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Co-Creating the Pitch:

An Exploration of the Role of Traditions on Co-Creation in European Soccer

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Abstract

The current study assessed the causal effect fans' sensory traditions have on co-creation. Data were collected by intercepting Portuguese and Spanish soccer attendees outside of the stadium prior to the match's start. A total of 282 useable surveys were retrieved from fans during the 2022–23 seasons. Path modeling results indicate that traditions relating to aesthetics, sound, and beverage provided the greatest means to co-create experiences for attendees. The study's results align with previous research within retail and sport exhibiting the positive impact of the sensory experience on social, psychological, and behavioral outcome. Furthermore, the findings provide support that sensory experiences wielding heightened levels of co-creation for fans contribute positively to merchandise spending and arrival time. This is meaningful as sport organizations continue to seek marketing strategies that will overcome the widespread media platforms that have made consuming sport remotely so accessible.

Keywords: attendees; international; management; sensory marketing; sport traditions

Traditions are a core component of the sport experience as they provide attendees with an ability to outwardly espouse identity and solidarity (Martin et al., 2015). From tailgating in the parking lot before the game to immersing oneself in a sea of red inside the stadium, traditions are ubiquitous in sport. The popularity of traditions is due in part to the benefits accrued for both sport organizations and fans alike, with research exhibiting the positive impact on event satisfaction (Slavich, Hungenberg, et al., 2022), team identity (Neale, 2010), nostalgic reverie (Slavich, Dwyer, & Hungenberg, 2019), as well as fans' cultivated social connections (Wann, Waddill, et al., 2011). For these reasons, there is great desire amongst all sport stakeholders for the development and sustainment of fan traditions.

Although traditions are common throughout sport, there may be no greater display of tradition than European soccer. Liverpool's "You'll Never Walk Alone," Dortmund's Yellow Wall, and "Forever Blowing Bubbles" at West Ham are emblematic of this. These ritualistic behaviors are communal in nature, serving as opportunity for fans to inject their own spirit into the event. Furthermore, they maintain two central elements: They are sensory in nature and enable fans to co-create the experience. According to Higgins (2006), feelings of being absorbed or engrossed in an experience will inevitably increase the attractiveness or the repulsiveness of that experience. Although research has demonstrated the sensory nature of the sport experience (Lee, Lee, et al., 2012), what remains absent from literature is exactly how traditions are cultivated within the sport experience and which sensory cues are most impactful in fostering fans' perceived co-creation. Previous research examining sport tradition has predominately employed qualitative techniques (e.g., Chun et al., 2004; McDonald & Karg, 2014), providing a glimpse into its sociocultural complexion. However, an inability to measure ritualistic behavior quantitatively has inhibited cause-and-effect analyses, leaving unanswered questions for how sport organizations around the world can cultivate such traditions.

Alarmingly, according to a recent Capgemini Research Institute study of European soccer fans, 69% of fans preferred to watch matches outside of the sports venue (Williams, 2023). Although there are various factors contributing to these consumption habits, opportunities afforded by digital media to view sporting events away from venues should raise concern for sport organizations. To combat this trend and maintain the variety of ancillary revenue streams tied to stadia attendance, sport organizations must effectively use engagement methods to attract and entertain fans. This is invariably their differentiating advantage—a multisensory experience that permits fans an opportunity to create value by involving themselves within an event.

To this end, this study explores the frequency, meaningfulness, and novelty of fan rituals, explicitly through fans' senses and social interaction. It is hypothesized that stadia experiences that embody the characteristics of ritualistic behavior and meet fans' desire to become part of an experienced economy will result in increased support of team and stadia consumerism. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to (a) assess the impact of traditions evoked through one's senses on the co-creation of the event experience and (b) examine the relationships between co-creation and attendees' attendance frequency, arrival time, and merchandise spending. The subsequent section details literature informing the study. This is followed by the study's hypotheses, methods, results, and discussion of how the findings can benefit sport practitioners.

