THE COMMODIFICATION PROCESS OF EXTREME SPORTS: THE DIFFUSION OF THE X-GAMES BY ESPN

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the commodification process of extreme sports. Specifically, this study is to investigate how X-Games as a sport event has been spread among the teenagers by ESPN in order to use extreme sports commercially. The diffusion theory was utilized as a theoretical framework to explain this process because the diffusion theory is a useful perspective to explain how new ideas are spread among the members of a social system. In other words, X-Games as an innovation has been diffused through both ESPN (mass media channel) and the participants and viewers of X-Games (interpersonal channel) over time among teenagers (the members of a social system). Especially, this study focused the role of ESPN as a change agent in the diffusion process of X-Games. For the purpose of this study, a research question was suggested, "Does ESPN influence the consumption of commodities related to extreme sports?". A path model was constructed to examine this research question. This model was designed to investigate the causal link between the amount of X-Games televised by ESPN and the consumption of commodities related to extreme sports. The result indicated that the model was consistent with the data.

Introduction

Individual sports and outdoor activities, like skateboarding, in-line skating, rock climbing, parasailing, mountain biking, skyboarding, disc golf, and snowboarding, that contain a certain degree of risk have become increasingly popular in the 1990s. These leisure activities are known by various names, such as "thrill seeker" vacations (du Lac, 1995), "whiz" sports (Midol, 1993; Midol & Broyer, 1995), "panic" sports (Kroker, Kroker, & Cook, 1989), "risk" sports, and " extreme" sports (ESPN, 1995; Rinehart, 1995; Robinson, 1992). Two terms, risk sports and extreme sports, are broadly accepted.

Robinson (1992) argued that risk sport activities differ from traditional sport activities by posing elements of real or perceived physical danger within a context of outcome uncertainty. He also defined the risk sports "as a variety of self-initiated activities that generally occur in natural-environment settings and that, due to their always uncertain and potentially harmful nature, provide the opportunity for intense cognitive and affective involvement" (p. 53). The origin of using the word "extreme" in those activities goes back to the 1970s in France when two Frenchmen referred to their conquest of Chamonix couloirs as "ski extrême" (Youngblut, 1998). Youngblut described the word "extreme" as "far beyond the bounds of moderation; exceeding what is considered reasonable; radical" (p. 24). Pedersen and Kelly (2000) contended that the term "extreme" was used in the context of sports to describe any sporting activity that was taken to "the edge." Then, they defined it as "a variety of sporting activities that have almost nothing in common except for high risk and an appeal to females and males from the ages of 12-to-34" (p. 1). Synthesizing the definitions of Robinson and Pedersen and Kelly, extreme sports are defined as a variety of individual sporting activities that challenge against uncertain and harmful nature to achieve the enjoyment itself, especially, among the young generation.

The Entertainment Sports Programming Network (hereafter, ESPN) X-Games is a commercialization of extreme sports. According to ESPN's Director of Programming, Ron Semiao, he got the idea for ESPN's X-Games in 1993. The idea was to create a sport event, such as the Olympic Games, held in both Summer and Winter every four years. Thus, ESPN began hosting X-Games in Summer and Winter annually, called them Summer X-Games and Winter X-Games. The idea of ESPN's Director, wishing to innovate a sport event in Summer and Winter, such as the Olympiad, has come true as X-Games. Needless to say, in terms of a communication channel to people, ESPN has played an important role to disseminate X-Games to people. ESPN claimed that "the 1998 X-Games attracted a record 250,000 spectators and gathered more than 400 of the world's top alternative sports athletes to compete for prize money/medals in nine sports categories" (X Games fact sheet – X at V, 1999, p. 1). In addition, they said that they reached 76 million households through ESPN, 64.4 million households through ESPN2, and approximately 171 million households worldwide via ESPN International in 1999 Summer X-Games. Since ESPN changed the name from "The eXtreme Games" to "X-Games in 1996, ESPN has hosted "The X-Games" each year in both Summer and Winter, as planned.

In the meantime, extreme sports are alternative sports against the mainstream. In spite of its uncommercial characteristic as the alternative sports, they have flourished commercially. Maurstad (1998) noted, "The X-Games present a sporting event for a post-punk audience raised on MTV. ... This wide world of sports represents a complete inversion of the old order in which team sports and team ideals were the standard that jocks lived by" (p. 1). The X-Games was created in 1995 by ESPN in order to enhance profit and entertainment in the form of sponsorship and endorsement of non-sports and sport-related activities, goods, services, and merchandise. In other words, the X-Games is a sports event created to commercialize extreme sports by a media company.

In fact, not only ESPN, the first network to televise extreme sports as a sport event, but also the other television networks (e.g., Fox Sports Net, NBC, MTV, and XOZ) are dealing with extreme sports or have a plan to do so (Larson, 1999). Many major advertisers have paid attention to extreme sports and have even sponsored them. It is said that the main reason why they are interested in the X-Games is that most of participants and viewers are teenagers who have strong purchasing power. For this reason, it is expected that many television networks will make efforts to commmodify the extreme sports continuously. Moreover, this type of intervention by media or sponsors demonstrates the commodification process of extreme sports regardless of the nature of alternative sports. In other words, the extreme sports, which have tried to resist commercialized and competitive forms (Rinehart, 1998), are becoming new objects of commodification.

