

## Sports fans' psychological ownership: the team as a cultural institution

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### Key words

Sports fan, psychological ownership, fan-identity, an anthropological perspective, the meaning transfer model, in-depth interview

### Aim of paper

Drawing from an anthropological perspective, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate fans' psychological ownership of sports team. Fans have been viewed as customers from exchange relationship viewpoints or members of a team from social psychological viewpoints. However, we also propose that fans see their teams as valued possessions as actually they say, "It's my team!" Effectively a sports team becomes culturally shared with fans and fan-identity is shaped within relationships to a team. Thus unlike the extant psychological concepts applied to fandom, psychological ownership enables the shape of fan-identity to be addressed within cultural framework and we introduce an ownership viewpoint. This paper investigates the nexus between spectatorship as a set of cultural practices and the team as an 'owned' cultural institution.

### Theoretical background

Psychological ownership is that state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of it is 'theirs' (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, p. 299). Presumably sports fans hold their possessive feelings to a team and this allows them to establish reciprocal relationships to it. Sports fans seem to experience cultural consumption and then such experience is gradually accumulated as individual memories (Fay, 2006). Through such consumption practices, a sports team becomes a part of fan-selves (Belk, 1988). Thus ownership is a way in which sports fans shape their fan-identity, besides the membership viewpoint.

Facilitators of psychological ownership are cultural meanings relevant to a sports team. McCracken (1986) illuminates that how cultural meanings transfer to material possessions. Adapting the meaning transfer model, meanings relevant to a team transfer through four phases. First, meanings relevant to a sports team exist in a cultural world. Second, meanings are transferred to a sports team in traditional and commercial practices. Third, the transferred meanings are stored in a sports team's elements such as players. Fourth, fans connect such transferred meanings, by undertaking rituals. Spectator sports consumption is a form of cultural practices linking to cultural meanings embedded in a team and that leads to the shape of fan-identity.

Here two specific research questions are raised for the analysis:

- RQ1: How do cultural meanings transfer to a sports team?
- RQ2: How do sports fans interpret the cultural transferred meanings and then connect them?

### Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 Japanese sports fans categorized into two groups, supporters (n=9) and members of organized groups (n=7). Interviewees were purposefully selected based on two criteria. First they were season ticket holders for the 2011 season (one interviewee did not purchase a season ticket but he purchased every game ticket in advance). Second, regarding members of organized groups, interviewees were leaders or vice- of their groups or recommended members by leaders, because we anticipated that such interviewees would clearly answer our research questions as not only individual opinions but also group opinions. The interview protocol was semi-structured, following the two research questions. The team investigated in this study was Sagan-Tosu located on Tosu city and the team is a professional soccer team was in the division 2 (J2) of the Japanese professional soccer league. The data were analysed, referring to Derbaix and Decrop's (2011) study.

### Findings and Conclusion

RQ1: Cultural and individual meanings were transferred to the team brands such as players and colours. Locality and individual memories with their families or friends were particularly prominent meanings transferring to team brands.

RQ2: Spectator sports rituals were undertaken differently in the each category. Almost all interviewees of the supporters category eagerly activated their fan-identity, wearing replicas in the stadium or decorating replicas and towel-scarves in his room, that is, they were willing to connect marketised meanings. In contrast, members of organised groups created their original T-shirts to differentiate them from other ordinary spectators. Because they dedicatedly cheered up aloud in the stadium, they refused to be seen as a part of ordinary supporters. Taking advantage of meanings embedded in the team brands, they manipulated such meanings to express their distinctiveness.

Compared to existing research, emphasis of this study on sports fans' psychological ownership allows us to introduce an anthropological perspective to sport marketing and to gain two practical understandings of fans. First, this study illuminates how meanings relevant to a team are contained in a team's brands and its brands are valued for fans. The second understanding is that fans individually interpret meaningful values of a team's brands and attempt to connect meanings, through the undertaking of diverse rituals.

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