Cultural Differences in Fan Ritualization: a Cross-Cultural Perspective of the Ritualization of American and Japanese Baseball Fans

Seungwoo Chun, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
James W. Gentry, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lee P. McGinnis, Washburn University

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At least two-thirds of Americans consider themselves to be sports fans (Lieberman 1991). In spite of the pervasiveness of sports as entertainment, media consumption, or the focal point of conversation, little research, less than five percent of the work in sports psychology and sports sociology (Wann and Hamlet 1995), has investigated the thoughts and behaviors of fans. This has resulted in a lack of understanding of sports fans and their behavior.

The sports literature has only generically identified sports fans as individuals with an enduring interest in sports, and the definition of “sports fan” has not been clearly distinguished from that of a “sport spectator” (Wann et al. 2001). Sports fandom is in a limited fashion defined as “the degree to which subjects considered themselves to be sports fans” (Wann 1998, p.287). On the other hand, some scholarly literature on fans (Jenson 1992) has highlighted fans as “deviant from normal,” focusing on the excessiveness of their behavior and treating them as abnormal and disreputable, even dangerous.

This paper will view sports fandom as ritualized experience. This ritualized fan experience includes the cognitions and feelings that a sports fans experiences; these cognitions and feelings are symbolized, role-assimilated, and self-enacted during the use of a sports-related product or service. Tetreault and Kleine (1990) associate ritualized behavior with role-assimilated and self-reflected mundane repetition across time and place. This ritualized behavior is symbolic-laden as well (Rook 1985). Sports fans may derive the ritualized experiences from their or others’ ritualized behavior in sports consumption. This view extends our understanding of sports fandom to a phenomenon symbolized and structured in the cultural values of the particular society in which a sports fan is situated.

In addition, the ritualized fandom perspective acknowledges that individuals may initiate and develop their identities and roles as sports fans through participating in various sport fan rituals, and that these fans can maintain their sports fandom through continued ritual engagements. This may broaden current sports fan socialization theory, which has focused on socialization agents (e.g., family, friends, school, etc.) and sports fan motives (e.g., group affiliation, self-esteem, entertainment, etc.) in the fan socialization process (McPherson 1976).

In this paper, we turn our attention to the “ritualization process” rather than the “ritual.” Bell (1992) defines ritualization as a process in which an individual possesses and maintains a cultural “sense of ritual” through differentiating ritual from non-ritual activities. This differentiation enables the individual to enumerate and legitimize symbolic meanings of a ritual. However, the strategies of ritualization are culture-specific because each culture differentiates ritual from non-ritual activities according to its own value system. Based on Bell (1992)’s definition of ritualization, we define fan ritualization as the process in which an individual acquires ritualized sports fandom through continued fan ritual engagements and through differentiating ritual from non-ritual activities based on the society’s cultural values and social relations.

We will investigate cultural differences in fan ritualization, selecting American and Japanese baseball fans as the research domain. Baseball has been popular both in the United States and Japan for a long time despite the cultural differences between these two countries. A variety of the fan rituals have been developed throughout the long history of baseball in both countries. Baseball is an extremely ritual-laden activity that lends itself to such observation.

In the first section of the paper, we discuss how sports fandom is defined as ritualized experience. Next, we discuss how an individual acquires and maintains ritualized sports fandom through the fan ritualization process. Then, in our discussion of cultural differences in fan ritualization, we explain how culture influences the ritualization processes, and generate several propositions about differences in the fan ritualization process between American and Japanese baseball fans. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this perspective in terms of extending current theories of sports fandom and fan socialization.

SPORTS FANDOM AS RITUALIZED EXPERIENCES

Some aspects of sports fans’ ritualized behavior are readily observable. It is not uncommon to note the ritualized sport fans wearing their favorite team colors on game day, preserving traditional values, celebrating patriotism at international games by decorating their body with national flags, and symbolizing personal meaning through sport-related material possessions (Eastman and Riggs 1994; Summers, Johnson, and Kennedy 2001).

