*Whose side are we on? Balancing economic interests with social concerns through a service-thinking approach to business and marketing in sport.*

**Abstract**

**Research Question:** The aim of this study is to conceptualize sports markets in a way which enables use to (1) explore how the economic and social aspects of markets might be (re)aligned; (2) discuss practical solutions for how this might be achieved; and (3) identify what the implications are for management practice.

**Research Methods:** Literature from developments in contemporary marketing (market system dynamics (Giesler and Fischer, 2017); and market studies are combined to discuss difference between interested and concerned markets. Service thinking is used ontologically and analytically to illustrate how sports organizations might reconcile the tensions and realities of existence in a business environment, and act positively within both interested and concerned market spaces.

**Research Findings:** The study suggests that sports organizations must consider the type and configuration of resource; network capabilities; and core organizational values to balance economic interests and social concerns. Secondly, practitioners should consider their organizations as a collective of co-existing entities: (1) teams; (2) clubs and (3) brands. Each organizational form has implications for the resources, capabilities and outcomes achievable by adopting service thinking.

**Implications:** The paper provides an alternative way of thinking about sports markets, and provides a conceptual space for scholars to consider future research into the dimensions of market concern and how these shape business practice. Generic examples are presented of sports business practice that may also be useful for actors in other service industries.

**Introduction**

Football and sport more broadly, is littered with examples of how the dominant pursuit of economic interests – i.e. profit maximization – is rarely sustainable. At the time of writing a revision of this paper, Bury Football Club were expelled from the English football League for, amongst several things, being unable to evidence the financial capability to complete the season’s fixtures. Sports organizations are social entities, community assets, and businesses with financial demands and legal obligations. Yet the business of sport is rarely considered beyond a traditional economic conceptualization.

Howard Becker’s (1967) question “whose side are we on?” invited consideration of the different dimensions of our social world, while recognising that our efforts in scholarship and practice exist as part of wider structures encompassing a broad range of actors, institutions and cultures. When we consider the nature and effect of markets, consumption, and business practice a palpable bias exists toward neoclassical economic perspectives.

In marketing theory, Giesler and Fischer (2017, p.3) highlight three distinct biases that have shaped marketing scholarship. One of these is the “economic actor bias”, a view that the actions of, and relationships between producers and consumers are privileged, excluding the agency ‘other’ actors in consumption and market functioning. Emphasis is placed on *how* consumers and producers interact, rather than *who* shapes these interactions, and what the subsequent effects are. Subsequently, our understanding of markets becomes served through an economic frame.

The commercialization of professional sport, like other areas that pre-date the emergence of capitalist society – i.e. education and healthcare - has attracted considerable debate. Once primarily leisure and pastime activities, sport is now a multi-billion-dollar industry. At the heart of this change has been globalization. Increased international trade, investment, opening of national economies, proliferation and diffusion of new communication technologies, and increasing mobility of labour and citizens are key drivers behind the emergence of sports business (Horne, 2005).

With commercialisation comes change. The principle goal of the ‘sports organization’ has evolved from orchestrating social activity to a central position as an entertainment product visible and accessible through an increasingly diversified media. Commercialisation has also assisted and added new activities in sport: The fitness sector, for example, has benefitted from improved facilities, professional coaching, access to sports science research, and alignment with healthcare and nutrition services. Social media and emergence of mobile technology to motivate greater sports participation, enhance market-research capabilities, and support new business growth further evidences the positive impact of commercialisation.

In contrast, the need to compete and win in view of global audiences has prompted clubs to prioritize short-term demand for ‘better players’ over rational financing and sustainable growth (Storm and Nielsen, 2015). Further, governing bodies have grown increasingly dependent on external funding due to cost pressure, having also to rethink sponsorship type and usage (Wagner and Nissen, 2015). Research also suggests that International Federations (IFs), although benefitting from managerial specialisation and social media engagement, suffer when coupled with a dominant monetization agenda. In this case, IFs may witness the legitimacy of their stakeholders challenged; difficulty adhering to stated mission and non-business goals objectives; and adoption of poor governance principles (Clausen et al., 2018). Further, the role of the media in the commercialisation of sport has resulted in negative environmental impacts and an absence of critical focus on the offshore production of sport equipment, social responsibility, or research into clubs and leagues that form the basis of the sport delivery system (Slack, 2014).

