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Sport and Consumption

In the twenty-first century, sport represents a popular and prominent aspect of what is a pervasive consumer culture (Horne, 2006). The concerted commercialization of sport has been a process that can be traced back, at the very least, to the rapidly urbanizing mass culture of the early to mid phases of the industrial revolution. However, it is since the end of the second World War that broader enmeshed economic, social, cultural, and technological transformations have drastically reshaped the sporting landscape according to the dictates of a seemingly unrelenting, corporate-led culture of consumption. Within this moment, the combined processes of corporatization, commodification, spectacularization, and celebrityization have rendered sport a vivid expression of a late capitalist economy, within which cultural products and processes play an evermore pivotal role (Jameson, 1998). From their basic internal logic as competitive athletic practices, the pervasive commodification of sport as a culture industry, has led to its re-engineering as primarily a mode of commercial entertainment. Hence, contemporary sporting events (specifically those high profile, meticulously structured, and heavily financed physically-based contests between teams and/or individuals) are illustrative of an economic formation characterized by an inextricably conjoined *commercialized culture* (the manufacturing of cultural practices and services for profit) and *culturalized economy* (an increased reliance upon the cultural realm as a source of capital accumulation).

Sport is unequivocally a significant sector within late capitalism's flexible regime of accumulation (Andrews, 2006). Nonetheless, it cannot be considered an economic or cultural monolith. Sport's incorporation into the consumerist order defined and dominated by corporate and media interests, has transformed it into a multifaceted and intertextual amalgam that can be experienced, and thereby consumed, in myriad forms. These include event attendance, media viewership, or through the purchasing of the ancillary commodities and services through which sport leagues, teams, and celebrities become materialized and/or embellished in the minds and lives of the consuming populace. Crucial to understanding the consumption of sport, as Crawford (2004) observed, are fans, audiences, and spectators; for it is consumers who contribute to the generation of the atmosphere at venues, create alternative ways to view sport in homes or other establishments, publish fanzines, participate in radio discussions, contribute to internet sites, and generate expressions through social media (Dart, 2012). Sporting content is also communicated through a variety of commercially-oriented delivery platforms (either through the selling of the sporting content to consumers, the auctioning and delivery of sport audiences to corporate advertisers, or oftentimes both), ranging from print and televisual media, to new social media conduits. Furthermore, the intertextual and multiplatform constitution of the sport sphere is complicated and compounded by its mutually constitutive relations with other culture industry domains (each of which incorporates its own intertextual and multiplatform relations). As Crawford (2004) observed, its incorporation into the emergent cultural economy has increased opportunities for people to engage and consume sport, both via the growing market of sport-related consumer goods and services, and expanding mass media technologies. Invoking Debord (1994), it is thus possible to argue that spectacularized sport commodities have colonized all aspects of social life: from team branded baby

apparel worn in an individual's formative years; through the directly experienced and/or mass mediated sporting successes and failures, trials and tribulations, that provide untold emotive value and symbolic meaning to many people's very existences; to even the team logo adorned coffin into which the perpetually loyal deceased is laid to rest.

The changing nature of sport, throughout the mid and late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century has brought about significant changes within the realm of sport involvement and spectatorship. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1978) articulated, the professionalization of sport delivered back to ordinary people, as paying customers/spectators, the commodified iterations of practices that were once sources of their own enjoyment that they directly controlled. Nonetheless, and despite the corporate organization and ownership of major sporting entities, many sport fans express a proprietary relationship with the sports and teams they follow. This is because—and perhaps more so than comparable cultural forms incorporated into the machinations of the late capitalist order (i.e. popular music, literature, and film)—for many people sport retains an aura that allows it to transcend the very real commercial forces and relations with which it is now constitutively framed. Furthermore, despite engaging in very real consumptive practices as part and parcel of their everyday sporting involvements, many supporters demonstrate open hostility towards what is perceived to be the commercial colonization and corruption of *their* game. For instance, some English football fans balk at the very reference to their teams as brands, others eschew the re-fashioned club logos on their replica shirts, and some even show an indifference toward the new wave of moneyed owners (many of whom are American magnates) who have oftentimes rescued their beloved clubs from being economic unsustainable. Much of the disdain exhibited by such fans derives from a sense that the new model of sport ownership, organization, and delivery fails to account for the traditions, values, and ethos of the game. There is a sense of resigned disillusionment that sport under threat from the relentless march of unashamed packaging, promotion, and presentation that positions sport as nothing more than a consumer choice within the expanding commercial leisure economy (Andrews, 2009).

