The Two Sides of the Gold Medal: Paradoxes of the Olympic Experience

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This empirical study on the Olympic spectator experience identifies four paradoxes—“union and disunion,” “void and repletion,” “the staged and the real,” and “the spirit and the rational” in discourse. A paradox perspective reveals interdependencies and dynamics of temporary solidarization, vitalization of the extraordinary, conquest of truth, and authentication.

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INTRODUCTION

Mega-sporting events like the Olympic Games, the Soccer World Cup finals, or the Super Bowl have become high-profile global consumption phenomena that attract the attention of massive spectator crowds. In the case of the Olympic Games, every four years, hundreds of thousands spectators gather for about two weeks to experience thrilling sporting competitions, entertaining side-shows, and how the “fastest-highest-strongest” from more than 200 countries compete for Olympic gold (Toohey and Veal 2007).

For spectators, the Olympic Games offer a unique consumption experience that exhibits characteristics of skill, spectacle, and festive performance (Arnould 2007). The staging of sports skill performance in a naturalistic setting offers the passive consumer a spectacular product. Yet, the Games also produce elements of spectacular performance through the extravagant presentation of moral values and fantastic environments. Also, consumers become integral parts of the festive performance; they co-create the atmospheric arena and produce cultural narratives (Arnould 2007). What participants of this study call a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience, resembles an extraordinary consumption experience in its various exceptional social interactions and “intense, positive, [and] intrinsically enjoyable” activities (Arnould and Price 1993, 25).

While this unique positioning has set the Olympics apart from other sports events, this popular spectacle is also vulnerable to public criticism and controversial media debates (Toohey and Veal 2007). On the one hand, critical cultural analysts mark an intensifying commercialization displayed by celebrations of consumption in Olympic Parks and streets (Tomlinson 2005) or financial pressures on athlete performances (Rahman and Lockwood 2011). On the other hand, they praise the Games as a cultural epicenter, exhibiting authentic athletic performances, accumulating cultural resources, furthering social cohesion and peace promotion, and encouraging active healthy lifestyles (Maguire et al. 2008; Papanikolau 2012; Rahman and Lockwood 2011).

Evidently, these spectacularized mega-sporting events offer the spectators experiences laden with opposing meanings—or paradoxes (Luscher, Lewis, and Ingram 2006; Mick and Fournier 1998; O’Driscoll 2008)—that are negotiated in discourse. Research on extraordinary consumption experiences and consumption of spectacular and festive environments has acknowledged before that dialectical elements of staged spectacles create tensions and competing discourses (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Tumbat and Belk 2011). This study applies a paradox perspective that emphasizes the interdependencies of opposing elements in discourse rather than interpreting them as contradictions. Adopting a paradox perspective allows to accept paradoxes as critical components of consumer discourse on consumption experiences.

This study reviews theoretical perspectives on paradoxes and empirically examines how paradoxes, crystallizing in the narratives of spectators of the London Olympic Games 2012, both dispute and enrich the Olympic experience. We detail the characteristics and dynamics of four paradoxes and discuss their contribution to unique consumption experiences.

THEORY

Nature and dynamics of paradoxes

The notion of paradox revolves around the idea of two opposing elements appearing simultaneously (Mick and Fournier 1998; O’Driscoll 2008). Unlike a dialectic approach that tends to polarize into either/or propositions, a paradox perspective uses both/and constructs (Lewis 2000; Westenholz 1993). It goes beyond dialectical thinking and adds to it in two ways.

First, a paradox theory not only highlights the simultaneity of the elements, but also their unity when taken together (Derrida [1976] 1997; Lewis 2000; O’Driscoll 2008). Thus, it guides researchers to investigate both ends simultaneously and pay attention to their interdependencies (Lewis 2000). It is the unity with the counterpart—Derrida ([1976] 1997) calls it “supplementarity”—that helps to better understand the phenomenon. The opposing element helps to delineate, and at the same time complements the element itself. A paradoxes approach opens a new way of thinking in that it suggests to look at the counterpart, consider how the elements overlap and interact and, eventually, cannot be separated.

