



From passion to obsession: Development and validation of a scale to measure compulsive sport consumption

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ABSTRACT

Sport consumption involves complex psychological processes – facilitating emotional highs and lows that reinforce and perpetuate habitual behaviors. The current work contextually broadens the scope of compulsive consumption research by developing and validating a scale to measure compulsive sport consumption (CSC). Three studies seek to: (1) qualitatively explore CSC and probe foundational issues; (2) begin the process of scale development through item generation, purification, and validation; (3) classify compulsive sport consumers, and examine the consequences of CSC. The resulting unidimensional scale assesses the habitual and obsessive consumption of sport wherein the pattern of behavior is associated with a sense of limited control. Results shed light on the unexpected prominence of CSC and expose several interesting psychological and behavioral relationships. Implications for the recognition and study of CSC revolve around consumer well-being and the modern marketing of sport.

1. Introduction

Both science and society have affirmed that people can be addicted to such activities as shopping, video gaming, watching television, surfing the Internet, texting, sex, and even eating chocolate (e.g., Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Hall, 2014; Hetherington & MacDiarmid, 1993; Huang & Leung, 2009; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, & Monroe, 2008). These often enjoyable, sometimes risky behaviors appear to evolve from pure passions, to compulsions, to pre-addictive behaviors, to inexorable addictions (Grover et al., 2011; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Recent research has found that marketing cues may be partly to blame in facilitating consumption addiction (Martin et al., 2013). Further progress in this research stream necessitates that marketers more deeply understand contextual elements (Kukar-Kinney, Scheinbaum, & Schaeffers, 2016) and consumption-related differences, especially in terms of motivations and defining characteristics. With billions of fans profoundly engaged in consuming this \$1.5 trillion industry (Plunkett Research, 2016), we contend that the contextual intricacies of sport consumption provide an ideal setting to investigate this phenomenon.

The purpose of this research is to investigate not only the possibility that a segment of consumers (i.e., extremely avid fans) can become

compulsively over-engaged in sport consumption, but the work also seeks to assess the mechanisms and outcomes associated with such behavior. First, we present a conceptual review and an examination of relevant theory. Second, we conduct depth-interviews to explore the notion of compulsive sport consumption (CSC), consider its breadth and depth, and provide a constitutive definition. Third, using survey research, we develop, test, and validate a scale to measure CSC. Fourth, a second survey further validates the Compulsive Sport Consumption Scale (CSCS) with confirmatory factor analysis to assess dimensionality, reliability, and validity. We also examine how the CSCS relates to other psychological and behavioral constructs, differentiate the CSCS from similar measures, and use the CSCS to classify and compare consumers. Lastly, the work concludes with a discussion of contributions and implications along with limitations and proposals for future research.

2. Compulsive consumption and the context of sport

Psychologically, addiction is viewed as an impulse-control disorder (Huang & Leung, 2009). Addictive behavior is characterized by cravings, dysfunctional emotional responses, a lack of self-control, and an inability to recognize harmful consequences (Hirschman, 1992). This behavior is frequently driven by a decrease in will power and an

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increased desire for immediate gratification (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991) resulting in a pathological pursuit of rewards in a compulsive manner (Martin et al., 2013). In marketing, compulsive buying has been defined as a consistent, habitual pattern of buying behavior and is associated with a corresponding lack of impulse control (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Ridgway et al., 2008). We expect compulsive sport consumption to also be characterized by obsessive-compulsive tendencies and impulsive control issues that potentially lead to harmful consequences.

Three primary forces propel excessive sport consumption into the realm of compulsion. First, there are internal psychological factors. Sport has been shown to shape fan values, attitudes, and even their identities (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Many people simply (and perhaps proudly) define themselves through their sport consumption. Such consumption promotes internal feelings of loyalty and positive self-esteem (Wann et al., 2000). Second, aside from being internally psychologically drawn in, fans are conspicuously “pushed in” by external social forces. Research has demonstrated that sport consumption spurs social cohesion, provides a fulfilled sense of belonging, and being a part of something greater than the self (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004). This social obsession with sport, and even the very notion of extreme fanaticism, can be traced back thousands of years (Gubar, 2015). Excessive consumption of sport is often socially praised since the avid fan is viewed as passionate, focused, and loyal rather than obsessive, fixated, and senseless. Third, media- and marketing-based cues also have a role in facilitating compulsive consumption (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Hing et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2013; Prentice & Cotte, 2015). Fans are bombarded through television, radio, print, mobile, online, and myriad social media to follow not only mainstream sport but also a growing number of alternative, extreme, and e-sports. Fans are implored by marketers to tune in to pre- and post-game shows, to call in, email, and tweet about sport. Remarkably, the number of consumers utilizing any media to view the last Olympics equaled roughly half of the planet's population (3.6 billion; Fortune.com, 2016). In today's technology-mediated society, with instant as well as constant access to sport through all manner of media, it is not surprising that many fans just cannot seem to stop themselves and are willing to set aside serious occupational and personal obligations to consume sport.