These examples illustrate some of the debates and tensions surrounding the business of sport. The nature of these issues are however complex. Inconsistent management practice, lack of transparency to stakeholders, absence of appropriate financial measures, and weak business modelling all create issues for clubs and governing bodies. Attracting top sporting talent may indeed raise audience figures, potentially boosting the financial gain from sponsorship and media deals, however if the cost of that talent is not appropriately accounted for, the model ceases to function in the long-term.

Similarly, the historic demand placed on sports organizations to bring people together, provide opportunities for leisure, entertainment, friendship and human interaction still exists today. What has changed however is how this interaction is realized. The challenge for professional sport, like other industries built on social foundations – i.e. entertainment, education, and healthcare – is that commercialization in practice and discourse creates a bias toward the pursuit of economic interests, marginalizing broader social considerations. The result is a no-win situation: On the one hand, a rejection of business leads to inefficient operations and potentially financial ruin. On the other hand, acceptance invites criticism from groups loyal to sports’ pre-commercialised roots. At the same time business practices accepted by fans and broader critics as being beneficial to the development of sport, rarely make the most of sport organizations’ unique geographical position at the heart of social and business communities.

This paper aims to introduce developments in the marketing and market studies literature to the discussion on *sport as a business* as a way of conceptualizing *concerned sports markets.* This acts as the basis to (1) explore how the economic and social aspects of markets might be (re)aligned; (2) discuss how this might be achieved; and (3) identify what the implications are for management practice.

The paper will now introduce *interested markets* as constructed through neoclassical economic thinking, and then the concept of *concerned markets*. Service thinking, or service-dominant logic (SDL), is then presented as a management technology to help discuss ways in which sports organizations might act in different market forms, and negotiate and reconcile the tensions of doing so in practice. The paper closes with a discussion of implications and future considerations for scholarship, and practitioners.

**‘Interested’ and ‘Concerned’ Marketplaces**

In the field of market studies, Geiger, Harrison, Kjellberg, and Mallard (2014) use the term ‘interested market’ to describe the traditional neoclassical economic view of markets. Using the economic problem - “human wants are infinite, resources are finite” (see any economics textbook) – as an anchor, economists sought to assimilate irrational, emotional human behaviour into the single motive of economic self-interest, purposefully re-orientating society toward the value of things, rather than people. For economists, optimal resource allocation is the aim, and markets are presented mechanisms for price formation involving rational, atomistic buyers and sellers with stable preferences and perfect information. The function of exchange within a market occurs when equilibrium is achieved (invisible-hand theory). This view of markets generally neglects broader social factors (e.g. relations and institutions) and material factors (e.g. assumes homogenous goods). This view of markets inspired developments in industrial organization, and marketing management theory, forming the basis of contemporary business thinking.

In practice, the free market has since been endlessly (re)presented and framed by different industries and contexts resulting in a multiplicity of markets that share common economic principles. Professional sport provides a prudent example of this. We have markets for athletes (the football transfer market; the Formula One drivers market; the NFL Draft); markets for coaches/manager; equipment; media/broadcasting; sponsorship; medical; hospitality; tourism; travel and transport, amongst many others.

In these examples, the market is created by the single (invisible) hand of the market mechanism, but also by the visible hand of the State, the visible hands of club owners and managers, and the visible hands of market intermediaries (marketers, advertisers, regulators etc), fans, competitors etc.

