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Communication & Sport 2013 1: 100 originally published online 16 January 2013

DOI: 10.1177/2167479512472049

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Communication & Sport
1(1/2) 100-112
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DOI: 10.1177/2167479512472049
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Abstract

This essay highlights the unique and intimately interrelated nature of the relationship between communication and advertising by providing a selective overview of communication about and through sport within the context of promotional culture. While advertising and marketing of sport leagues, teams, celebrity athletes, and commodities are important, this treatment focuses on how the advertising industry has come to dominate contemporary social life, and why “sport” is such an important channel of communication within promotional culture. The article (a) outlines the emergence, nature, and social significance of advertising; (b) offers a framework for analysis based on the circuit of commodification and communication model that emphasizes the context and complex interrelationships between particular moments in commodification processes; (c) discusses a current research example examining sport, globalization, and corporate nationalism; and (d) considers directions for future research.

Keywords

advertising, promotional culture, corporate nationalism, capitalism, commodification, sport, media

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Why Communication and Sport Matters

To understand the significance of sport communication, and the role of advertising and promotional culture within it, one only needs to remember that communication is the very essence of all human interaction. Yet, it is rarely acknowledged that communication and advertising have much in common including their etymology. For example, communication is based on the Latin word “*communis*,” meaning *to share*, and advertising, from the middle English term *Advertisen*, means *to notify*. To highlight the unique and intimately interrelated nature of this relationship, this essay provides a brief overview of communication *about* and *through* sport within the context of advertising and promotional culture (Wernick, 1991). While advertising and marketing of sport leagues, teams, celebrity athletes, and commodities are undoubtedly important, my focus will be on how and why the advertising industry itself emerged and has come to dominate contemporary social life, and why “sport” is such an important channel of communication within promotional culture.

The economic significance of promotional culture, and the value of sport within it, is overwhelming. The global sponsorship market grew from \$US3.9 to \$US26 billion between 1984 and 2002 (Lagae, 2003), rose to \$US37.9 billion in 2007, and looks to top \$US51.1 billion in 2012. While these figures refer to all forms of sponsorship, it is worth noting that “sport” was the fastest growing sector in North America in 2011–2012, accounting for 69% of all sponsorship or approximately \$US12.97 billion (IEG, 2012). Sponsorship is integral to a wider promotional culture that not only seeks to communicate particular corporate identities and brands but also the symbolic and ideological content of a culture and “its ethos, texture, and constitution as a whole” (Wernick, 1991, p. vii). An important question, then, is how and why sport emerged as such an important theme or vehicle in advertising and promotional culture?

As previously documented (Jackson & Andrews, 2005, 2012), sport is a valuable cultural commodity within the sport/media/promotional culture nexus (Jhally, 1989); because it (a) attracts large and passionately devoted audiences (Wenner, 1989); (b) translates well across cultural and linguistic contexts; (c) is less expensive to produce relative to other types of media programming; (d) involves human drama and a context for the socially acceptable expression of the full range of human emotions; (e) features real people demonstrating the limits of the body; (f) has been described as an erotic practice (Guttman, 1996); (g) provides us with carefully crafted narratives of heroes and villains (Whannel, 2002); (h) offers consumers and fans flexible modes and degrees of consumption and identity investment (Jackson, 1988); (i) serves as a preeminent basis and marker of identity; (j) is an ideal conduit of promotional culture because it mirrors the idealized version of capitalism that celebrates competition, achievement, efficiency, technology, and meritocracy; and (k) is associated with positive images of health and nationhood (Rowe, 1996). In combination, these characteristics make sport “a powerful vehicle for transnational corporations and their allied advertising and promotional armatures... located within and across a complex and increasingly global system of intertextual

promotional cultures including: movies, art, fashion, music and politics” (Jackson, Andrews, & Scherer, 2005, p. 8).