Literature Review

Rituals

The performance of rituals serves as an opportunity to celebrate and demarcate significant life events (Rook, 1985). Rituals are defined as "a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (Rook, 1985, p. 252). Among the core attributes of rituals is their uniqueness, which inherently provides meaning to individuals through such participation (Vinner, 2007). Through engagement in rituals, individuals are able to align with the unique characteristics of a group while establishing disassociation from one or more outgroups (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). The result is social, communicative, or performative meaning for involved participants.

Rituals are commonplace within both participant and spectator sport, with research exhibiting their prevalence and distinction (Young, 1988). Although some rituals are personal in nature (Blanchard, 1988), many of the rituals performed in sport—such as the singing of songs and consumption of specific types of food—are collective, providing opportunity for connection with the team and other fans. The facility itself can even become a place of shared experiences where fans can engage in ritual performance, helping to co-create the sport experience by fostering positive outcomes for fans and teams alike (Underwood et al., 2001).

Co-Creation

The concept of co-creation is still relatively novel. With foundations in the service-dominant logic, customers were long viewed as the recipient of goods and services, but now are considered a co-producer of the service and the accrued value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). From retail to recreation, consumers have active involvement and interaction with the brand, contributing to consumers' evolving desire for experiences (Payne et al., 2009). A mutual and reciprocal process, co-creation fosters consumers' desire to be part of the experience (Woratschek et al., 2014).

Sporting events are a prime platform for co-creation, with the team and spectator-induced atmosphere working together to create the ultimate value. Previous research of co-creation in sport exhibits the contribution of a number of stakeholders including event organizers, security, media, and fans (Woratschek et al., 2014). Fans arguably are the most important contributors to the event through their contribution to the stadium experience via singing, chanting, and other orchestrated activities (Kolyperas et al., 2019; Woratschek et al., 2014). One only has to think back to the period immediately following the onset of COVID-19 when games were played in front of few or no fans. The missing presence of fans draped in similar clothing and absence of sounds echoing in unison merely affirmed the role fans play in creating the meaning and purpose that underlies the value in sport (Kolyperas et al., 2019).

Sensory Experience

The views of the facility, the sound of the crowd and music, and the smell of aromas including food and beverages all contribute to the sport sensory experience. Based off Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) S-O-R model (stimulus-organism-response) previous research in the retail context has exhibited the impact of the sensory environment on consumer emotions and behavior including satisfaction, amount of time spent in an environment, purchase behavior, and loyalty (Clarke et al., 2012; Torabi et al., 2021). Across settings, specific sensory cues including lighting, music, and scent are shown to positively impact

a consumer's emotional and behavioral outcomes (Chebat & Michon, 2003).

In the sport context, Lee, Lee, et al. (2012) first examined the role of the sensory experience and exhibited sensory cues' impact on satisfaction and behavioral intentions. In a subsequent investigation, Lee, Heere, and Chung (2013) revealed senses' impact on team identity. Further, sensory environments are shown to affect nostalgia and memory (Hungenberg et al., 2020; Slavich, Hungenberg, et al., 2022), engendering myriad social-psychological outcomes. Although the combination of sensory and social interactions within sport have shown to impact consumer behavior, research exhibiting the role of sensory traditions on co-creation and relevant team-related outcomes is negligible.

In summary, research illustrates that repetition, uniqueness, and meaning underlies sport rituals pertaining to attire, song, sight lines, and gustatory consumption (King, 2017). In applying this framework, this study sought to examine how experiential components occurring within stadia impact event-related outcomes. Specifically, the hypotheses in Table 1 frame the focus and expected outcomes of this study.

Table 1

Hypotheses

	Hypothesis
H1a	Traditions evoked through aesthetics (sight) will positively impact co-creation.
H1b	Traditions evoked through sound will positively impact co-creation.
H1c	Traditions evoked through food will positively impact co-creation.
H1d	Traditions evoked through socialization with family and friends will positively impact co-creation.
H1e	Traditions evoked through socialization with others will positively impact co-creation.
H1f	Traditions evoked through beverages will positively impact co-creation.
H2	Co-creation will positively impact attendance frequency.
H3	Co-creation will positively impact arrival time.
H4	Co-creation will positively impact merchandise spending.