This view of sport fandom as ritualized experience offers extensions to the current understanding of sports fandom, which has been limited to the degree to which individuals consider themselves to be sports fans or the amount of money and time that they spend on sports-related consumption each year (Wann 1998). Ritualized sports fandom can be characterized as “symbolized, role-assimilated, and self-enacted” sports-related consumption experience. Each of these three components is explored below.

First, symbolized consumption experiences are easily observable in sports fandom. Through objects and activities (e.g., apparel colors and types of cheering), sports fans develop, maintain, and manipulate various types of symbolized meanings and values about themselves, their favorite teams and players, games, etc. Derbaix, Decrop, and Cabossart (2002) in their study of Belgian soccer fans, reported that material possessions—colors of clothes and scarves—are strongly related to their soccer consumption, and that the goods associated with soccer have symbolic functions: identification,
integration, expression, and sacralization. Sports fans share and communicate those symbolized meanings and values with other fans, and, in addition, these symbols serve the function of categorizing them according to their favorite teams, and to their involvement and knowledge levels (Derbaix et al. 2002; Holt 1992, 1995).

The meanings and values symbolized by sports fans represent social and cultural values. Furthermore, new symbolic meanings may frequently emerge as a consequence of changes in social values or extraordinary social occurrences (e.g., war, revolution, or elections). For example, during World War II (1940-1945), many Americans, including President Roosevelt, viewed baseball fandom as vital for sustaining the nation’s morale (Weiller and Higgs 1997). In the same sense, patriotism became widely embraced by American baseball fans following the terrorists’ attack on September 11, 2001.

Second, ritualized sports fans are role-assimilated. There are different roles for home-fans and away-fans in terms of seat locations, cheering, or even activities outside of the stadium. Kelly (1997) observed that Japanese fans cheer only when their team is at bat, but not when it is in the field. There are “hitting marches,” but no “fielding marches.” Although sports fans have the freedom to enact their role in their sports consumption, on occasion they will experience embarrassing moments if they neglect those roles. Holt (1995), in his observation of Chicago Cubs’ fans, reported that fans sitting in the left field bleachers show their loyalty to the team through the “throwing back” ritual; failure to throw the opposing player’s homerun ball back to the field exposes the fan to immediate criticism from other spectators. Fans of several other Major League Baseball teams in the United States have currently incorporated this ritual as well.

A sports fan’s role enactment may be either passive or active (Rook 1985). Some baseball fans show active role enactment; for example, one can observe devoted fans who voluntarily lead collective cheering in Japanese baseball games (Kelly 1997). Most Japanese baseball fan clubs are managed based on their fans’ voluntary cooperation. Even though the fan clubs sometimes receive support from team management, for instance when purchasing group season tickets, in running the clubs most club members have self-defined roles such as providing drinks and food or playing a musical instrument on a game day (Kelly 1997).

This self-enacted volunteerism of sports fans is also representative of their fandom. Ritualized sports fans transform the roles and regularities that are, sometimes, externally prescribed in their behavior into internally self-endorsed ones. Deci and Ryan (1991) suggest that people accept values and regulatory processes that are endorsed by the social order, but are not intrinsically appealing initially, through an internalization process.

Interest/excitement has been identified as a significant factor in motivating individuals to internalize or self-enact those values (Deci and Ryan 1991). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) proposes that true enjoyment accompanies the experience of flow, providing a peculiar, dynamic, and holistic sensation of total involvement with the activity itself. Holt (1992) observed that many baseball fans felt transcended in a number of situations, such as when dramatic situations and outstanding performances occurred while watching a game in the stadium.

In addition, the other major component in internalizing the roles and values of sport fandom is their need for relatedness with others (Deci and Ryan 1991). Sports fans may have a communitas experience as they support their team. In the experience of communitas, they feel the disappearance of everyday social roles and status, and develop intense comradeship with each other (Turner 1969). In the context of Chicago Cubs baseball, Holt (1995) describes this feeling as emerging from the consumption practice of “play,” which is one of the four ways people consume.