My Journey with Communication and Sport

My own journey considering communication and sport has made it clear that multiple layers of analysis are required to understand advertising as a form of communication and as a cultural practice that drives and sustains capitalism—a paradigm based, and dependent, on gratuitous and excessive consumption. While most of my work is not in the field of sport communication per se, I have always been fascinated by the media and its power to influence politics, policy, and how people think, feel, and act.

My early work focused on the role of the media in constructing forms of national identity (Jackson, 1994, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2004). Highlighting how one’s own biography influences one’s work, my migration from Canada to New Zealand reinforced an emerging interest in global media and its impact on identity formation (Jackson & Andrews, 1999), and this led to interrelated projects on *Sport, Culture and Advertising* (Jackson & Andrews, 2005), *Corporate Nationalism* (Jackson, 2001, 2004, 2013 [in press]; Jackson, Batty & Scherer, 2001; Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002; John & Jackson, 2011; Scherer & Jackson, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010), and, more recently, *Sport, Alcohol and Promotional Culture* (Gee & Jackson, 2010, 2011; Wenner & Jackson, 2009).

Central to recent work has been the use and adaptation of the circuit of cultural commodification (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Johnson, 1986). In many ways, the circuit represents my own exploration and experience of advertising with all its creativity, complexities, and contradictions. Like most, my reaction to ads ranges from ambivalence to amusement, and from boredom to shock. Eventually, I began to see ads in a new light. I wanted to know more about what was going on “behind the scenes.” How did the advertising industry emerge and come to dominate social life? What is the relationship between media companies, corporations, and advertising agencies? How do corporations such as Nike, with their network of celebrity athletes such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and LeBron James, ethically and morally justify their accumulation of wealth predicated on exploited labour in developing nations? Why do ad agencies use specific images to deliberately shock and offend? Are ads really effective? Who is responsible for regulating advertising in order to protect consumers, particularly children?

While most of these questions remain unanswered, I have slowly come to a disconcerting realization: We are now living a real-life version of the movie *The Matrix*. In this film, while walking through a busy city intersection, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) tries to explain “The Matrix” to Neo (Thomas A. Anderson played by Keanu Reeves):

The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you’re inside, you look around, what do you see?—Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters—the very

minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it.

As they walk Neo is distracted by a beautiful blonde woman in a red dress. Morpheus then asks “Were you listening to me Neo or were you looking at the woman in the red dress,” then asks him to “look again,” whereupon Neo is confronted with a man (agent Smith) pointing a gun in his face. My interpretation is that (1) the Matrix is the paradigm we know as global consumer capitalism—a system aided and abetted by particular interests; (2) the woman in the red dress represents advertising and the seductiveness of *consumption*; and (3) the gun signifies all those things we do not know, cannot see, and, worst of all, do not care about that could hurt us now or in the future. These matters include climate change/global warming, poverty, various forms of discrimination, violence, and war.

Relating this to sport, we only need to ponder society’s obsession with branded fashion sportswear. Seductive, stylized, and celebrity-fronted advertisements often serve to conceal the real power relations at play between the profits of global corporations, excessive and needless consumption, and exploited third-world labor. Framed by my reading of *The Matrix*, I outline the emergence, nature, and wider social significance of advertising, offer a model that highlights the context and complex interrelationships between particular moments in the circuit of commodification, and, finally, offer an example of current research.

Focus: On Advertising and Promotional Culture

Over the past century, advertising has been variously described as a system of organized magic (Williams, 1980), a form of subliminal seduction (Key, 1972), a form of popular culture (Fowles, 1996), a science (Rothenberg, 1999), “the official art of capitalism” (Harvey, 1990, p. 63), a “sphere of ideology” (Goldman, 1992), and a language and form of social communication (Cook, 1992; Goddard, 1998; Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990). The very range of these characterizations confirms advertising’s powerful place within society. Here, I focus on two particular aspects of advertising: (a) its emergence as an industry within global consumer capitalism and (b) its role as a privileged form of social communication. Notably, the two are intimately interrelated, with the latter naturalizing and legitimating the former.

