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Validating an old Classic: Deconstructing the Sporting Pyramid using Holt's Typology of Consumption

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Abstract

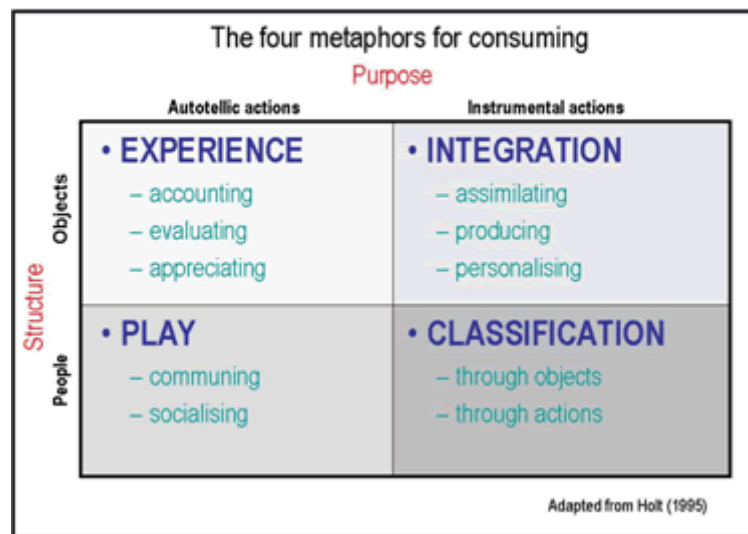
The purpose of this study is to revisit Holt's (1995) seminal treatise – How consumers consume: A typology of consumption practices. Whilst Holt implies that this theory applies to all consumption activities his data was exclusively the consumption of national baseball in the United States of America. The limited nature of Holt's research: one location, one country, one sport, and one level of sport suggests further investigation of this theory in different settings may be insightful. In this study we look at different sports, at different levels, and in an Australian context. Overall, our findings confirm the usefulness and applicability of Holt's typology in an Australian sporting context, however, our study identified that there are factors that must be considered at different levels of participation, particularly relating to the consumer's relationship with the participants.

Introduction

Sport is an important part of Australian society; 43% of adults attend one or more sporting events per year, 63% of children participate in regular sporting activities, and expenditure on sport averages \$18.94/week/family (ABS, 2011). Some say that sport is Australia's other religion (Mackay, 2010) however this sport as a religion is not new or unique to Australia (Brody, 1979). With this in mind consumption of sport, whether it is the marketing of sport, or marketing through sport is arguably a topic of importance to Australian marketers. One seminal and related treatise that combines both sport and consumer behaviour is Holt's (1995), "How consumers consume: A typology of consumption practices," and with this in mind the question the authors explore is to what degree does Holt's model relate to the unique layers of the Australian sport 'participation pyramid' (Eady, 1993; Shilbury & Deane, 2001; Shilbury, Deane, & Kellett, 2006; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick (2008); Kellett & Russell, 2009).

Holt's (1995) typology of consumption, builds on the work of a number of academics (Holbrook 1994; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Rook's 1985; Belk's 1988; McCracken's 1986; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Levy 1959; Sahlin's 1976; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Sherry 1990, and Arnould and Price 1993). Holt (1995) proposes that consumption has both purpose and structure. The purpose is either: an end in itself (an *autotellic action*) or, a means to an end (an *instrumental action*) and the structure is performed through consumption *objects* or interactions with *people*. Simply, people either consume sport for the love of the sport or because sport is a vehicle to meet other needs. This forms a 2 X 2 matrix; the resulting four cells represent distinct yet interrelated consumption activities. Each of the four cells is identified by a metaphor: "consuming as experience", "consuming as integration", "consuming as classification" and "consuming as play". To explore the consumption of sport more fully Holt (1995) provides each metaphor with sub-classifications; the metaphors and the sub-classifications will be discussed below (see Fig.1).

Figure 1.



Consuming as experience

This metaphor is both a process and a reaction. There are three sub-classifications of how spectators consume as experience: firstly through *accounting*, interpreting or making sense of actions using a shared framework of meanings; then through *evaluating*, using conventions and history to make judgments; and finally through *appreciating*, feelings toward actions, objects or situations.

Consuming as integration

This metaphor is about acquiring, using and manipulating consumption objects to express self, to enable self-identity and to engineer a richer experience. Consumers use integrating practices to decrease the metaphorical distance between the consumer and the object through: *assimilating*, developing skills and knowledge to help interaction via thinking, feeling, acting, and looking like a consumer of a sport; *producing*; attempting to exert control over the game and increase interaction; and *personalizing*; asserting one's individuality through objects.

