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Ian Jones
University of Luton, ian.jones@luton.ac.uk

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Sports fandom consists of cognitive and affective, as well as behavioural components. Existing sports fan research utilises either strong qualitative, or more often, strong quantitative methodologies. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach are outlined, developing the argument that the use of a single methodology often fails to explore all of these components. The use of a mixed methods approach is suggested to counteract this weakness and to enhance research into the sports fan.

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Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Sports Fan Research

by
Ian Jones[±]

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Abstract

Sports fandom consists of cognitive and affective, as well as behavioural components. Existing sports fan research utilises either strong qualitative, or more often, strong quantitative methodologies. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach are outlined, developing the argument that the use of a single methodology often fails to explore all of these components. The use of a mixed methods approach is suggested to counteract this weakness and to enhance research into the sports fan.

Introduction

Although interest in the sports fan dates back to the beginning of this century, there is little empirical research on the subject (Burca, Brannick, & Meenaghan, [1996](#); Duke, [1991](#); Wann & Hamlet, [1995](#)). Existing work has tended to favour quantitative methodologies (such as Branscombe & Wann, [1991](#), [1992](#); Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, [1992](#); Iso-Ahola, [1980](#); Lee, [1980](#); Madrigal, [1995](#); Miller, [1976](#); Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, & Ellen, [1987](#); SNCCFR, [1996](#); [1997](#); Wakefield & Sloan, [1995](#); Wann & Branscombe, [1993](#)). By contrast, qualitative research on the sports fan is extremely rare (such as Armstrong, [1998](#); Dunning, Murphy, Williams, [1987](#); King, [1997](#); Marsh, Rosser, & Harre, [1978](#)). Although some investigations do show elements of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, few, if any, existing studies of the sports fan adopt the mixed methods approach as an explicit research strategy. This paper argues that such an approach is a worthwhile means for gaining a fuller understanding of the sports fan.

The choice of research design must be appropriate to the subject under investigation (Patton, [1987](#)). Thus, the nature of sports fandom will have implications for the choice of suitable methodology. Those authors who define sports fandom (Branscombe & Wann, [1992](#); Guttman, [1986](#); Pooley, [1978](#)) all stress that cognitive and affective, as well as behavioural components are significant. These dimensions are also noted by other authors (Lee & Zeiss, [1980](#); Madrigal [1995](#); Miller, [1976](#)), and summarised by Pooley ([1978](#), p. 14), who states that

whereas a spectator of sport will observe a spectacle and forget it very quickly, the fan continues his interest until the intensity of feeling toward the team becomes so great that parts of every day are devoted to either his team or in some instances, to the broad realm of the sport itself.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that fandom comprises more than simply attending and observing a sporting event. Rather, being a fan "represents an association from which the individual derives considerable emotional and value significance" (Madrigal, [1995](#), pp. 209-210). This acknowledgement that sports fandom consists of more than overt behaviour has important implications for the choice of research methodology.

Quantitative Research and the Sports Fan

Quantitative research designs are characterised by the assumption that human behaviour can be explained by what may be termed "social facts", which can be investigated by methodologies that utilise "the deductive logic of the natural sciences" (Horna, [1994](#), p. 121). Quantitative investigations look for "distinguishing characteristics, elemental properties and empirical boundaries" (p. 121) and tend to measure "how much", or "how often" (Nau, [1995](#)). They are appropriate to examine the behavioural component of sports fandom, such as attendance at games.

A quantitative research design allows flexibility in the treatment of data, in terms of comparative analyses, statistical analyses, and repeatability of data collection in order to verify reliability. The advantages of a quantitative approach are demonstrated by the research carried out into the English "Premier League" football fan (SNCCFR, [1996](#), [1997](#)). This survey-based study produced broad data across a large fan population at Premier League clubs, allowing the behavioural patterns of the English football fan to be ascertained. The quantitative design permitted a simple comparative analysis between clubs, it also enabled longitudinal data to be collected in consecutive seasons, in order to enhance reliability. These surveys clearly illustrate the composition of the crowd, their overt behaviour, and their scaleable attitudes towards pre-determined items. Although the approach is obviously useful in determining the extent of such behaviour or attitudes, the methodology adopted, however, fails to provide any explanation or analysis beyond the descriptive level.