One perspective on the wider cultural import of advertising is offered by Sut Jhally in his book *The Codes of Advertising* (1990) and documentary *Advertising and the End of the World* (1997). The documentary’s title seems hyperbolic. However, Jhally makes compelling connections between the origins and logic of advertising as an industry, its crucial role in mediating the relationship between production and consumption, and its seductive power in providing people with fantasized ways of achieving dreams and happiness through consumption. Most

importantly, he points out the inherent contradiction and insustainability of a way of life that, if continued unchecked, may drive the destruction of our planet.

Although rudimentary forms of advertising have long existed, it emerged as an industry in the late 19th century (Jhally, 1990; Sassatelli, 2007). New technologies enabled the mass production of commodities on a scale never before witnessed or imagined. Indeed, we had reached a stage where industry could produce more commodities than people wanted or needed. Enter the advertising industry, which mediated between production and consumption. This was a pivotal moment, the historical transformation from a capitalist system driven by production to one increasingly based on consumption (Miller, 1995). Stated another way, society had shifted from a system where people needed commodities to one where commodities needed people (Jhally, 1990). Advertising was a cultural industry, the sole purpose of which was to ensure that the matrix of capitalism survived. What emerged was a distinct form of media that became one of the most powerful forces in human history. As Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990, p. 5) note, advertising became “an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions.”

Another way of conceptualizing advertising is in terms of what Bourdieu (1993) refers to as a “cultural field,” a site where people, with differing levels of power, struggle over material and symbolic resources. Ultimately, a cultural field is a place/space where society tells its stories reflecting its history, morals, values, and the “keys to happiness.” These stories, once the domain of the family, church, and school, became increasingly the province of the media, and by default, advertising (Jhally, 1990). Indeed, the *problem* is that media and advertising have become *the* central storytellers in contemporary society, transforming the landscapes of capital (Goldman & Papson, 2011), colonizing culture, and thereby shaping our ideas, experiences, and identities.

Consequently, the increasingly commercialized and deregulated media, operating in conjunction with other corporations, have developed a system that successfully correlates happiness and success with the consumption of commodities. Propelling that system is advertising, which serves as a form of promotional culture articulating images and brands with lifestyle and identity in order to maintain and sustain capitalism. Unfortunately, beneath and behind the sophisticated imagery, emotion, humor, and exotic themes of advertising are the accumulating effects of obsessive global consumption. For example, we have been warned that, in the last 50 years, we have used as much of the world’s resources as the entire history of humankind and that blindly continuing on our current path is likely to lead to a crisis by approximately 2070 (Jhally, 1997; McKibben, 1989). This taken-for-granted innocence of advertising and its masking of broader, long-term damage prompted Jhally to boldly title his 1997 documentary *Advertising and the End of the World*. Such concerns situate advertising in a broader model that helps illuminate the workings of global consumer capitalism within the relational context of promotional culture.

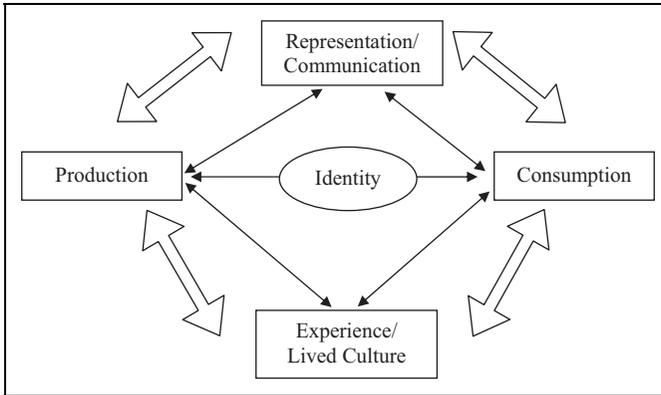


Figure 1. The circuit of commodification and communication model.