We have discussed three major characteristics—symbolized, role-assimilated, and self-enacted—in defining sports fandom as ritualized experience. Our next step is to investigate how a sports fan acquires the ritualized fandom in his or her sports consumption. We propose that individuals may become ritualized—symbolized, role-assimilated, and self-enacted—through a ritualization process in which the individual possesses and maintains a sense of ritual by differentiating ritual from non-ritual activities. However, the ritualization process is culture-specific because each culture has its own values concerning the legitimization and internalization processes. In the next section, we will discuss cultural differences in fan ritualization between American and Japanese baseball fans.

**CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE FAN RITUALIZATION PROCESS**

Following Driver (1998), Arnould (2001) suggests that ritual provides society with at least three functions—order, community, and transformation—and these functions are achieved by allowing people to experience emergent shared emotions through manipulating objects and symbols in the ritual. Arnould (2001) further notes that these shared emotions play a role for consumers in shaping consumption decisions and behaviors. In the same sense, a sports fan is able to initiate and develop ritualized sports fandom—symbolized, role-assimilated, and role-enacted—through the continued ritual engagements which continually provide them the emergent shared emotions.

In adapting Bell’s (1997) discussion on ritualization strategies, we will introduce several fan ritualization strategies—formalism, symbolism performance, traditionalism, and socialization—which produce ritualized fans. As we mentioned earlier, culture determines the effectiveness of each strategy and, thus, plays an essential role in fan ritualization. We will investigate the differences in effectiveness of the ritualization strategies between American and Japanese baseball fans. However, stereotyped cultural characteristics (e.g., individualism and collectivism) are not sufficient for a full understanding of the baseball fan ritualization processes. Further consideration should include how baseball becomes contextualized in each society.

**Formalism**

Formality is one of the most frequently observed characteristics of ritual. Bell (1997) noted that the formality of a ritual is associated with “the use of a more limited and rigidly organized set of expressions and gestures, a restricted code of communication or behavior in contrast to a more open or elaborate code” (p.139). The formalization of behavior is effective in enhancing the particularity of a situation by contrasting it with less special ones, as this promotes the conventional and idealized order related to the event (Harris 1983).

This formality of behavior in ritual, in many cases, develops into sets of rules that normalize ritual activities. These normative rules may regulate ritual activities by elaborating the procedure and the limits of acceptable behavior in the ritual. One will face criticism from other group members when she or he attempts to act differently than directed by the rules of ritual. Turner (1969) explicitly argues that ritual involves obligation, and all members of a society should follow the rules of the ritual. Ritualization by means of rule-governance gives rise to the engagement of cultural and social customs in defining ritual activities.

Baseball fans commonly ritualize their behavior by formalizing, or further normalizing their behavior. The fans should stand up...
as a way of displaying respect to their nations when national anthems are playing at the beginning of a game. Furthermore, some fans are likely to feel a sense of guilt or a “fear of being an outsider” if they act differently from those who follow the rules and conventions of baseball. Refusal to take an integral at-bat with seriousness can certainly capture the disdain of fellow onlookers who might view such a moment as being near sacred-like. The rules formalizing baseball fans behavior in the fan ritualization process are different between American and Japanese baseball fans.

American baseball fans seem to have self-disciplined rules in formalizing their behavior. This means that American fans mostly follow the rules of baseball for the sake of their own playful experience in baseball consumption (Holt 1992). The self-disciplined rules embraced by American baseball fans seem to be associated with their individualistic goals of pursuing self-identity as baseball fans rather than the statement of collective loyalty made by the rigidly disciplined fan clubs of professional baseball in Japan. Thus, for American fans, following rules is an individualistic pursuit, and it tends to be less influenced by social context; it is stable across time and place. Many American fans display ritualized activities, including wearing team colors, consuming special foods or drinks, or performing routine preparatory activities while watching a game on the television (Eastman and Riggs 1994). We believe that these ritualized activities in front of the TV, which are often enacted individually, are fairly consistent with those performed by many fans in the stadium. American fans are more inclined to display consistent ritualized behavior irrespective of the setting.