Second, a paradox perspective brings a dynamic component to the phenomenon under study. Paradoxes can paralyze (Burkean logic, as cited in Czarniawska 1997), lead to reinforcing cycles which enforce tensions, or virtuous cycles which enable change, transformation, or creativity (Cameron and Quinn 1988; Lewis 2000; Ropo and Hunt 1995; Smith and Berg 1987; Smith and Lewis 2011)—thus, paradoxes ask for a reaction and initiate action, even if this action is suppression or acceptance of the paradox. Especially organization theorists, like Cameron and Quinn (1988), praise paradoxes as a “powerful framework for examining the impacts of plurality and change, aiding understandings of divergent perspectives and disruptive experiences” (Lewis 2000, 760). Literature suggests several strategies on an individual, group, and organizational level that allow for a successful “management” of paradoxes in order to turn them into opportunities rather than threats. Among others, researchers list accepting (Lewis 2000; Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Schneider 1990), confronting (Lewis 2000; Smith and Berg 1987; Vince and Broussine 1996), and transcendence (Lewis 2000)/paradoxical thinking (Westenholz 1993)/reframing (Lewis 2000; Smith and Berg 1987; Westenholz 1993). Only recently, Smith and Lewis (2011) detail the evolution of paradox in a dynamic equilibrium model of organizing, in which they regard tensions as inherently present and depict their cyclical responses to the paradox as a “constant motion across opposing forces” (386). Several authors propose not to resolve, but rather to embrace paradoxes (Czarniawska 2001; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Handy 1994; Lewis 2000; Smith and Lewis 2011; Westenholz 1993).

Paradoxes in Marketing and Experience Literature

In marketing and consumer literature, some researchers apply related concepts, such as dialectical tensions (Thompson and Haytko 1997), contradictions (e.g., cultural contradictions Holt 2004), or ambivalence (Omes, Lowsley, and Shrum 1997); others use the term paradox in diverse contexts and with different foci. The authenticity paradox, for example, is about the contradictions involved in communicating and creating authenticity through advertisement (Stern 1994). The expression “staged authenticity,” coined by Mac-
Cannell (1973) and further used in tourism literature (Wang 1999), describes this paradox. In their study on reality television Rose and Wood (2005) are also concerned with authenticity; however, they reveal a paradox between the real and the fantastic. In their paper on the technology paradox, Mick and Fournier (1998) conceptualize the postmodern paradox and detail individual responses (in form of coping strategies) to them. Others point at the paradox that lies within modern communication technologies (Christensen 2000; Sproull and Kiesler 1992), arguing that modern technologies not only further, but also constrain interactive communication. Caruana, Crane, and Fitchett (2008) discuss the paradox of consumer independence and find that consumers mediate the tension between the “myth of the independent traveler” (269) searching for the authentic and the mass-mediated, commercialized tourist destinations. Newholm and Hopkinson (2011) investigate the paradox of the construction of individuality when participating in mainstream consumption. Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard, and Kristensen (2011) investigate the paradox of consuming while at the same time exhibiting mundane brand resistance. They find that consumers legitimate bad consumption by “embracing myths of craftsmanship” (215). Overall, while paradoxes are widely used in literature, the notion of paradox is not systematically defined, or used; the paradox mostly serves to denote variants of contradictions in different consumption contexts that individual consumers are concerned with.

Research on extraordinary consumption experiences investigate opposing structures in extreme situations (Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Tumbat and Belk (2011), in their research of the Mount Everest experience, approach their data with a Turnerian structure/anti-structure perspective and find that participants “negotiate” both ends of the dialectic “in their pursuit of extraordinary consumption experiences” (Tumbat and Belk 2011, 57). This finding points at the co-existence of both ends and, ultimately, towards the existence of a paradoxical structure. Whereas Tumbat and Belk (2011), in response to an overly positive framing of consumption experiences in consumer research literature, critically interpret their findings as marketplace tensions and duality of elements/concepts, this study aims to uncover the dynamics and interdependence of this duality.