The circuit of commodification and communication model (Figure 1) unmasks and demystifies some of the key relationships within advertising and promotional culture. The benefit of the model is that it (a) allows us to see the “life” of a sport commodity or brand as it circulates throughout the circuit; (b) encourages us to acknowledge the relationships between, and the multidirectional nature of, key moments in the circuit; (c) enables us to see conceptually what we often cannot see in reality, making visible the invisible or, in Johnson’s (1986) terms, helps illustrate the relationship between public and private; and (d) locates sport commodities and brands within particular sociohistorical and political economic contexts. Finally, beyond these benefits, the model also shows how various forms of regulation and deregulation may enable or constrain the flows of sporting capital, all of which influence identity formation. To this extent, the model helps us understand advertising as a form of communication about commodities by heeding du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus’s (1997, p. 3) advice that “one should explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution.”

The best way to illustrate the utility of the model is to show how it has been applied in specific research projects. Here, I will draw upon one multidimensional line of research on sport, globalization, and corporate nationalism. The concept of corporate nationalism is associated with the strategies used by transnational corporations (TNCs) to localize within different national contexts. TNCs face a wide range of challenges in negotiating the global–local nexus (Morley & Robins, 1995) including linguistic, cultural, and political barriers.

So, how do TNCs, including those related to sport, engage in global localization or what Robertson (1995) refers to as “glocalization”? One increasingly prevalent and popular form of glocalization is a process known as *corporate nationalism*. According to Silk, Andrews, and Cole (2005, p. 7), as a result of corporate nationalism, “the nation and national culture have become principal (albeit perhaps unwilling)

accomplices. as global capitalism seeks to, quite literally, capitalize upon the nation as a source of collective identification and differentiation.” In order to capture the role of advertising as both a form of cultural communication and colonization, Jackson (2004, p. 20) conceptualizes corporate nationalism as “the process by which corporations (both local and global) use the currency of ‘the nation’, that is, its symbols, images, stereotypes, collective identities and memories as part of their overall branding strategy.”

Over the last 10 years, scholars have used different definitions, theories, and methods, to undertake analyses of corporate nationalism such as the one that emerged at a key moment in the transformation of New Zealand’s national game, rugby (Jackson, Batty, & Scherer, 2001). The sport of rugby went professional in 1995 when the national governing bodies (unions) of South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia (SANZAR) signed an historic 10-year television deal with Rupert Murdoch’s SKY TV network. Only 4 years later, and seeing the potential to harness the global media capacity of SKY TV, sportswear company Adidas signed a 5-year sponsorship deal with the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU), estimated to be worth between \$NZ75–100 million, in order to gain access to the All Blacks. What followed is a textbook case of glocalization. A global company (Adidas), with little history of sponsoring the sport of rugby, enters New Zealand, one of the world’s smallest national markets with a population of four million people. In doing so, Adidas displaced local brand Canterbury which had sponsored the All Blacks for 75 years. To retain elite players and to compete globally, the New Zealand Rugby Union needed substantial funding, explaining its willingness to accept Adidas’ sponsorship. But a remaining question is “why” did Adidas invest so heavily in a rather marginal global sport in such a small market? The answer, in part, is “because the All Blacks can deliver something to their brand that no other team or individual can in sport” (*Admedia*, 1999, p. 22).

Yet, the All Blacks offered more than just access to a market of 4 million consumers and one of, if not, the most successful sport teams in history—they embodied a mystique, some of which can be linked to Māori culture. In short, the All Blacks offered Adidas something new, unique, and exotic through which to communicate their brand. How, then, did Adidas localize within the New Zealand context, and how did they engage in corporate nationalism? Previous work has outlined a range of techniques employed by Adidas to localize their brand, including adapting but retaining the integrity of the All Blacks team jersey and demonstrating their long-term commitment to rugby by establishing a national rugby academy (Jackson et al., 2001; Scherer & Jackson, 2010). More specifically, Adidas unveiled a carefully orchestrated advertising and marketing campaign that articulated the past, present, and future of New Zealand rugby with its new sponsor. Steeped in nostalgia, a multiplatform campaign was unveiled, including print ads, billboards, and television advertisements.