On the other hand, rules for Japanese baseball fans are likely to be more group-disciplined. For Japanese fans, following the rules of baseball seems to be situational, and social surroundings are crucial factors in enacting the rules. The maintenance of harmony with other fans by complying with the rules may contribute to enhancing the consumption experience. For instance, many Japanese baseball fans bring a plastic megaphone to participate in collective cheering, even though they may be not familiar with those cheering activities. Japanese baseball fans are likely to display different behaviors in a public setting versus in a private setting. For instance, we can observe some highly-highly identified fans who display few ritualized behaviors while watching a game in the privacy of their own home (Eastman and Riggs 1994).

Thus, we propose that American baseball fans will tend to adhere to more self-disciplined rules, while Japanese baseball fans will tend to adhere to more group-disciplined rules in formalizing behavior. This may be consistent with the idea that people from individualist cultures are more self-oriented, whereas people from collectivist cultures are more group-oriented (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis et al. 1988). Moreover, Riess (1999) suggests that Americans have celebrated individualism, self-reliance, and cultural pluralism through linking agrarian/rural and democracy myths to their baseball consumption. On the other hand, the Japanese as fans and players of baseball have spiritualized its collective virtues—teamwork, harmony, authoritarian leadership—in the practice of baseball (Guttman and Thompson 2001). For the Japanese, baseball has been a powerful vehicle to promote the “Japanese management style” based on collectivism in the modernization era.

P1: American baseball fans tend to adhere to more self-disciplined rules than group-disciplined rules in formalizing behavior in the fan ritualization process.

P2: Japanese baseball fans tend to adhere to more group-disciplined rules than self-disciplined rules in formalizing behavior in the fan ritualization process.

Symbolic Performance
The performative dimension of ritual—the deliberate and voluntary doing of symbolic actions in public—is understood as something beyond routine reality (Bell 1997). Ritual performance is dramatized by highly visual imagery, dramatic sound, and extraordinary settings. These dramatized performances in ritual evoke intense emotions among participants by attaching specialness to the event, which easily induces participants to link powerful symbolic meanings with the ritual.

These symbolic ritual performances by baseball fans can be classified into two types: self- and collective-expressive ritual performances. Self-expressive rituals reflect the visibility of each individual’s ritual performance. An individual performer is easily identifiable in terms of his or her role or aesthetic expressions while performing a ritual. For example, baseball fans often hold up creative and special signs (e.g., The CUBS and WGN are #1 (Holt 1995)) to support the team and players, which can also serve to “personalize” the experience of the fan (Holt 1995). But, there is no strict rule as to what kinds of messages should be used on the signs. Some signs can be quite benign, indicating support for the team while others can be quite caustic, often used to demonstrate ire against specific players (e.g. Sammy Sosa using a coked bat), coaches, or ownership. An individual’s creativity concerning ritual performance may play a significant role in distinguishing him/her from other fans in the ritual. Setting oneself apart from the crowd may indeed be the motivation.

On the other hand, a collective ritual refers to ritual activities that represent a harmonized expression of symbolic meanings by the participants. This ritual requires unified and cooperative efforts from every participant. Examples would be a wave encircling the stadium and the displaying of a huge player’s uniform or a flag on the stands. Many collective rituals demand organized preparation and practices before fans perform them, whereas the “wave” (observed in Western venues) does not. Further, in Japan, drawing individual attention to oneself during a game, or displaying signs opposing team management, players, etc., is not likely to occur.

Thus, we argue that collective rituals are more salient to Japanese baseball fans than American baseball fans, whereas self-expressive rituals are more salient to American baseball fans than Japanese baseball fans. Collective rituals are frequently observed in Japanese baseball stadiums. Kelly (1997) reported that collective chanting and cheering accompanied by the pounding rhythm of taiko drums (similar to Western bass drums) continue through the whole game and that several leaders organize the chanting and cheering for better performance. He also discusses a collective ritual observed at Hanshin Tigers’ home games: the soaring of thousands of whistling balloons into the air in the bottom of the seventh inning. On the other hand, American baseball fans (with a notable exception being the Atlanta Braves’ chopping chant) tend to be more self-expressive in ritual performance. Instead of focusing on collective chanting and cheering, television cameras point to individual fans holding up creative signs supporting the team and players as well as expressing them own views.

P3: The self-expressive aspect of symbolic performance in baseball fan rituals is a more influential factor for American baseball fans in the fan ritualization process than for Japanese baseball fans.

