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Sports Logistics Outsourcing: a Conceptual and Qualitative Study in the Equine Industry

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ABSTRACT

The equine industry, despite its considerable impact on the economy, remains overlooked in contemporary supply chain research. The current paper aims at narrowing the gap along two directions: First, the equine industry supply chain is conceptualized, and its main participants and relationships involved are identified. Second, the complex nature of these relationships is illustrated within the context of a specific strategic decision, outsourcing. For years, outsourcing was considered a formal transaction-cost economics decision with little or no consideration for additional factors. This limiting perspective provides the stimulus for the current study's use of a qualitative approach to get a better understanding of additional factors affecting the decision. A series of in-depth interviews with horse owners and trainers in the equine industry revealed that, in addition to a detailed cognitive assessment of the transporter capabilities, the outsourcing decision involves a considerable emotional component.

INTRODUCTION

The American Horse Council (AHC) defines the economic impact of the equine industry to surpass 102 billion dollars. A report ordered by AHC and conducted by Deloitte Consulting LLP provides more specific numbers to further illustrate the importance of the industry (Table 1).

Table 1
The Equine Industry in Numbers*

• There are 9.2 million horses in the United States.
• 4.6 million Americans are involved in the industry as horse owners, service providers, employees and volunteers. Tens of millions more participate as spectators.
• 2 million people own horses.
• The horse industry has a direct economic effect on the U.S. of $39 billion annually.
• The industry has a $102 billion impact on the U.S. economy when the multiplier effect of spending by industry suppliers and employees is taken into account. Including off-site spending of spectators would result in an even higher figure.
• The industry directly provides 460,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs.
• Spending by suppliers and employees generates additional jobs for a total employment

impact of 1.4 million FTE jobs.
• The horse industry pays $1.9 billion in taxes to all levels of government.
• Approximately 34% of horse owners have a household income of less than $50,000 and 28% have an annual income of over $100,000. 46% of horse owners have an income of between $25,000 to $75,000.
• Over 70% of horse owners live in communities of 50,000 or less.
• There are horses in every state. Forty-five states have at least 20,000 horses each.*

* Source: Deloitte Consulting LLP Report, 2005

Interestingly enough, there are no academic studies examining the relationships among participants in the horse industry and the potential impact of these relations on the industry dynamics. The current manuscript suggests that one of the reasons for the lack of research related to this industry can be attributed to its high level of complexity. In such a context, introducing the idea of an equine supply chain becomes a necessity in order to streamline the investigative process and provide a background for the study. Consequently, the definition of this particular type of supply chain becomes the first research objective.

The natural transition from investigating a particular industry toward a broader conceptualization within the supply chain research domain provides for the development of the second area of interest, namely, identifying the relationships involved among the various participants. More specifically, investigating the factors affecting the transportation outsourcing decision, both cognitive and emotional, will serve as a proxy to an initial assessment of the dynamics involved in managing the equine supply chain. Next, a conceptualization of the outsourcing decision will be offered supported by insights from industry participants in an in-depth interviews context. Finally, some limitations of the research will be acknowledged, followed by a discussion on applicative and academic value of the paper.

THE EQUINE SUPPLY CHAIN OVERVIEW

A supply chain can be defined as "a set of three or more entities (organizations or individuals) directly involved in the upstream and downstream flows of products, services, finances, and/or information from a source to a customer." (Mentzer et al., 2001, p. 4). Furthermore, this definition differentiates among diverse types of supply chains along degree of complexity: "direct, extended, and ultimate supply chains." Following the definition, it's worth mentioning a couple of important points applicable to the current study:

1). Supply chains involve not only organizations but individuals as well. This point is particularly relevant in the equine industry since, naturally, the personal component is much more pronounced when horse-breeding is discussed. Table 2 illustrates how the equine supply chain can be categorized as "ultimate" as well.

2). The "products or services flow" within the supply chain must be adapted to include the specific nature of the horse itself. Horses are surprisingly fragile and susceptible to a variety of serious illnesses. As a result, participants in the equine industry are subject to state and federal regulations regarding the health and safety of horses, including vaccination requirements and provision of evidence that horses participating in competitive sports are not suffering from illness.