Consuming as play

This metaphor is when sport is employed to interact with people simply for the pleasure of social interaction. Play is evident through the synergistic concept of *communing*; sharing mutually felt experiences, cheering a goal or booing the opposition and; *socializing*, the performative entertainment of others, humorous comments and actions, reciprocating and competing, attempts to outdo others in knowledge, responses to humorous comments by rivals.

Consuming as classification

This metaphor is when people use the consumption experience as a means to classify themselves and affiliate with others. Spectators use *objects*, symbolically transferring meaning from objects as a means of classifying self and increasing creditability, membership of club, special collections and souvenirs; and *actions*, storytelling involving association with celebrities, meeting with a famous player or personalities as classifying practices.

Holt's (1995) work has been referred to as seminal (Derbaix, Decrop and Cabossart 2002) and as an exemplar of a multidimensional model of sport consumption (Stewart, Smith and Nicholson, 2003). When applied it assists marketers to identify motivational factors,

differentiate their offering, identify segments, and develop appropriate marketing strategies. Holt's study investigated consumption at the national (professional) level and applied the findings to the consumption of sport in general. It does not take into account the possibility that spectator consumption could vary depending on the level of sport that is being consumed. Stewart, Smith & Nicholson (2003) argued that in general this area is underdeveloped and that further exploration of Holt's work may be beneficial.

The sports participation pyramid has received much attention in sport marketing literature. It suggests that there is greater participation at the base of the pyramid ("grassroots" - regional associations and clubs) and less at the apex ("elite and excellence" – corporate, national and international). Most scholars note a symbiotic relationship between the various layers and some note a trickle-up and trickle-down characteristic, however, some question whether the attention given to elite sports is really trickling down (Hogan & Norton, 2000, Sotiriadou et al, 2008). This is a well covered area and a full exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

Involvement has different meanings in different disciplines. Involvement from a marketing perspective has a different meanings from sport involvement to sport participation. Marketers view involvement as the psychological linkage between an object, issue, activity, and/or a person. Generally, it is thought in terms of a low to high continuum. Rothschild (1979: 1984), and Bloch and Richins (1983) have identified three involvement types – *situational involvement, response involvement and enduring involvement*, and note that involvement is personal, and may vary with time and circumstance.

Involvement has received some attention regarding sport. Shank and Beasley (1998) developed a sport involvement scale with 8 elements; there were two groupings, affect and cognition. Under the affect grouping the scale explores the degree of boring – exciting, uninteresting – interesting, unappealing – appealing, under the cognition grouping the scale explores the degree of useless – useful, not needed – needed, irrelevant – relevant, unimportant – important, worthless – valuable. Shank and Beasley (ibid) propose that each element on their scale is independent to the others whilst combining to form a cumulative involvement measure. Therefore, a sport event may be evaluated as boring yet important and valuable. Additionally, Won & Kitamura (2006) provide a list of 10 motivational factors - interest in players, community pride, entertainment, drama, escape, physical skill, social interaction, family, vicarious achievement, team identification. The study will employ the 8 elements of the sport involvement scale and the 10 sport consumption motivational factors in concert within the data analysis process of this study.

Methodology

192 undergraduate and postgraduate Sports Science and Sport Management students participated in this study over a period of two years. The gender split was 32% female and 68% male. Students were required to study Holt's consumption model and to apply it to a sporting event of their choice. The selected sports covered all levels of the participation pyramid and included *baseball, basketball, beach volleyball, billiards, cricket, dance, equestrian, football [AFL], football [Gaelic], football [soccer], golf, gymnastics, hockey, judo, kayaking, lacrosse, motocross, motor sports, mountain bike racing, marathons & triathlons, netball, rodeo, rowing, rugby, skiing [snow], skiing [water], softball, squash, surfing swimming, taekwondo, tennis, volleyball and wrestling*. Some sports [e.g., football

(AFL), football (soccer), motorsports, netball, rugby, and surfing were explored at multiple levels of the participation pyramid.

The students were required to study Holt's work and then to emulate Holt's ethnographic style and immerse themselves as active participant observers in the sport consumption experience. Observations were made in relation to Holt's four metaphors for consuming: experience, integration, classification and play. In addition to field notes and to improve the quality of the reflective process, students were asked to take photographs. Self-reflection was an important element of the design to ensure an 'experiential view' of the phenomenon was captured. It also allowed the feelings and emotions of the consumption experiences to be explored and discussed with others (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993).