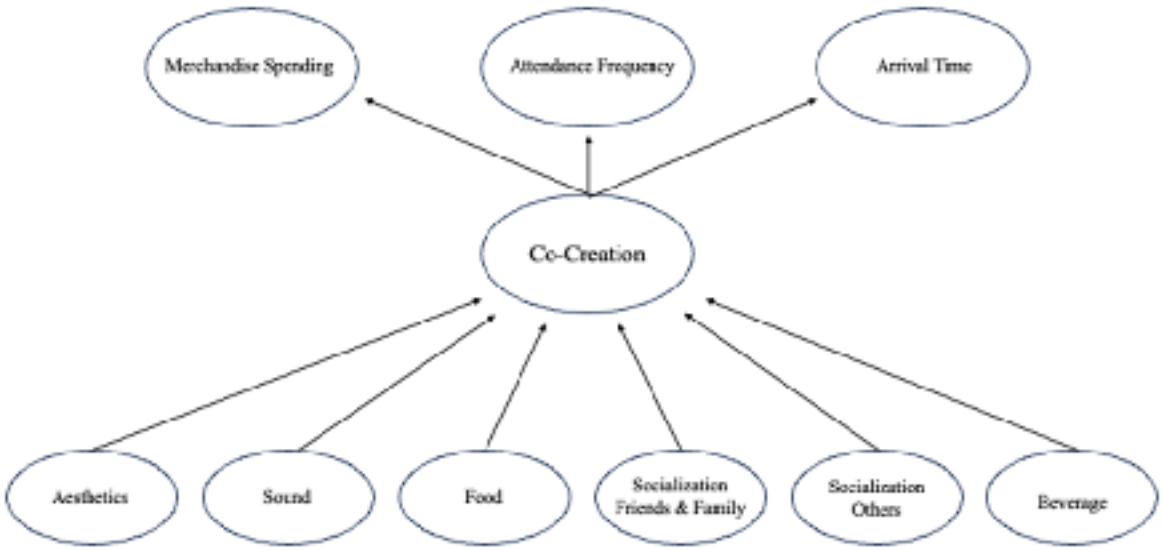
Method

Data were collected at Portuguese and Spanish soccer matches. European soccer was deemed an appropriate context of study to identify the sensory cues most germane to sport traditions impactful in facilitating co-creation. Researchers intercepted soccer attendees outside of the stadium prior to the match's start. Each participating respondent was given a QR code that directed them to the online survey. Participants were also encouraged to distribute the code and/or survey link to other individuals in their accompaniment while inside the stadium. A total of 282 useable surveys were retrieved from fans during the 2022–23 seasons. Among the study's response, 65% were male and indicated being an average age of 28. Both ends of the household income spectrum were captured with 22% reporting earning less than 70,000 USD and 62% reporting a household earning of more than 200,000 USD. More than half of respondents reported being single (55%), 25% were married, and 20% were currently in a relationship. Only 7% were attending the event by themselves, 15% were accompanied by only one other individual, and the remaining sample were joined by at least two other fans.

The survey instrument was developed to examine ways sensory elements within the stadium had created fan traditions that fostered a sense of co-creation. The study hypothesized that sensory traditions that heightened attendees' sense of co-creation would subsequently result in increased attendance, merchandise spending, and earlier arrival times at stadiums leading up to the match's start (see Figure 1). Sensory traditions (i.e., Aesthetics, Sound, Food, Beverage, Socialization with Friends and Family, Socialization with Others) were measured as multidimensional constructs based upon their frequency of occurrence, meaningfulness (Wann et al., 2013), and degree of novelty (Kim et al., 2019). Thus, each sensory tradition construct consisted of three items. Co-creation was comprised of two items adapted from Meng and Cui (2020) and meant to encapsulate fans' sense of interaction and active participation within the event. All items generated a 1–5 Likert response and were averaged to create a composite score for each respective variable.