Table 2
Major Participants in the Equine Industry*

Equine Supply Chain Categories	Activities and Participants
1. Professionals/para-professionals	Veterinary, dental technicians, research centers, ferries, and saddlers
2. Land-based business	Livery and dealing yards, racecourses, maintenance
3. The Trade	Transportation, horse feed, breeding, riders, retail (clothing, food, etc.)
4. Event organizations	Media, sponsors, public relations (PR), permanent show grounds
5. Financial services	Specialist equine insurance
6. Workforce training and education	On the job training, formal qualification
7. Associations	Breed association, training association, lobbying association, charities
8. Outsourcing	3PLs (Third party logistics service providers)

*Adapted from: *The Equine Industry: The British Study, 2004*

3) The conventional meaning of "customer" in the supply chain must be further explained. Since the sports nature of horse-breeding is outside the scope of the current research in terms of spectators, leisure activists, etc., the general definition of the customer in the equine supply chain must include the horse itself.

The above-mentioned specificities related to the equine industry provide for the following definition: The equine supply chain is a type of "ultimate supply chain that encompasses suppliers, owners/managers, and associated infrastructure and professional service with the ultimate task of ensuring the horses' well-being."

TRANSPORTATION OUTSOURCING IN THE EQUINE INDUSTRY

Since transportation is often considered "the single largest element of logistics costs," (Bowersox et al., 2010), the current research will focus on that aspect of the equine supply chain to better understand the dynamics involved. Many equine businesses are outsourcing transportation and logistics activities to third-party provider(s) in attempts to build both capacity and manage costs (Thompson, 2013). Formal requirements and conditions for the horse and for the equipment of the transporter must be met. For example, horses shipping to Canada are required to carry federal health papers. Any horse crossing state lines must carry health papers issued within the past 30 days by a licensed veterinarian. Additionally, best practices for shipping horses follow well established equine management practices. For example, horses need free choice quality hay and regular stops for water to avoid potentially life-threatening colic episodes. Additionally, horses expend significant energy maintaining their balance while in transport and scheduled rest periods are critical to their well-being. Horses are generally unloaded every 18 hours to allow them to rest in a stall for an extended period. Even shorter trips require the hauler to stop to allow the horses to rest every eight hours.

When using an external transporter, the professionals involved in the equine industry face another challenging task: the design of an optimal contract that includes the well-being of the horse and recognizes the emotional attachment owners and others feel toward the animal. Granted that capacity restrictions of the transporter, equipment shortcomings, lack of experience, and adequate network coverage may affect the choice of a partner company along cognitive evaluation criteria, the experiential component in the decision-making process must be accounted for as well (De Boer et al., 2006).

THE ROLE OF EMOTION

While De Boer et al. (2006) focus on organizational behavior drivers combined with cognitive models, Mello et al. (2008) go a step further by including "… personal factors, such as experience and self-interest, and cultural factors, such as organizational values and norms, as inputs to the process (p.5)." Still, these authors acknowledge that the personal factors depicted in their research have a rational background often linked, although indirectly, with outsourcing related measurable outcomes. The three general categories used to illustrate "personal", i.e., motivation, confidence-building, and disposition toward outsourcing, were linked to firm-related outcomes like "job security…, ease of doing business…, saved a lot of money…, and washed my hands off of an existing problem…," (Mello et el., 2008). What is missing is reaching beyond the rational personal motivation to consider "irrational biases," like emotions, that play an additional role in the decision-making process (Gaudine and Thorne, 2001).

Research over the past two decades suggests that emotions significantly impact decision-making in all interpersonal contexts (e.g., Bagozzi, Dholakia, and Basuroy, 2003; Rajasekhar and Vijayasree, 2012). In the marketing literature, for example, it is widely accepted that emotions play a key role in consumer decisions (Laros and Streenkamp, 2005). Research in business to business (B2B) contexts, however, has generally placed little emphasis on the impact of emotions on buyer-seller relationships (Zehetner, 2012). An exception to this emphasis on rational-utilitarian decision-making is in research examining family businesses. Conceptual and empirical research in family firms has found that emotion plays a key role in family business decision-making (Bee and Neubaum, 2014; Bjornberg and Nicholson, 2012; Morris, Allen, Karatko, and Brannon, 2012). Movement away from strictly rational-utilitarian approaches to the study of B2B decisions is also found in personal selling research, where scholars have found sellers to be impacted by call anxiety (Belschak, Verbeke, and Bagozzi, 2006), shame and embarrassment (Verbeke and Bagozzi, 2002), and mood states (George, 1998). Despite this recognition of emotional factors in buyer-seller relationships, few studies have specifically examined emotions from a buyer-side perspective.