METHODOLGY
To get insights on the nature and dynamics of paradoxes of the Olympic experience, we applied an interpretive approach consisting of participant observation and narrative elements. One of the authors participated as spectator at various Olympic events before and during the Olympic Summer Games 2012 in London. Covering an observation period of one month, we kept detailed written field notes, took over 400 photographs, and engaged with dozens of spectators. Additionally, we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews of 20-60 minutes with spectators. We recruited participants at Olympic venues and conducted the interviews after sporting competitions or other events. To include multiple perspectives we chose to recruit both national residents of Great Britain, and international spectators, making up half of the interviewees. Prior to, during, and after the event we collected photographs, on- and offline articles, and other relevant data on the Olympic experience. We analyzed data according to constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006). In several circles of reflection, we identified mixed messages (O’Conner 1995; Lewis 2000) that mark inconsistencies across the data.

FINDINGS
Our data on the Olympic experience exhibits four recurring paradoxes, “union and disunion,” “repletion and void,” “the real and the staged,” and “the spirit and the rational.” They are not mutually exclusive but complementary in forming a comprehensive narrative framing of the Olympic experience. Table 1 gives an overview of the identified paradoxes, discursive themes, and dynamics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradoxes</th>
<th>Discursive Themes</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Union and Disunion</td>
<td>- Global nationalistic forum</td>
<td>Solidarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Competitive union</td>
<td>- Shifting group boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repletion and Void</td>
<td>- Aggregation and nothingness</td>
<td>Vitalization of the extraordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Desire and saturation</td>
<td>- Seizing and preserving the moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Real and the Staged</td>
<td>- The mediated real</td>
<td>Conquest of truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The fictional hero</td>
<td>- Searching proximity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The moral and the economic</td>
<td>- Exploring variants of truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The idealized past</td>
<td>Authentication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Legitimizing the commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Evaluating investments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Union and Disunion

The (dis-)union paradox is most pervasive across the data and manifests itself in various ways. Spectators mainly recognize the uniting element of the Olympic Games. Helene (31, German), for example, explains that to her, the Olympic experience is “about coming together and to stand for something which unites everyone” and Maaïke (40, Dutch) describes how a commonality among the spectators creates bonds. However, union simultaneously creates disunion—especially at the Olympic Games: Whenever a union or group of people forms, this group also always creates boundaries, which have a disuniting effect. At the Games, these group boundaries are extremely volatile and temporary, as commonalities uniting various groups change rapidly: Data shows that the “I” of spectators often changes into a “we” that sometimes stand for a group of spectators supporting the same athlete, a nation, all participants of the event, or even humankind. This volatility of union becomes evident in the case of Helene, who later explains that “it is also about showing commitment...commitment to maybe your home country.” The competitive nature of the Games only contributes to the formation of group boundaries and thus, fosters as well union and disunion. Stefanie (26, US American) refers to this paradox of simultaneous union and competition when she says that it “feel[s] like [the Olympic Games are] the only thing that you see that unites the entire world in a healthy and competitive way.”

What we can also witness at the Olympic Games, is an underdog effect (Paharia et al. 2011); a solidarization with the less “privileged”. Spectators reported how amazed they were by the relentless support offered to those athletes that were far from winning one of the precious medals. Therefore, the fact that only an incredibly small number of athletes win does not necessarily create disunion, but union among and with those who never win a medal.

We find that the paradox of union and disunion is similar to paradoxes of belonging, which denote the complex relation between the individual self and group membership (Smith and Berg 1987; Lewis 2000); our findings exhibit processes of shifting boundaries and temporary and fluid constructs of groups. People are constantly searching for commonalities with others, quickly trying to become a member of a group—before group boundaries are shifted again. These processes, that we like to put under the heading of solidarization, resonate with Maffesoli’s ideas (2007), when he recognizes mechanisms of solidarity to be at work in the rituals and participation around sporting idols and other archetypes. The “collective sensibility” (Maffesoli 1996, 18) emergent in this process leads to a common sentiment of belonging to an open, yet unstable emotional community. Also, our data supports the idea that international sporting events act as a “global nationalistic forum” (Lee and Maguire 2009, 6) as they both reinforce passionate nationalistic expressions, and simultaneously promote cosmopolitan identification between nations (Barnard et al. 2006; Maguire, et al. 2008).