Although the Premier League surveys do not utilise any form of statistical analysis beyond the parametric measures of frequency counts and means, Jayaratne ([1993](#)) introduces a further advantage of a quantitative research design, noting that as well as producing what may be considered more objective data, it may also allow more objective analysis. Thus, other quantitative research into the sports fan (Branscombe & Wann, [1991](#); [1992](#); Madrigal, [1995](#); Murrell & Dietz, [1992](#)) demonstrates a strong emphasis upon significance testing, with most existing research examining the relationship between level of fandom and aspects of fan behaviour, such as level of identification with a team and patterns of attendance (Schurr, et al., [1987](#)), fan satisfaction (Madrigal, [1995](#)), or evaluation of team performance (Wann & Dolan, [1994](#)). Many of the scales used within these studies are also tested for validity and reliability, thus claiming further "scientific" credibility, such as the use of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, [1993](#)).

Thus, it can be seen that quantitative methodologies do have strengths for sports fan research. These may be summarised as follows:

- Quantitative methodologies are appropriate to measure overt behaviour.

- They are also strong in measuring descriptive aspects, such as the composition of the sports crowd.
- Quantitative methodologies allow comparison and replication.
- Reliability and validity may be determined more objectively than qualitative techniques.

These strengths however, are not the sole prerogative of quantitative designs. Indeed, many of the arguments for the use of quantitative research, especially in an academic climate where resources are limited, have pragmatic origins in terms of allowing large scale data collection and analysis at reasonable cost and effort, as well as providing statistical "proof".

The weaknesses of such quantitative research designs lie mainly in their failure to ascertain deeper underlying meanings and explanations of sports fandom, even when significant, reliable and valid. The quantitative assumption regarding fandom is that "people can be reduced to a set of variables which are somehow equivalent across persons and across situations" (Reason & Rowan, [1981](#), p. xiv). Quantitative research is strong in measuring such variables, and, if this measurement is the focus of the research, such as the case with the Premier League survey, then a quantitative approach may be justified. However, as noted earlier, psychological factors, such as affect and cognition, are important to the concept of sports fandom. Although quantitative methods can be used to measure such factors, their appropriateness in explaining them in depth is more limited. A further weakness of qualitative approaches lies in their tendencies to take a "snapshot" of a situation, that is to measure variables at a specific moment in time. Sports fandom may be affected by temporal changes, such as the team's performance, or the quality of opposition, which cannot always be identified within a single quantitative study.

Qualitative Research and the Sports Fan

Qualitative research designs are those that are associated with interpretative approaches, from the informants' emic point of view, rather than etically measuring discrete, observable behaviour. Qualitative methodologies are strong in those areas that have been identified as potential weaknesses within the quantitative approach, e.g. the use of interviews and observations to provide a deep, rather than broad, set of knowledge about a particular phenomenon, and the appropriateness to investigate cognitive and affective aspects of fandom. This depth allows the researcher to achieve "*Verstehen*", or empathetic "understanding". The concept of *Verstehen* is the basis for a critique of quantitative research designs, and their empiricist emphasis. The argument used is that quantitative methods measure human behaviour "from outside", without accessing the meanings that individuals give to their measurable behaviour. If, as many authors have suggested, fandom contains psychological, as well as sociological dimensions, then the emphasis should rather be upon gaining an understanding of how the subjects themselves view their own particular situations. A qualitative research design allows these understandings to be investigated from the informants point of view. The advantages of a qualitative methodology for sports fan research can be summarised as follows.

- Qualitative methodologies allow the cognitive and affective components of fandom to be explored in greater depth than quantitative methodologies.
- Qualitative methodologies encourage the informant to introduce concepts of importance from the emic aspect, rather than adhering to subject areas that have been pre-determined

by the researcher. As noted earlier, research into the sports fan is rare, and thus the flexibility of qualitative methodologies is appropriate for research that may be exploratory in nature.

- Qualitative approaches permit the identification of longitudinal changes in fandom, whereas quantitative approaches tend to take a "snapshot" of behaviour, cognition or affect at the one time the research is conducted.

