apply specifically to this research: 1) the complex group is a collection of many individual objects whose collective action is greater than the sum of its parts (Smith, 2004; Johnson, 2007); 2) the group can adapt based on internal or external feedback (Butz, 1997; Mihata, 1997; Arrow et al, 2000; Smith, 2004; Johnson, 2007); and 3) the group is an open system (Arrow et al, 2000; Johnson, 2007). The first component describes the interaction between the individual members of the Organized Fan Group. This interaction creates the effect upon the surrounding environment that elicits emotions, such as enjoyment. The second component, adaptability, allows individual parts of the group to adjust to feedback, either internally or externally, in an effort to improve performance (Johnson, 2007). This feedback can be the result of the other spectators or the game itself, and helps the OFG enhance or scale back the level of chanting/singing. The third component, small groups as open systems, describes the nature in which the OFG, its members, and the environment are involved in multiple two-way exchanges that both enhance and direct group decisions and its task orientation (Arrow et al, 2000). As an extension of the feedback component, the open system allows the group to engage in bi-directional communication with the surrounding environment which helps direct the type of chants/songs produced. Time of game, intensity of rivalry, and intensity of crowd interaction may all be factors influencing this dynamic.

Embracing these three elements, the authors conceptualize the origination of OFG’s further in three separate categories according to the nature of emergence: Self-Organizing Fan Groups (SOFG), Initiated Organized Fan Groups (IOFG), and Controlled Organized Fan Groups (COFG). The SOFG group is differentiated from the others by its origination, an emergent property that is not controlled by the sport organization overseeing the atmosphere in which the group exists. As the theory of emergence suggests, these emergent groups or structures do not follow a rigidly organized formation, and often produce results that are surprising or novel (Bechtel and Richardson, 1992; Mihata, 1997; Johnson, 2007). The second type of OFG, IOFG, has a loose connection to the sport organization, and may even be initiated by the organization, but the dynamics involved in the creation of what the group produces (i.e. songs, chants, apparel), not at all, or minimally, controlled by the sport organization. The last type, COFG, is occasionally referred to as an ‘official supporters’ club and is manifested entirely by the sport organization, who retains control over many of the groups characteristics (i.e. clothing coordination, chants, songs, membership requirements, ticket packages, etc.).
Further, each type of group will be delineated by their overall level of organization with at least three of the five components mentioned previously (i.e., size and collective location, and at least one of the following components: collective apparel; songs; chants) assigned a rating of high or low. The following ratings have been developed for the hypotheses to be tested. Group size rating: high = 10 or more recognizable members in attendance; collective location rating: high = all members of group in attendance are in the same section of sporting arena with little to no noticeable gaps or non-OFG spectators between them; collective apparel rating: high = all members wearing the same shirt/hat/scarf/other apparel designating them as separate from the non-OFG spectators; songs rating: high = singing initiated by the OFG and lyrics can be understood by non-OFG spectators; chant rating: high = chants initiated by the OFG and lyrics can be understood by non-OFG spectators. Low ratings are to be given when the qualifications listed above are not met. These characteristics have been designated as the authors believe a group of more than ten (10) persons whom sit together can and will have an impact upon the emotions of the non-OFG spectators surrounding them. The collective apparel, songs, and chants component designations all rely upon the ability of non-OFG spectators to distinguish the group as “different”, which the authors feel these ratings characterize.

It is believed that the more highly-organized OFG’s will produce a greater emotional effect upon the surrounding spectators and subsequently, lower levels of organization a smaller effect. To be specific, highly-organized SOFG’s will produce a greater enjoyment upon the surrounding spectators than loosely-organized SOFG’s (hypothesis 1); highly-organized IOFG’s will produce a greater enjoyment upon the surrounding spectators (hypothesis 2); highly-organized COFG’s will produce a greater enjoyment upon the surrounding spectators (hypothesis 3); and when comparing all three types of OFG’s, the COFG will show the greatest impact on the enjoyment of spectators with SOFG’s second and IOFG’s third (hypothesis 4).

The results of the main study will help academics and practitioners better understand the effect of the collective actions/appearances of the OFG’s upon spectators at collegiate sporting events. In addition to adding to the literature on spectator enjoyment at sporting events, the authors expect this study to guide future studies on how sport managers can enhance game-day experiences for their customers. The presence of SOFG’s and IOFG’s may offer great opportunities for sport organizations in terms of efficient, game-day marketing. Discovering the marketing power of fan-led groups could lead to an increase in consumption behaviors, including increased likelihood of future attendance.

References