P4: The collective-expressive aspect of symbolic performance in baseball fan rituals is a more influential factor for Japanese baseball fans in the fan ritualization process than for American baseball fans.
Traditionalism

Traditionalization is a common way of legitimizing ritual activities by attaching mythical and sacred power to “past” in the ritualization process (Bell 1997). Bell (1997) notes that, as a powerful tool of legitimation, traditionalization may be manifested in “the repetition of activities from an earlier period, the adaptation of such activities in a new setting, or even the creation of practices that simply evoke links with the past” (p. 145). In their study of the ritualization associated with inherited possessions, Arnould, Price, and Curasi (1999) found that people generally use the past as a source of ritual meanings.

Nostalgia for the past is essential to sports fans in enhancing their enjoyment in the consumption of sports (Summers et al. 2001). This sense of the past in sports consumption plays a role in the construction of a shared collective identity among the fans. This nostalgia is associated with sports fans’ enjoyable childhoods, the perceived betterness of the past generation, and the original lessons of a sport. The fans bestow mythical and sacred values on those experiences. Work on nostalgia in consumer behavior research bears a similar definition, whereby a general preference toward objects from one’s younger days is observed (Holbrook 1993).

For Americans, the nostalgia of baseball seems to closely overlap with American’s small-town, pre-industrial past (May 1989). This reason may reflect the pastoral characteristic of American baseball because baseball started in rural nineteenth-century America (Seymour 1990). As well, adult fans may have enjoyable memories of their own playing days in rural hometowns before they moved into urban areas. This perspective is consistent with the rural town setting of the nostalgic baseball movie, “The Field of Dreams.”

For the Japanese, baseball is a symbol of modernization and westernization (Kelly 1998; May 1989). After baseball was first introduced in 1873, it became Japan’s most popular modern participant sport in the late Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan’s early modernization era (Guttmann and Thompson 2001). Many Japanese have recollections of the Koshien high school baseball tournament that started in 1915 and, since 1924, has been held at Koshien Stadium in Osaka. This stadium is symbolized as the emergence of modernity to many Japanese (e.g., their first experience with flush toilets) (Kelly 1997). Since the inception of a professional league in 1938, modernization has constantly underscored baseball’s continuing popularity. The professional baseball league has prospered under big corporate ownership and throughout the last century, baseball has been a significant arena for the display of the ideologies and institutions of modern Japan (Kelly 1998).

P5: The rural and pre-industrial aspect of traditionalism in baseball fan rituals is a more influential factor for American baseball fans in the fan ritualization process than for Japanese baseball fans.

P6: The modernization aspect of traditionalism in baseball fan rituals is a more influential factor for Japanese baseball fans in the fan ritualization process than for American baseball fans.

Socialization

Socialization in the ritualization process refers to a set of learning activities through the sharing ritual activities and their symbolic meanings with other people. Individuals might learn how to perform the various activities of a ritual and its symbolic meanings from family, friends, community members, and/or media. Frequently, people join in and create ritual communities to learn ritual activities and to share ritual experiences with others (e.g., biker groups (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and Star Trek fan communities (Kozinet 2001)). Those who have multiple socializing agents may be concerned with the agents’ authoritative ability to legitimize ritual performance.

Bell (1992) introduced the concept of “ritual specialists” who have socially recognized authority to judge the importance of ritual and the performance’s correctness. Ritual specialists may serve to legitimate the social importance of ritual, and to diffuse the correct way of performing it. However, the status of ritual specialists seems to reflect the degree of hierarchical structure in a society (Bell 1992). In a society where the social hierarchy is strong, the role of the specialist in legitimizing ritual activities is much greater than that in societies with weaker hierarchical structures.

The concept of a ritual specialist is useful in explaining baseball fans’ socializing in the fan ritualization. As noted earlier, fans get information on correct ritual performance of a ritual and its meaning from a parent, sibling, close friend, other fans, or media. The fans—as parents, friends, co-workers, or even media—may also act as ritual specialists who provide other fans with ritual information. For example, many baseball fans join in fan clubs to share ritual experiences with others, and their fan club activities offer the chance to learn something from ritual specialists.