Figure 1

Hypothesized Model of Co-Creation



Each of the study's latent constructs were above the reliability threshold of .70 (see Table 2 for descriptive results). The outcome variables included attendance frequency, per-game spending on merchandise, and time of arrival prior to the match's start time. Each were measured with single items. Attendance frequency was measured using a 7-point scale and represented how many times a year the respondent attended soccer events at the stadium (1 = none, 4 = 5–6 times, 7 = more than 10 times). Merchandise spending was captured with a 5-point scale, indicating how often an attendee purchased team merchandise at a game (1 = never, 3 = sometimes, 5 = always). Lastly, arrival time, measured with a 5-point scale,

provided insight into how early fans arrived at the sport venue (1 = less than 1 hour, 3 = 3–4 hours, 5 = more than 6 hours).

Table 2

Descriptive Values for Exogenous and Endogenous Variables in Path Model

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Chronbach's Alpha	AVE
Sight	4.37	.73	.78	.57
Sound	3.38	1.05	.87	.70
Food	2.51	.99	.83	.64
Socialization–Friends/Family	3.53	1.00	.86	.67
Socialization–Others	3.19	1.04	.84	.62
Beverage	2.72	1.07	.83	.65
Co-Creation	4.22	.78	.75	
Attendance	5.01	2.17		
Merchandise Spending	2.03	.90		
Arrival Time	1.73	.81		

Data Analysis & Results

Prior to testing the hypothesized model, examination of the study's psychometric properties was conducted to ensure the measurement possessed internal validity. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) provided evidence that the data adequately fit the model well, CFI = .91, IFI = .91, RMSEA = .09, CMIN/DF = 3.64. Convergent validity was also revealed, as each of the exogenous variables' Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The measurement's reliability and validity values are illustrated in Table 2 and provide requisite support for the subsequent analyses.

To test the sequential effects identified in the hypothesized model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using Amos 27. Acceptable model fit was exhibited based upon the following fit indices, CFI = .94, IFI = .95, RMSEA = .09, CMIN/DF = 3.45.

Path estimates indicate that traditions relating to aesthetics (β= .18), sound (β= .25), and beverage (β= .23) provided the greatest means to co-create experience for attendees. Attendees' perception of co-creation, then, had a significant effect on attendance per year (β= .12), merchandise spending (β= .13), and arrival time (β= .18). Overall, the full model illustrates that sensory traditions have a small, but significant effect on patrons' arrival time (R2 = .03), attendance frequency (R2 = .02), and merchandise spending (R2 = .02) through the degree to which they can co-create the experience (see Table 3).

Table 3

Path Model Summary

Direct Effects of Full Model	Co-Creation (β)	Attendance per year (β)	Merchandise Spending (β)	Arrival Time (β)
Sight	.18*			
Sound	.25*			
Food	-.10			

Socialization – Friends/Family	.12**			
Socialization – Others	-.07			
Beverage	.23*			
Co-Creation		.12*	.13*	.18*
R2	.19	.02	.02	.03

*p < .05 **p < .10

Table 4 provides a snapshot of the hypotheses and whether they were supported or rejected. All but a few of the hypotheses were supported. Only H1c and H1e were not supported by the findings.

Table 4

Result of Hypothesis Testing

	Hypothesis	***Result***
H1a	Traditions evoked through aesthetics will positively impact co-creation.	Supported
H1b	Traditions evoked through sound will positively impact co-creation.	Supported
H1c	Traditions evoked through food will positively impact co-creation.	Not supported
H1d	Traditions evoked through socialization with family and friends will positively impact co-creation.	Supported
H1e	Traditions evoked through socialization with others will positively impact co-creation.	Not supported
H1f	Traditions evoked through beverages will positively impact co-creation.	Supported
H2	Co-creation will positively impact attendance frequency.	Supported
H3	Co-creation will positively impact arrival time.	Supported
H4	Co-creation will positively impact merchandise spending.	Supported

Correlative assessments of the model's exogenous variables reveal that arrival time was significantly correlated with the frequency by which attendees purchase merchandise. However, arrival time was not significantly correlated with attendance per year (see Table 5).