Repletion and Void

“Once it is finished, you know, it will feel like an empty void” (Catherine, 44, British).

The Olympic Games are oriented towards a dense spatial and temporal aggregation. Spectators are keen for these sparse moments to come and, as soon as they are there, they need to be ready and seize them as intensely as they can, “soaking up the atmosphere” and enjoying peak moments. This repletion of the Olympic Games is also marked by a joining of the modern and innovative with heritage and tradition. The Games simultaneously mirror the past and create the future, when traditional elements of the Games, such as the opening ceremony, are held in newly built stadiums and are realized with the help of cutting-edge technology. Paradoxically, spectators not only recognize this repletion, but also a nothingness of the Olympic experience. For Helene (31, German), for example, the Olympic experience is “everything and nothing” and for Catherine (44, British), the event’s inevitable perishability seems to be omnipresent: “There is nothing to look forward to. I mean we have done it. It’s finished, it’s over, and it’s like empty.” In this verbatim, Catherine, using present tense, drags her expectations of the future into her perception of the present.

Discourse reveals an interesting interdependence of repletion and void. Andy (30, Austrian) refers to one facet of this interdependence when he explains that, if time in between the events were shorter, his desire for the upcoming event would be diminished. Desire for the experience, a “primarily positive” feeling (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, 343), grows in times of void; repletion can only be experienced together with void, and vice versa. The spatiotemporal distancing from the everyday mundane life in the Olympic experience, reminiscent of Maclaran and Brown’s “sense of displace” (2005, 320), is pervaded by a critical awareness of nothingness, which—paradoxically—enriches it. Simultaneously, repletion easily leads to saturation, which further leads to boredom (Pisching 2008). Also, the awareness of the void leads to the wish to capture moments of repletion, visible in picture-taking and the collection of manifestations, in order to conserve them for times of void. Thus, the paradox of repletion and void initiates processes of preserving the moment and delineating the experience from the mundane that are able to powerfully vitalize and energize the extraordinariness of the Olympic experience in a continuous oscillatory circle.

The Real and the Staged

“Ah, it was amazing, you know. If you [sat] at home you would never understand how that, how it was. I mean, it’s only possible for yourself [to understand]...how amazing that moment IS” (Brian, 58, British).

Spectators of the Olympic Games consider themselves to be in an exclusive position; they are the insiders experiencing the vibrant atmosphere and spectacular environment. Not sitting behind their screens, they expect to experience the immediate. They are aware of the staged setting, reflect upon it, and want to look backstage in order to get a glimpse of the truly real (Goffman [1959] 1973; Holt 2002). However, they are not always satisfied with what they find. Paradoxically, some spectators explain that, being at the live event, they feel much more detached than sitting behind their TV sets and watching close-ups and slow motions. The media offers proximity to the event through a focus on the spectacular and provides a diversity of options. In other cases, the media forms expectations that cannot be met in reality. A special paradoxical example in this context is the hero. Pauline’s (34, British) example of how she “started cutting out all the stories from the papers about, oh, on ‘this athlete is doing incredible work to get out here, because they have fought this disease’...” shows how heroes are created by the media. However, in real life, athletes may not be able live up to their fictional portrayals—which makes the true hero the fictional hero (Goethals and Allison 2012).

Our findings of the real and the staged suggest that the staged induces the real and vice versa. Without the hype generated by the mediation of the staged, no such desire for the real could be initiated. And of course, without an immediate real, there is nothing to be mediated. However, just like Rose and Wood (2005), we find that consumers negotiate both elements of the paradox. Through this
negotiation process, they widen their perspectives; hence, making out of one experience hundreds of thousands possible variants to be explored and choices to be made for the consumers’ quest of truth. Also, the paradox of the mediated real(ity) spurs a process of searching proximity. The constant search for the next piece of the puzzle, stimulated by media reports and word-of-mouth, creates a rather adventurous desire of “exploring” and going “right into the middle of it”.