Objections to the approach do exist, however. The main argument against is the concept of validity, in that it is difficult to determine the truthfulness of findings. The relatively low sample numbers often encountered may also lead to claims of findings being unrepresentative of the population. This point may be illustrated by an evaluation of the work of Marsh, et al. (1978) on "ritual violence" of sports fans. Whilst full of "rich", descriptive data on the violence itself, enabling an understanding of the underlying explanations to be developed, the findings fail to give any clear indication as to extent of such violence among fans. Their results fail to highlight the degree to which ritual violence is an important issue. Thus, even if certain issues are identified by the researcher, the claim that such issues are not unrepresentative of the population as a whole is possible. King's (1997) case study on one club within the Premier League raises two further interrelated questions. Firstly, his use of twenty informants from a crowd of approximately fifty-five thousand raises the question of the generaliseability of the views of those informants to the general population. Secondly, the choice of case may lead to criticisms of the case being untypical. As will be argued within this paper, the use of a mixed methods approach may enable the researcher to avoid such potential criticisms.

If the sports fan researcher does develop a qualitative research design however, then certain issues need to be recognised. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) recognise that the adoption of a qualitative methodology may invite hostility. The objectivity of quantitative research is apparently "synonymous with good research" and the inherent lack of objectivity within qualitative research is synonymous with "sloppy". (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 19) and "unscientific" research (Nau, 1995).

Whilst not arguing for a hierarchy of research methods, this paper suggests that a third way, the mixed methodology, provides even greater strengths to the researcher, and may enhance both the quality, and perception by others, of the research.

A Mixed-Methodology Approach to the Study of the Sports Fan

Although the use of a single methodology has been advocated by a number of authors, many of the supporting arguments are decidedly pragmatic, such as time constraints, the need to limit the scope of a study, and the difficulty of publishing the findings (Creswell, 1994).

The crucial aspect in justifying a mixed methodology research design is that both single methodology approaches (qualitative only and quantitative only) have strengths and weaknesses. The combination of methodologies, on the other hand, can focus on their relevant strengths. The researcher should aim to achieve the situation where "blending qualitative and quantitative methods of research can produce a final product which can highlight the significant contributions of both" (Nau, 1995, p. 1), where "qualitative data can support and explicate the meaning of

quantitative research" (Jayaratne, [1993](#), p. 117). By adopting the following assumptions, the researcher should ensure that the final product maximises the strengths of a mixed methods approach.

- Qualitative methods, especially observation, or unstructured interviews allow the researcher to develop an overall "picture" of the subject under investigation. This may guide the initial phases of the research.
- Quantitative analysis may be more appropriate to assess behavioural or descriptive components of sports fandom.
- The descriptive analysis, such as the socio-demographic profile of the crowd, may allow a representative sample to be drawn for the qualitative analysis. Marsh, et al. ([1978](#)) who note that quantitative research may confirm or deny the representativeness of a sample group for such qualitative research. Thus the mixed methodology will guide the researcher who is carrying out qualitative research, that his or her sample has some representativeness of the overall population.
- Sports fandom involves cognitive and affective characteristics, as well as overt behavioural aspects. Thus a qualitative "core" is appropriate to investigate these aspects, by examining the informants point of view.
- Much sports fan research is still largely exploratory. The use of qualitative methods allows for unexpected developments that may arise as part of such research (i.e., serendipity).
- Quantitative analysis may complement the findings of qualitative methods by indicating their extent within the fan population.
- Quantitative analysis may confirm or disconfirm any apparently significant data that emerge from the study. Thus, for example, if level of fandom, as measured by existing scales (such as Wann & Branscombe, [1993](#)) appears to have an effect upon aspects of fan behaviour, quantitative methods can be used to enable statistical testing of the strength of such a relationship.
- If such a relationship is determined, then quantitative methods are weaker in providing explanation. Qualitative methods may assist the researcher in understanding the underlying explanations of significance.
- The inclusion of quantitative methods and analysis within leisure research may increase the likelihood of publication, especially within those journals with a strong positivist tradition.

As noted before, the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that a mixed methodology is the only suitable research design for this topic, rather that it is an appropriate, and at times desirable design. The overall choice needs, of course, to be the most suitable one to achieve the objectives of the research. A mixed methodology however, has a number of advantages within sports fan research, as well as other social science disciplines, and may be able to enhance the quality of such work in such ways as have been outlined.

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Author Note

[†]*Ian Jones, MSc.*, is a Ph.D. student in the department of Tourism and Leisure at the University of Luton, UK. The subject of his thesis is sports fan identification with professional football teams in England, due to be completed in Summer 1998. He gained his MSc. in the Sociology of Sport at Leicester University. Other research interests are those of leisure identities, and the importance of leisure in providing and maintaining an individual's social identity. He can be reached at Luton Business School, University of Luton, Park Square, Luton, LU1 3JU. His e-mail address is ian.jones@luton.ac.uk.

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