Within this context, the very notion of the sport spectator has become complicated by residual and emergent experiences and expectations. Giulianotti (2002) captured this bifurcation within his taxonomy of professional football spectators, wherein (and amongst other insights) he positioned the traditional football “supporter” in contradistinction to the more contemporaneous football “flâneur”. Whereas the former displayed an engrained personal and emotional investment in the team, its spatial location, and the community of supporters of which they were a part, the latter displays a relatively indifferent, and most likely ephemeral, highly mediated relationship with football; the sport being used as a marker of the flâneurs urbane and cosmopolitan lifestyle, until it loses its cultural cache to be replaced by the next sign of cultural sophistication. Recognizing the competing consumer subjectivities operating within the contemporary sport context, Roger Goodell the National Football League's Commissioner recently characterized the Washington Redskins' audience as “millions of fans and consumers”: the loyal supporters/fans being a constituency that can be almost guaranteed due to their traditional or “hot” relationship with the team and sport, whereas the “cool” flâneurs/consumers required enticing away from competing commercialized leisure options (Giulianotti, 2002).

One aspect of contemporary sport culture that has opened upon new consumption opportunities and experiences over the past decade or so has been that of social media. New social media technologies (such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Vine, Instagram) are now invaluable and unavoidable aspects of the corporate sport landscape. They are vital mechanisms through which marketing and promotional

initiatives reach the consuming public (Dart 2012). Moreover, for consumers, new social media represents a cultural space affording them the potential to influence the creation of meanings associated with sport, and develop new democratized patterns of interaction that can (at times) circumvent established hierarchies of media communication (Dixon 2011). Such “sport chatter” (Whannel 2009) is distinct from statistical information, formal reporting, and material consumption, and provides occasion for fans to exchange analyses of events, tactics, players and performances blended with anecdotes, banter, and reminiscence. Moreover, such engagements can evolve into the creation of new practices and traditions associated with being part of a sporting community (Dixon 2011). Furthermore, fans using social media become *prosumers* (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson 2012), in that they are no longer purely consumers of media content, they actively produce media content that shapes, however minutely, the meanings circulating within the sporting culture industry. The rise of the prosumer—what Ritzer refers to as the ‘coming age of the prosumer’—signals an increased importance (sport) producers place on the end user/prosumer within the realization of commodities and services. More readily and recently associated with advocates of social media than other realms, the sport prosumer represents the largely autonomous, uncontrollable, and unpaid manner through which fans produce and consume user-generated online content powering social media technologies. Beyond passively consuming sport, prosumers myriad contributions to the social media universe accelerate and intensify the feedback loops contributing to the constitution and production of sport media, marketing, and promotional discourse. Consequently, the fan endeavoring to productively exist and operate within the social media universe necessarily participates in the *trending* dimensions of prosumers’ commentaries, which may lead to re-considerations, or even re-workings, of commercial marketing and promotional strategies and practices (Ritzer 2012). This new patterning in the production of sporting consumption effectively ties together more closely the individual elements of the production-text-audience triad of cultural production.

While the commodification of sport and spectator identities as vehicles for the promotion of the cultural industry ushered forward highly mediated productions of sport and the expansion of sport into other forms of consumption, contemporary (sporting) promotional culture cannot completely control the production of meaning and structuring of relationships of, and related to, objects, events, and experiences (Wernick 1991). With the creative utilization of sporting objects, events, and experiences in the, at times, oppositional practices of the everyday (Willis 1990), the positioning of the sport fan or consumer as the irrelevant end-point in the production-text-audience triad of cultural production must be reconsidered (Crawford 2004). For, as new social media technologies attest, the symbolic production of sport’s symbolic economy and experiential spaces are indebted not solely to promotional devices, but also to the various ways in which people productively engage in practices of symbolic manufacture and exchange, such as the nurturing and circulation of expressions of individual and communal identity, and associated feelings of belonging (Dixon 2011). Evidently, analyses of contemporary sport fandom cannot simply reduce the sporting consumer to being a compliant or passive dupe of consumer culture.

SEE ALSO: Commerce, Commodity, Consumption, Leisure and Recreation, Popular Culture, Sport,

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