The purpose of this study is to explore the commodification process of extreme sports. This study is also to examine how extreme sports evolved into X-Games as a sport event by ESPN. Thus, it is assumed that ESPN has played an important role as a change agent to diffuse extreme sports among people in order to use extreme sports commercially. In this matter, diffusion theory provides a useful theoretical framework to achieve the purpose of this study. According to Rogers (1995), "diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system "(p.5). Thus, diffusion theory is useful approaches to explain how new ideas are spread among the members of a social system. Therefore, this study is to explore the commodification process of the extreme sports by applying diffusion theory. Specifically, it is investigated how X-Games as a sport event has been spread among people by ESPN in order to use extreme sport commercially.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the commodification process of extreme sports. Specifically, this study is to investigate how X-Games as a sport event has been spread among people by ESPN in order to use extreme sports commercially. The diffusion theory was utilized as a theoretical framework to explain this process because the diffusion theory is a useful perspective to explain how new ideas are spread among the members of a social system. In other words, X-Games as an innovation has been diffused through both ESPN (mass media channel) and the participants and viewers of X-Games (interpersonal channel) over time among teenagers (the members of a social system). Especially, this study focused the role of ESPN as a change agent in the diffusion process of X-Games.

For the purpose of this study, a research question was suggested, "Does ESPN influence the consumption of commodities related to extreme sports?" In addition, hypotheses to test this research question were proposed as follows:

Hypothesis #1: There is a positive association between the amount of X-Games televised by ESPN and the number of participants in X-Games.

Hypothesis #2: There is a positive association between the number of participants in X-Games and the amount of consumption of commodities related to extreme sports.

Based on these hypotheses, a path model was constructed (Figure 1). The path model was applied because it is a causal model for understanding relationships between variables. It is assumed that independent variable, the amount of X-Games televised by ESPN, will have an impact on the number of participants in X-Games as a control variable, and in turn will have an impact on the amount of consumption of commodities related to extreme sports as a dependent variable.

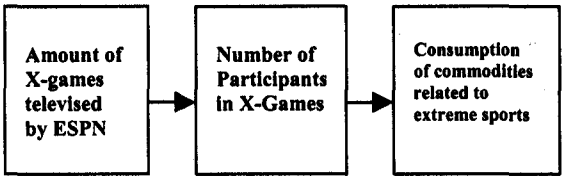

Figure 1. Path model

In order to test this path model, the second data were collected as follows. The amount of X-games televised by ESPN 1 and ESPN 2 in a yearly base from 1993 to 1999, the number of participants in X-games in a yearly base from 1991 to 1998, and the amount of consumption of commodities related to extreme sports from 1990 to 1999 in a yearly base were tabulated. Moreover, a least squares path analysis program by Hunter and Hamilton was employed to analysis.

Results

In order to assess the fit of the model, the amount of X-games televised by ESPN (X)→ the number of participants in X-games (Y) → the amount of consumption of commodities in extreme sports (Z), it should be compared by the predicted value of the correlation between X and Z to the obtained value of that. If this model is correct, the predicted value and the obtained value of the correlation between X and Z are equal. Thus, the predicted value of the correlation between X and Z is the product of the correlation between X and Y and the correlation between Y and Z (Tables 1 & 2).

The predicted correlation between ESPN (X) and Participants (Y) was (0.74) (0.91) = 0.63. Thus, the error in predicting this correlation is approximately (0.93) – (0.63) = 0.26. This error is trivial. Furthermore, the significant test of the error size (z=1, $p > .05$) indicated that the data are consistent with this model. In addition, χ^2 (1) = 0.99, so that $p > 0.05$, again indicating that this model is consistent with the data (Figure 2).

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients

Variable	ESPN (X)	Participants (Y)	Consumption (Z)
ESPN (X)	1.00		
Participants (Y)	0.74*	1.00	
Consumption (Z)	0.93*	0.91*	1.00

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Path Coefficients

Variable	ESPN (X)	Participants (Y)	Consumption (Z)
ESPN (X)			
Participants (Y)	0.74		
Consumption (Z)		0.91	

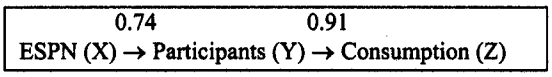

Figure 2. Path Model with Path Coefficients

Discussion

According to the test of the path model, the hypotheses were supported; that is, there is a positive association between the amount of X-Games televised by ESPN and the number of participants in X-Games; there is a positive association between the number of participants in X-Games and the amount of consumption of commodities related to extreme sports.

One of the limitations of this study will be that this study examines the commodification process of the extreme sports in the macro level. Therefore, the future researches in the micro level should be followed. For instance, the specific roles of ESPN to diffuse extreme sports, the psychological or sociological motive of participants for extreme sports, the characteristics of individual participants in terms of adopter categories, and the interpersonal network of participants should be examined in the future research.

Despite this limitation, this study will have several implications. First, this study will be worthy as a pilot study on extreme sport or X-Games. In fact, there have been few researches on extreme sports or X-Games. Especially, there has been no research, which empirically examine the commodification process of X-Games. Furthermore, this study will provide theoretical base for the future research on X-Games. The various researches on X-Games or extreme sports in the micro level or individual level can be conducted. As previously noted, one of the strengths of diffusion theory is its broad applicability. Another implication of this paper will be that it tries to apply diffusion theory to another field, namely, the field of leisure sports marketing.

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