Two television commercials, in particular, are noteworthy: “Captains” and “Black.” The former, shot in black-and-white and “backgrounded” by an old war

song, cleverly drew upon various generations of famous All Black team captains, each putting on the jersey of their era and ending with the current captain, who dons the new Adidas jersey. The “Black” advertisement is also shot in black-and-white and features a powerful performance of the famous All Blacks pregame “haka” or challenge. This advertisement intercuts images of the current team with traditional Māori warriors, enabling Adidas to capitalize on one of the world’s most unique and exotic sporting rituals.

Relating this strategy to the circuit of commodification and communication model, the commercial representation of the corporate brand—which drew upon both national and indigenous culture—was publicly circulated for consumption. However, while the advertisement was popular, it did meet with some resistance. Although various forms of consultation took place between Adidas, the New Zealand Rugby Union, the All Blacks, and local Māori tribes, a legal claim seeking compensation was made by the latter. The comments of Maui Solomon, the lawyer, representing the tribe help explain the conflict between Western legal rights and indigenous perspectives on the very nature of ownership: “I think what this whole debate highlights . . . is . . . that the intellectual property rights system is totally inadequate to recognize and protect Māori cultural values and cultural rights” (Harcourt, 2000). Although this lawsuit was unsuccessful, over 10 years later a formal agreement was signed between the New Zealand Rugby Union and Ngati Toa, the tribe whose ancestor, Chief Te Rauparaha, is credited with inventing the original Ka Mate haka that is used by the All Blacks.

This Adidas example helps demonstrate, albeit superficially, the utility of the circuit of commodification and communication model to illustrate the process of production, representation/communication, and consumption of cultural commodities. However, the model also helps confirm that cultural commodities and how they are communicated—for example, through television advertisements drawing on indigenous imagery—can be challenged, resisted and even regulated.

The Adidas advertisement featuring the haka was not the only case of public resistance to corporate communication. During the 2011 Rugby World Cup, Adidas was involved in an embarrassing corporate public relations incident—“Adidas-gate” (Jackson & Scherer, in press). About 1 month prior to the commencement of the World Cup, it was revealed that the cost of an All Blacks jersey in New Zealand was twice that of the same jersey if purchased overseas. The transnational company was accused of trying to exploit the intense nationalism within the event and capitalize on the loyalty of New Zealanders. Recognizing that the issue was not going to disappear, both the national and the Asia Pacific regional managers appeared on New Zealand television current affairs programs. They attempted to communicate the long-term and significant investment that Adidas has made in New Zealand rugby, but they could not explain the local–global price differential, nor the high cost of a jersey relative to the use of inexpensive, exploited labour in China.

With respect to the concepts of glocalization and corporate nationalism, although Adidas met with a range of resistance in the local context, these are simply

considered part of the process of negotiating a new market. As evidence of Adidas' commitment to New Zealand Rugby, and its confidence in the investment being made, the company signed a 9-year deal for \$NZ200 million in 2003, and this was renewed in the form of a 10-year, \$NZ200 million deal until 2019. And, Adidas is not the only global company investing in the All Blacks. In October 2012, American Insurance company (AIG) signed a 5-year deal estimated to be worth \$NZ15 million per year. According to AIG New Zealand chief executive Cris Knell, the All Blacks sponsorship deal was about "redemption" in light of the company's \$180 billion bailout from the U.S. Government. Knell further noted that "AIG's global reach would ensure the sport's profile gets a boost" (Rugby: All Blacks' AIG deal worth \$80m, 2012). Ultimately, the All Blacks seek sponsorship revenue to retain top players in order to maintain performance levels and profile their brand. Likewise, global corporations see the All Blacks, and the internationally expanding sport of rugby, as vehicles through which to promote and grow their markets and brands.