Table 5

Correlations Among Exogenous Variables

Variable	A	B	C	D
Co-Creation (A)	1			
Attendance Per Year (B)	.112*	1		
Merchandise Purchasing (C)	.132*	.118*	1	
Arrival Time Prior to Start (D)	.176*	.044	.173*	1

* p < .05

Discussion

The study's results align with previous research within retail and sport exhibiting the positive impact of the sensory experience on social, psychological, and behavioral outcomes (Clarke et al., 2012; Hungenberg et al., 2020). Furthermore, the findings provide support that sensory experiences wielding heightened levels of co-creation for fans contribute positively to merchandise spending and arrival time. Although previous literature in the retail setting has linked sensorial marketing elements to increased spending and time spent inside a store (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017), the current study showcases the relationship among these variables in the sport context. This is meaningful as sport organizations continue to seek marketing strategies that will overcome the widespread media platforms that have made consuming sport remotely so accessible.

The merit of this research also rests in the data's ability to isolate sensory cues most associated with long-standing soccer traditions. For instance, the aesthetic quality of facilities reinforces the importance of place as a symbol of self-expression. Only in stadia can you appreciate the lights, architectural design, and the practice of performing choreographic sequences. Sight lines of the pitch also reinforce the meaning and importance of stadia by demonstrating the exceptional ways sport presents itself at its highest levels. Vision, after all, is considered the dominant sense. This is evidenced by humans relying more on visual information than any other sensory mode to understand their surroundings (see Hirst et al., 2018). Consequently, sport stadia should highlight a venue's aesthetic inventory in the strategic planning and marketing mix as design features are likely to engage all senses (Agapito et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, sound revealed itself to be the most pervasive among soccer fan traditions. This finding supports previous literature noting sound as an effective mechanism for manipulating mood and social interaction (Tinson et al., 2017). By engaging fans in ritualistic chants or encouraging vocal response to on-pitch play, sounds create an immersive quality that positively contributes to the sport environment. Traditions comprising songs also provide opportunity for fans to reveal their understanding and experience with a team's history and identity. Because of this, sport is witnessing trends involving the matching of sport teams with musical artists aiming to perform songs that reflect their imagery and personality (Ballouli & Heere, 2015). Each of these characteristics represent the meaningfulness and unique expressive qualities that embody sport traditions. They also exhibit ways sound elicits in fans a strong emotional response, including at times, an immediate physiological reaction (e.g., Liverpool's "You'll Never Walk Alone"). Thus, sound should be employed as a means to enact behavioral cues, placating on fans' desire to insert themselves into the game's atmospherics.

Venues and event marketers also should not overlook sensory traditions relating to beverage consumption. Regardless of where the fan is watching the game (e.g., on the sofa, outside the stadium, inside the stadium), drinking on match days is part of the experience. It is a social additive that fosters the strengthening of friendships, escapism, excitement, and pleasure. Ultimately, traditions involving food and beverage consumption provide fans the ability to experience meaningful psychosocial outcomes (Hobson et al., 2018). Based upon this study's findings of the positive role of beverage traditions, more focus is warranted on how sport organizations can encourage such traditions in a responsible manner.

Not surprisingly, the results of this study further exhibited the role of the social experience in sport

fans' traditions. With that said, most social experiences also comprise senses such as sight, sound, and taste within traditions such as tailgating and team songs/anthems. Nonetheless, as sport organizations look to foster and sustain traditions, they should consider how traditions can incorporate other fans—this based upon merchandise spending and attendance frequency growing with perceived levels of co-creation.

Interestingly, though, traditions involving socialization with other people (not family/friends) did not positively contribute to co-creation in the current study. Furthermore, although taste made a positive contribution, food did not; thus, future research should explore these other senses and factors that contribute to their impact on co-creation and ultimately the event experience. Also, as this study was limited to the context of European soccer, research should be employed in other settings. The on-site nature of this data collection yields challenges as well, and future study may consider other forms of data collection.

In conclusion, as sport marketers face the ongoing challenge of attracting fans to venues, there is great onus on identifying methods to improve the event experience. The current study exhibits the positive impact of traditions—namely, those incorporating aesthetics, sound, beverage, and the social experience. In lieu of these results, sport organizations should examine potential avenues for the initiation of traditions unique to their own environment. By focusing on ways sensory marketing can enhance fan involvement, stadia will continue to showcase why it presents an unrivaled fan experience.

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