A small number of studies, examining emotions in B2B marketing, have included a buyer-side perspective. Both Hook, Chatham, and Wilding (2002) and Wilding (1999) emphasize that emotions and "soft skills" are significant factors in purchasing decisions. A qualitative study by Zehetner (2012) found that many emotions impact professional buying decisions. This research found a broad range of both positive emotions (e.g., excitement, joy, fun) and negative emotions (e.g., anger, annoyance, tension) impacting various aspects of buyer decision-making. In a study specifically examining outsourcing decisions in the hotel industry, Donada and Nogatchewsky (2009) report that both positive emotions and economic factors (e.g., switching cost) affect outsourcing decisions. These studies, although limited in both number and context, suggest that

including emotional factors can complement existing models of purchasing and outsourcing that generally focus on only rational-utilitarian aspects of decision-making.

The current research acknowledges that including the feelings of practitioners as human beings when operational decisions, including outsourcing, are discussed, can be a challenging task. In fact, traditional models of logistics and supply chain management related decision-making processes try to control for such externalities when optimal solutions are considered (Valentine and Hollingworth, 2012). At the same time, these authors warn that not including personal emotions may result in a loss of formal validity in presenting a final solution to a business problem. Although their findings relate specifically to approaching ethical dilemmas in operations management research, the same reasoning can be applied to supply chain management and logistics studies, including the case of transportation outsourcing. With the notable exception of Gaski and Ray (2004), who consider alienation among participants in the distribution channel, there is no existing research that specifically accounts for human emotions, including personal attachment and love toward the "product," in the supply chain. The current study addresses this gap by introducing such psychological-level factors as important considerations when tactical and strategic operational decisions are discussed. Moreover, it responds to a long-forgotten call for considering social-sciences, including individual psychology-based research, in the quest to more fully understand the dynamics involved in logistics (Stock, 1996).

While the tangible aspects of the outsourcing decision are well-developed, the emotional aspects lack similar attention. For this reason, following an industry with deeper level of personal involvement on both managerial and owner levels is selected as a research background.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology was used to develop an assessment tool or a frame of reference to help evaluate transportation outsourcing decisions in the equine industry. Specific factors involved, including the role of emotions in outsourcing decisions, were detailed. As previously discussed, little written material was identified covering emotions in supply chain management in general and logistics in particular. In this context, the exploratory form of investigation is deemed most appropriate (Yin, 2003).

Personal, semi-structured interviews with owners and trainers involved in the equine industry served as the primary method to gain a better understanding regarding the role of emotions in transportation outsourcing decisions. The use of depth interviews is not new to the field of logistics inquiry and, in fact, has become a normative qualitative research tool in "… clarifying practitioner views on (outsourcing) and its antecedents or drivers" (Golicic and Mentzer, 2005, p. 50). The participants in the research were selected by applying a purposive sampling in selecting cases of interest (Davis and Mentzer, 2006). Due to the specific nature of the equine industry within the broader context of supply chain operations, efforts were made to select participants on at least two levels in each venue: 1) Horse owners with the personal involvement and knowledge of the key role of transportation in their business, and 2) Trainers (managers or operations executives) responsible for day-to-day equine program development and implementation, including horse transportation. After identifying the main criteria for inclusion, a list of potential

candidates was developed. A referral system was applied (see Davis and Mentzer, 2006), where three experts from the equine industry helped to identify venues with extensive horse show, horse breeding, and racing involvement. The sampling process was constrained by limitations regarding geography and time; only venues within a day's driving distance from the researchers' location were included. Such convenience sampling is acceptable with a qualitative case study approach (Pagell, 2004).

Nine horse owners, four of whom were also trainers, were identified as meeting the established criteria. Table 3 provides some characteristics of participants in the research.

Table 3
Characteristics of the Participants/Interviewees

Participant	Participant's Title	Job Characteristics & Years of Experience
Number 1	Owner and Trainer	Horse Shows, 35 years
Number 2	Owner	Horse Shows, 5 years
Number 3	Owner	Horse Shows, 20 years
Number 4	Owner and Trainer	Horse Shows, Breeding, 48 years
Number 5	Owner and Trainer	Horse Shows, 43 years
Number 6	Owner	Horse Shows, Transportation, 20 years
Number 7	Owner	Horse Shows, Racing, Breeding, 21 years
Number 8	Owner and Trainer	Horse Shows, 10 years
Number 9	Owner	Horse Shows, 6 years

The current research combines information gathered from practitioners with existing research in order to fully understand the topics of interest (Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003, p. 9), such dual sourcing allows for a more precise formulation of "… what is known on the topic … (and) to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic." Developing a perceptual instrument, which helps to assess the outsourcing decision, became an iterative process moving back and forth between the two sources of information. The interviews were audiotaped and impressions and notes from the visits were shared with the other researchers. The audiotapes were professionally transcribed and verbatim scripts provided to the research team. Data were qualitatively analyzed by the three individual researchers to ensure increased trustworthiness of findings.