3. Study 1: A qualitative exploration of compulsive sport consumption

3.1. Method

The purpose of Study 1 was to gain a foundational understanding of the behavioral and psychological processes surrounding extreme sport consumption and to develop a sound constitutive definition. Depth interviews allowed for follow-up questioning and provided autonomy to pursue topics as they arose. Given the exploratory nature of Study 1 and the possible difficulties in finding compulsive sport consumers, it seemed appropriate to have a larger sample size than might be expected for qualitative interviews. Further, we intended to conduct the research over multiple sporting seasons. So, over a ten-month period, 62 unpaid participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling. Fifteen interviewees were referred through university athletic departments. The benefit of these referrals was not only in the introduction of potential interviewees, but also the athletic department screened and qualified interviewees (as extreme fans). Most other participants were members of the university fan club or family/friends of other interviewees identified as avid sport fans. Previous research in sport behavior generally indicates that men tend to express higher levels of emotional involvement and consumption motives compared to women (Gantz & Wenner, 1991). Correspondingly, our sample included a much larger proportion of male interviewees (46 males, 16 females).

Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings (homes, coffee shops, on-site at sporting events) and varied in length from 45 to

75 min. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 74 years old ($M_{age} = 29.9$). Further, the mean number of weekly hours spent consuming sport (including online) was 23.9 h per week, which is triple the national average of 7.7 h (Statista 2014). This total included 5.8 h reading about sport, 9.4 h watching sport, and 8.7 h talking about sport. Efforts were made to get 3rd-party interviews (from spouses and family members) in order to increase validity by avoiding any self-reporting biases. Interestingly, the research team reasoned that while some interviewees would suffer positivity bias and proudly overstate their sport consumption as a signal of loyalty, others might feel shame and guilt and therefore understate their sport consumption. These five 3rd-party interviews provided new perspectives and unique insights into the complex phenomena of CSC.

The semi-structured script contained 23 questions in four major sections. The first section contained simple warm-up questions about the interviewee's sport participation background as well as estimates of current time spent consuming sport (as a fan). Section 2 delved more deeply into feelings and emotions during and after sport consumption. Section 3 asked questions about possible negative effects from consuming sport (e.g., professional obligations, personal relationships, physical needs, and emotional health). The final section asked general opinion questions about CSC (e.g., its existence, a proposed definition, precursors, and perceived conceptual differences between passion and compulsion). Lastly, interviewees were asked if they or someone they knew could be considered a compulsive fan.

Interviews were transcribed, then two external coders were employed and trained. They were given a key that assigned codes for Section 1 and labeled topics for the categorical sorting and rating of topics in the other sections. The coders read and scored each interview separately. Codes and ratings were also reviewed by a member of the research team. Inter-coder reliability coefficients ranged from 0.713 to 0.945.

3.2. Results

Overall, there was a stark contrast in tone between 1st-person and 3rd-person interviews. Generally, 1st-person interviewees were enthusiastic when discussing what appeared to be one of the biggest issues in their lives. Most were proud of their consumption behaviors and exhibited positive attitudes, but they also often acknowledged a negative side. While there were discussions of harmful consequences of sport consumption, most interviewees tended to justify and rationalize past behaviors. For example, one interviewee described missing his sister's wedding in order to attend an NFL playoff game. He did not see why his family was upset (although he was supposed to be in the wedding party), and he downplayed his behavior in the conclusion to his story – that he did make it to the reception, and that “it was not that big of a deal” (I59, Male, age 24). On the contrary, while 3rd-person interviewees were similarly eager to discuss sport consumption, they tended to discuss subjects' attitudes and behaviors in much more negative tones. For the most part, 3rd-person interviewees wanted sympathy and would fervently describe behaviors and attitudes as inane, senseless, and even abusive. Many of the 3rd-party interviews were interspersed with harsh tones of frustration and/or exasperation. Interestingly, 3rd-party interviewees simultaneously recognized a subject's CSC as part of their identity. They had reconciled that extreme avidity and CSC were simply part of who the subject was – as if a choice had been made, and there was no turning back or turning away. Regardless of perspective, the range of experiences revolved around issues of identification, social connection, avidity, mixed emotions, coping, outcomes and consequences, and felt needs or compulsions. Examples of illustrative interviewee quotes are presented in Table 1.

High levels of sport consumption were tied to an outward-looking social motivation in the form of group membership, social cohesion, and a need to signal to others one's level of extreme loyalty. Many interviewees were official members of fan clubs. Others had tight-knit

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