The source of authority seems an important factor in determining the degree of legitimacy of various social groups as ritual specialists. It seems that other-focused and high-power difference cultures (e.g., Japanese and Korean) consider officialness and representativeness in overall society to be more important than close ties in the establishment of the authority of social groups. The reason for this is likely to be that collectivist cultures conform more readily to influences based on hierarchical power structures than do individualist cultures (Smith 2001).

Therefore, we expect that the authority of social groups as ritual specialists in fan ritualization will vary between Japan and the United States. We argue that the official groups (e.g., official supporter groups or the media) have legitimacy as ritual specialists in the fan ritualization process in Japan more than in the United States. On the other hand, close social groups (e.g., family or close friends) will act as the ritual specialists in the ritualization process more in the United States than in Japan.

According to Kelly (1997), oendan (supporter group) plays a major role in devising fan rituals and educating less ritualized fans about Japanese baseball. Otnes and Scott (1996) pointed out that the impact of the media is much greater in symbolizing ritual meanings of advertised products in Japan than in the United States. On the other hand, Wakefield (1995), in a study of Pittsburgh Pirates’ fans, reported that perceived peer group acceptance has a positive effect on the individual’s identification with the team, and with patronage intention.

P7: When baseball fans are socializing others in the fan ritualization process, close social groups (e.g., family or friend groups) are more influential ritual specialists for American baseball fans than for Japanese baseball fans.

P8: When baseball fans are socializing others in the fan ritualization process, socially authorized groups (e.g., media or supporter groups) are more influential ritual specialists for Japanese baseball fans than for American baseball fans.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This perspective of sports fandom as ritualized experience views sports fans as active participants who symbolize and celebrate sports consumption by voluntary role-enactments as sports fans. This sports fandom is much more than spending money to
attend a game and to buy sport-related goods. However, most sports research measures sports fandom by asking an individual about his/her interest in sports, and the amount of money spent on sports consumption (Wann 1998). As Wann et al. (2001) mention, this operationalization in defining sports fandom may result in an unclear distinction between sports fans and sports spectators. The attempts to identify the symbolic meanings and roles associated with sports fans in their sports consumption may offer extensions to the current understanding of sports fandom.

In addition, most sports research relates sports fans’ sense of self to their team/player identification, which is defined as the degree of psychological connection to specific teams or players (Cialdini et al. 1976; Fisher and Wakefield 1998). However, team/player identification is not the only factor shaping sports fans’ sense of self. They actively create and build their identities as sports fans by attaching symbolic meanings to objects and activities, securing their valuable traditions, and anchoring their behavior in cultural and social orders through the fan ritualization process. Therefore, sports fans, in their roles as ritual participants, may celebrate not only successful team performance, but also symbolized cultural meanings through engaging in a variety of fan rituals.

This perspective of the fan ritualization process may broaden current sports fan socialization theories. The theories of sports fan socialization have mostly focused on the roles of socialization agents (e.g., family, friends, and peer group) and sports fan motives (e.g., group affiliation, self-esteem, and entertainment) in the fan socialization process (McPherson 1997). However, little concern has been given to sports fans’ desires to connect themselves to “cultural continuities” (Arnould 2001) through sports activities. Arnould et al. (1999) argue that consumers have a desire for ritual action to secure cultural meanings of consuming mass-marketed consumer goods. The fan ritualization process enables them to link their sports experience to cultural values and meaningful social relations by acquiring and maintaining ritualized fandom.

Finally, we call for further investigation about the consumer ritualization processes in consumer research. Although several studies have examined ritualization strategies that consumers employ to link their consumption activities to cultural categories (decommodifying market products in the Thanksgiving Day (Wallendorf and Arnould 1989) or constructing descent groups to hand down inherited objects (Arnould et al. 1999)), consumer researchers have not systematically studied ritualization processes. As we argue in this paper, these consumer ritualization processes will be culture-specific because consumers symbolize and authorize their consumption experiences according to their own cultural values. It will be valuable to study the cultural differences in consumer ritualization processes concerning the same consumption phenomenon around world (e.g., sports fandom).

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