Students, as part of an assessment, were required to submit an essay detailing their research activity. To ensure the qualitative data could be managed an essay template was provided. This enabled data in the form of photographs and text to be grouped according to metaphors. The text data was then merged into a 7 column X 3650 row Excel spreadsheet for metaphor analysis and the photographs were inserted into a 192 page PowerPoint slideshow for easy viewing and analysis. Hyperlinks in the spreadsheet linked text data to photographs. The data was analysed with Holt's (1995) typology, Shank & Beasley's (1998) sport involvement elements, and Won & Kitamura's (2006) motivational factors in mind.

Discussion

In a holistic sense the study concluded that Holt's typology is a worthwhile tool for sport marketers, sport science and sport management students. More specifically the metaphor of experience was the most consistent at all levels of the sports participation pyramid; where spectators would show their support for the player's achievements by acknowledging acts of skill by entering into conversations where performance evaluations took place. Although a useful tool, Holt's typology is not equally applicable across all sports [e.g., billiards]; it is more applicable to team sports that have a high media exposure and less applicable to extreme sports [e.g., surfing, kayaking].

There are a number of areas of interest for marketers from this study that require further research and a few examples are now provided. When the three methods of analysing are combined it reveals an inverse pyramid where community interest is narrowest at the lowest level [family and extended family as sport consumers] and broadens as extends through local, regional, state, and national levels. Age is also determinant factor as to who will attend a sporting event at lower levels.

At the lower levels of the participation pyramid those attending did so as a means to an end as Holt predicted, however their primary motivation was not the sport but their interest in the player and family obligations [e.g., daughter/son/niece/nephew/granddaughter/grandson]. In some cases it could be classified as perhaps boring yet important. For example, one photograph revealed two grandmothers knitting and chatting with little or no interest in the sport. Unlike national sport, the cost at the grass roots level is not money, but time and effort. It could be concluded that the grandmothers had high situational involvement, however unless the grandson excels at sport there will be little enduring involvement with the team and the sport. Extreme situational involvement, drama, and vicarious achievement were also observed, revealed through the 'ugly parent' syndrome, [e.g., clashes with umpires and other

parents]. These were limiting exceptions however as lower level sport tended to be family affairs, often including family friends and sometimes even the family dog [particularly netball]. In some country sporting events the family car was driven up to the edge of the sporting oval and used as spectator seating throughout the game. The family car also features through the use of personalised number plates, which although has a measure of enduring involvement is a less enduring method of showing team loyalty than a team tattoo which also featured in the photographs.

As with higher levels of sport, grass root sport consumers displayed their loyalty particularly during key matches [e.g., finals and with teams that were traditional rivals], however, banners tended to be homemade with siblings often using what could be found around the home [e.g., cardboard]. Clothing and scarves tended to be part of an existing wardrobe and as colour compatible with team livery as possible. In contrast, at higher levels it is mass produced and purchased, more so used to show identity. At the lower grass roots level involvement with the sport tends to be situational and emphasized through the actions and proximity of the person rather than through objects (team merchandise).

The data also revealed that age is a factor in the participation pyramid with the role of family and support diminishing over time. This was particularly apparent with sporting events where the participants were of driving age. At the local sport club level, spectators' consumption of the sport suggests a relaxed approach where sport consumption reflected an everyday outing rather than an event of significance. At the local club level a common characteristic is the importance of sport as a means to an end, as a vehicle for social interaction, interest in players, escape, entertainment and drama - often particularly with football [AFL] female friends would accompany each other to events to show support for male friends.

At the higher level sport consumption has different characteristics; team merchandise becomes the country colours [e.g., Allblacks] and the country colours become part of the event [e.g., face painting with flag motif and wearing flag as clothing]. In addition, people often go to considerable expense [money, time and effort] to follow their national team. This highlights a high response involvement and a high enduring involvement, however, often situational involvement changes with competition [e.g., Australia V New Zealand in Rugby; Australia V England in cricket]. What is also revealing in the photographs is that not all international sport teams attract the same following [e.g., Australian hockey teams] and female international teams tend to attract lesser support at higher levels.

In summary, it appears Holt's typology is not only applicable to sports other than baseball (the original study) but is also a useful tool in exposing the nuanced etic and emic distinctions of the sporting pyramid. The model appears as relevant to 21st century sports marketing as it was when conceived from the lofty heights of the Wrigley Field 'bleachers' in the early 1990's. The authors also wish to note the abundance of student feedback consistently claiming the model was helpful in the interpretive deconstruction of the phenomenon; and ultimately the understanding of sport from a marketing perspective.

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