The qualitative investigative technique was chosen to explore the motives and behaviors of the participants in the research and to extend understanding regarding the relationship between

personal feelings and emotions and the transportation outsourcing program development and implementation.

FINDINGS

Findings from interviews of participants in the equine industry revealed three themes related to transportation outsourcing decisions. First, rational-utilitarian motives play a role in the decision-making process. Horse owners and trainers recognize that cost, convenience, and the functional capabilities of transporters are critical factors in determining the best approach to moving horses. According to Interviewee No. 1:

> […] transporters are expensive, and they're not always consistent in their care. And they're not always consistent in their routes. So to get somebody to come transport on a specific date costs four to five times what it costs me to do it myself.

Why do many owners and trainers outsource horse transportation? For Interviewee No. 8, the answer is simple: "It actually ends up being cheaper." Another Interviewee (No. 6) indicated that "cost and convenience" are key factors to be considered when making transportation outsourcing decisions. Interviewee No. 4 also identified cost as a key factor, but added that functional capabilities of transporters are also important. "There are too many … haulers that don't know a lot about horses," the interviewee stated. Interviewee No. 7 summed up the views of all nine interviewees in explaining that relationships with transporters and "love of horses" are important considerations, but "we are not millionaires."

A second theme emerging from interview responses concerned the trustworthiness of those charged with horse transportation and the need for relationships with those transporters. Both Interviewee No. 6 and Interviewee No. 9 emphasized the need to establish a "relationship" with a transporter prior to outsourcing horses for transport. Similarly, Interviewee No. 5 indicated that horses must be transported by a "very trustworthy person." This interviewee added that transportation outsourcing only happens when the transporter is "a friend." Interviewee No. 4 indicated that length of the relationship with a transporter is important and "there are only two haulers that I would recommend that I trust that we've had throughout the years." Continuing this theme of trustworthiness and relationship, Interviewee No. 7 declared that "there are people that I would not put a horse on a truck with." While these factors may be considered emotional aspects of decision making, the emotional aspects here seem to be focused on the people involved in the transportation function (and potential outsourcing of that function). With the third identified theme, discussed below, the emotional focus is on the horses being transported.

A third theme emerging from the interviews suggests that horse owners and trainers often have a strong emotional attachment to their horses and that emotions play a significant role in transportation outsourcing decisions. Eight of the nine interviewees indicated that transportation decisions involve emotional aspects. In two interviews (Interviewee No. 6 and Interviewee No. 9), horses were referred to as "my babies." Similarly, Interviewee No. 5 described the following relationship with horses:

> My horses are my kids. All my kids have four legs. They are my horses. I have a very big emotional attachment with my horses. They are family to me.

The interviewee added that in any transportation outsourcing decision, "The wellbeing of the animal is the primary concern and money is secondary." Interviewee No. 7, criticizing the lack of emotional involvement with some people involved in horse transport, declared that "people can be money minded." Interviewee No. 2 stated that "we have a very emotional tie" with our horses and "[horse] safety is always top of the list" among factors to consider when making transportation decisions. Echoing the emotional concerns of many interviewees, Interviewee No. 3 said, "We are very attached to our horses and we like to know exactly what's happening."

As indicated by these interviews, transportation outsourcing decisions in the equine industry are affected by economic, relational, and emotional factors. As one would expect from any business operation, rational-utilitarian economic factors (particularly costs) and relationships among supply chain participants are important. For this industry, however, emotions focused on the special or unique value of horses also appear to play a key role in outsourcing decisions. Given that all the interviewees indicated that love of horses and a passion for involvement with horses were the primary reasons for their involvement in the industry, this finding is certainly not unexpected.