Looking Ahead for Communication and Sport Research

A few concluding thoughts are offered on the future of sport communication research with respect to the specific area of advertising and promotional culture. It is essential to begin by acknowledging the context within which commercial communication is located, and the increasing consolidation of global media. Consider Bagdikian's (2000, pp. xx–xxi) summary of mergers and acquisitions over a 20-year period: "In 1983, fifty corporations dominated most of every mass medium [I]n 1987, the fifty companies had shrunk to twenty-nine . . . [I]n 1990, the twenty-nine had shrunk to twenty three. [I]n 1997, the biggest firms numbered ten." Although we are regularly confronted with such information, it is not always easy to comprehend its wider implications. With respect to sport, Harvey, Law, and Cantelon's (2001) mapping of Rupert Murdoch's sport–media complex is a model for others to follow. Charting the organizational structure of NewsCorp, they reveal an interlocked network of influence over every aspect of media-related content including television, radio, newspapers, films and music, the Internet, and interests in sport teams and stadia. Ultimately, it is the media's capacity to communicate messages across a wide spectrum of contemporary social life, and within the taken-for-granted paradigm of consumer capitalism, that demands our attention.

A strong platform of communication and sport research in the area of promotional culture and advertising is slowly emerging. It is beyond this essay's scope to outline a comprehensive strategy for future research in communication and sport, however, a few interrelated suggestions are offered. First, the circuit of commodification and communication model offers a useful framework for contextualizing and examining the process of sport communication in terms of production, representation/communication, consumption, lived cultures, and regulation, all of which shape our social experiences and identities. Only a few studies (cf. Du Gay et al., 1997; Scherer & Jackson, 2008b, 2010, 2012; Kobayashi 2012a, 2012b) have undertaken

comprehensive analyses using the model and for good reason: It is a complex and time-consuming challenge. Perhaps, the best way forward is a team approach that draws upon the specialist knowledge and expertise of scholars with respect to each moment in the circuit.

A second category of sport advertising and communication research might focus on the relationship between the global and the local, particularly in light of international shifts in power relations from the West to the East (Mahbubani, 2008) and from the North to the South (Connell, 2007). An international, collaborative study of corporate nationalism would be ideal. Scholars from different countries could examine how global sport corporations such as Nike, Reebok, and Adidas try to localize within their respective countries. In this way, we could track and compare the strategies used by global corporations in order to enhance opportunities to resist and regulate their activities.

A third future area of sport advertising and communication research might focus on the impact on children. Corporations and their advertising agencies are well aware that there are 52 million kids under the age of 12 in the United States alone spending an estimated \$US40 billion annually. Thus, it is not surprising to see the emergence of *Channel One*, a U.S. corporate sponsored television network offering educational programming in exchange for sponsor exposure, pointing to a new advertising strategy. Similarly, the dramatic rise in child-focused marketing companies, such as *The Family Room*, prompted Daniel Cook (2011, p. 258) to identify the concept of commercial epistemology: “ways of thinking and knowing about children and childhood with respect to marketing products.” Such disturbing trends have caused Henry Giroux (2000, p. 19) to warn “As culture becomes increasingly commercialized, the only type of citizenship that adult society offers to children is that of consumerism.” Arguably, there is a need for critical analysis that scrutinizes the types of advertising and marketing “research” being advanced along with advocacy that regulates and offers protection to all consumers, and children in particular.

The challenge facing academics who wish to undertake critical media analysis is quite daunting. This is due, in part, to how quickly the technological landscape is changing, but, more crucially to the increasing influence that media and promotional culture is having on the academy itself. As Harvey (2002, p. 107) notes, “[T]he shameless commodification and commercialization of everything is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our times.”

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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