The Spirit and the Rational

Every four years, the Olympic Games need to live up to a promise of moral values (Toohey and Veal 2007), revive a shared Olympic spirit, and make both values and spirit tangible to the senses (Prisching 2008). The spirit side to the Games is highlighted by many spectators, Max (45, British) explains that “there certainly is something very magical” about the Olympic Games, “something a lot bigger, certainly hard to describe.” He very much idealizes the atmosphere and imagines what it would be like, if it were spread: “Save that in a bottle, and give it to the rest of the world when having a problem—all the problems are gone.” While idealizations are prominent in the discourse, spectators also evaluate the Olympic Games from a very rational viewpoint. They repeatedly refer to the obligations and duties of the host country and critically reflect on the costs and benefits of the investments taken. Alexandros (70, Greek) evaluates the Olympic Games from both perspectives and comes to the conclusion that they should disseminate universalistic ideals and messages, such as internationalism, cosmopolitanism, environmentalism or fair-play (Maguire et al. 2008), and, at the same time, need to be embedded in the present economic and commercial system. In other words, they need to satisfy the spirit as well as the rational element. In a sense, spectators want to experience the traditional, antique sports-myth of the Olympic Games; however, they are also aware of the commercialized elements tainting this myth. Afraid of being disappointed, the paradox of the rational and the spirit leads to a continuous evaluation of investments and “returns on investment” by spectators and the host country. When spectators are referring to the inspiring elements and the perfect “show” of the Olympic Games, they are trying to legitimize the sometimes commercial nature of the experience towards themselves and others.

The negotiation process between the idealized and the rational in the Olympic experience is reminiscent of processes of authentication in commercial contexts (Alexander 2009; Newholm and Hopkins 2009). Rahman and Lockwood (2011) for example, identify a paradox of commercialization in the context of the Olympic Games and find that the representation of the athletes as amateurs aims to legitimize the Games and maintain authenticity. We find that the discourse on the Olympic spirit authenticates the Games yet, not without its counterpart, the rational. In today’s commercialized society, the Olympic Games gain legitimized space exactly through the rational; a space necessary for the spirit to prosper. While the rational legitimizes the spirit, the spirit authenticates the rational.

DISCUSSION

The Olympic Games offer a unique experience comprised of paradoxical juxtapositions of competing yet, interdependent elements. Our empirical analysis of spectator discourse on the Olympic experience has revealed paradoxes of “union and disunion,” “void and repletion,” “the staged and the real,” and “the spirit and the rational.” These two sides of the gold medal exist simultaneously in this unique consumption experience of skill, spectacular, and festive performance. Their interdependencies become visible as we flip the medal and look at the other side of the same.

Paradoxes spark dynamics of constant negotiation processes of the respective opposing elements and shed light on the ‘‘other’, the ‘unrepresentable’ and the unfamiliar” (Caputo 1997, as cited in Dholakia and Venkatesh 2006, 132). However, none of the prevailing paradoxes are resolved in discourse; rather, they trigger dynamic processes. The constant motion across temporary uniting and disuniting discourses reveals the latent grounds of a variety of social solidarities; the interplay of discourses on repletion and void intensifies and energizes the extraordinary character of the spectacle; the dense juxtaposition of discourses on the real and the staged exponents perspectives in the conquest for possible truths; and finally, the complementary discourses about the rational and the spirit initiate an authentication of the commercial foundation of the Olympic Games.

Until now, consumer research has mostly directed its attention to either overly positive, communal, enchanting characterizations of consumption experiences, or anti-structural characteristics and dialectical tensions in extraordinary experiences. Corroborating Tumbat and Belk (2011), we find negotiation processes and add to their research in specifying their underlying dynamics. While we have investigated the nature and dynamics of paradoxes during the Olympic Games, we encourage further research to go beyond that restricted time frame. A longitudinal perspective would enable researchers to explore potentially vicious or virtuous cycles over time and thus characterize and understand the evolution of paradoxes.

Adopting a paradox perspective on a discursive level opens new perspectives for further disentangling the complexities of extraordinary consumption experiences and sheds light to the flip side of the same gold medal. It enriches our understanding of paradoxes in consumer discourse as important ingredients of unique consumption experiences.

REFERENCES