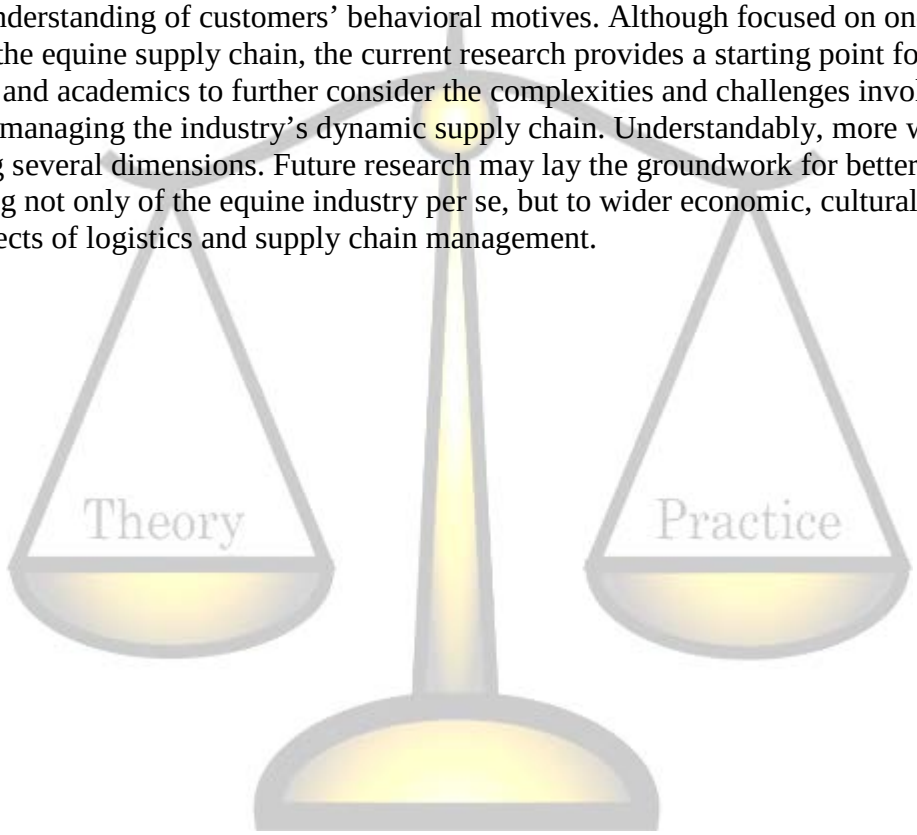
IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Supply chain management and logistics in sports have always been a challenge for teams, sponsors, and professional sports management companies alike. The prevailing approach to resolving the issues, though, has always been narrowly focused on resource accumulation and allocation within the organization (Moliterno and Wiersema, 2007). These authors consider the sports organizations' capability to "… purposefully create or modify (their) resource base," including decisions on selling off particular assets, as the basic mechanism to enhance competitiveness and performance. While the current research supports this notion, it goes a step further to include specific intangible considerations in an effort to further develop the sports business model. Pitsis et al. (2003), for example, revealed that a specific sports project related to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney required much more than tangible resources and technological construction capabilities to be successfully completed. "… Projected feelings, concerns and … social construction issues …" had to be included as well to ensure successful project completion (Pitsis et al., 2003). The consideration of emotional factors related to the sports industry in general finds its confirmation within the specific case of the equine industry itself. The current research reveals that equine transportation involves a unique set of decision criteria when compared to most cargo. Horses have delicate physical systems that make them susceptible to illness and injury during transport. The relatively high economic value of a horse suggests that precaution during transport is critical to preserve the owner's investment. But many owners have an attachment to their horses that transcends economic reason. In other words, many owners have an emotional bond with their horses.

The decision to outsource equine transportation certainly involves the more traditional factors of cost and capability. We are suggesting that emotional attachment to the cargo also factors into the transportation of horses and other high involvement products. With greater insight into

customers' decision processes, professional equine transporters will be better able to provide services valued by horse owners and trainers. In the specific case of horse transport, the most successful transporters are likely to be those able to ensure owners and trainers that well-being of horses, not cost, is the primary concern. Additionally, insight into the emotional decision-making process derived from the equestrian industry may provide direction for examining additional outsourcing decisions with cargos that have substantial emotional value to the customer.

Overall, this study introduces the idea of emotion in outsourcing transportation using the equine industry as a case study. The emotional element is currently missing from the supply chain literature, but is expected to be relevant for various decision-making contexts that include an emotional component. The findings underline the need for a more holistic perspective on transportation service offerings that goes beyond economic and technological readiness to include an understanding of customers' behavioral motives. Although focused on one specific facet within the equine supply chain, the current research provides a starting point for both practitioners and academics to further consider the complexities and challenges involved in successfully managing the industry's dynamic supply chain. Understandably, more work is needed along several dimensions. Future research may lay the groundwork for better understanding not only of the equine industry per se, but to wider economic, cultural, and personal aspects of logistics and supply chain management.



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