The actions of multiple market actors shape and produce sports markets, but to what extent do these markets reflect society? Cochoy (2014) argues that in practice, markets help to produce, rather than reflect society. This statement is however both obvious and controversial (Cochoy, 2014). The omnipresence of economic logic evidenced above surrounds and guides social life. “Transfer windows” in professional football engage supporters in club communications, media productions, social media chatter, workplace debates, and family discussions. Fantasy football leagues and game simulators – i.e. Championship Manager – see football fans spend hours of their time through the medium of specific market objects. The start and finish point in seasons mark periods of excitement and anticipation, celebration and despair. New kit launches become consumer events, and global mega-events, such as the World Cup, can significantly influence the happiness of a nation for a small time period. Meanwhile in our modern data-driven environment, these activities help to populate business databases helping to keep the economic wheel turning. There are numerous examples of how sports markets produce and shape aspects of society, and while this is obvious, it is also controversial because for most people – especially in business - the economy and society are complementary, but different dimensions of our world (Geiger et al., 2014). Subsequently, a version of society orientated toward realizing economic interests is produced. This orientation problematic, particularly for sports organizations whose historic roots are similar to those of civic institutions. Here local communities, fans and other stakeholders want to feel that *their* sport organization is there *for them* in similar ways to how universities and governments are perceived.

The concerns raised in market studies, and inherent criticisms of neoclassical economic thinking partly reflect arguments presented through the work of E.F. Schumacher. In his 1974 writing "Small is beautiful", Schumacher argued that mass production methods; the mass media; and mass culture, while opening up new opportunities to ever widening audiences, was creating bigger markets and bigger political entities, a reality where such scale led to a dehumanisation of people and the economic systems that ordered their lives (Schumacher, 2011, original 1974). Schumacher demanded a people-centred economics, because in his view, this would enable environmental and human sustainability. It is with this latter point that I particularly agree. We need to conceive an approach to business and management in sport that encourages market actors to account for social concerns.

The marketing studies literature evokes the language of ‘concern’ comparing historical origin in the domain of political science – i.e. ‘political concern’ or ‘public concern’ – with contemporary dictionaries (Geiger, et al., 2014). The definition ‘to concern’ has three distinct dimensions: (1) refer and relate to; (2) affect and influence; (3) worry and trouble. Geiger et al (2014) subsequently propose that – for better or worse – market concerns are the situations and items that are related to us, that affect and influence us, and that can cause us to worry.

**Negotiating Interested and Concerned Markets**

As discussed, the multiplicity of sports markets shape and are shaped by aspects of our society. Markets organize and circulate goods and services, helping to configure our values and actions in the process. Investigating the relations we develop within markets and how value is conceived is crucial to develop sustainable sports business practice. Understanding how we are related to markets, goods and services; how they affect and influence us, and ultimately, how they trigger our worries – or how we are concerned by them – helps to provide a conceptual space for us to think about markets that are both interested and concerned.

These dimensions of concern are useful to consider how sports business actors can make use of their inherent principles in practice. A central criticism of economic thinking is that a re-orientation to self-interests and production of market things distances us from society more broadly. This is not a call to reify the human and society over economic interests, but to bring the idea of concerned markets to life in the world of sports business and recognize the agency both of market ‘things’ and ‘people’ in a way that balances economic interests with social concern.

Over the past decade, *service thinking* has contributed significantly to our understanding of how markets work to create and sustain value through the interaction of all market actors – people and other. Service thinking challenges the neoclassical economic caricature of markets arguing that service is the basis of economic exchange. It represents a unified understanding of the purpose and nature of organizations, markets and society. Naturally, this encourages a more holistic perspective of resource potential, and how value is created.

Framed as a mind-set, service thinking acts as a management technology, orientating users to consider the potential and capacity of resources to be (re)configured for the co-creation of ‘value’ – which may include, but is not limited to economic profit. Service thinking therefore presents a credible vehicle to consider how economic interests and social concerns can be achieved in sports business practice.

**Service thinking**

The central issue with traditional neoclassical informed business practice relates to what Vargo and Lusch (2004) call a ‘Goods Dominant Logic’ (GDL). Here, units of output (goods) are the basis of economic exchange. The term ‘logic’ reflects a mind-set, or ‘way of thinking’ about how value is created, while the ‘Goods Dominant’ element reflects the foundation of traditional models of business. Goods (products and/or services) are why economic exchange takes place. Firms integrate resources internally and through their supply-chain externally to produce units of outputs where ‘value’ is attached and then consumed by customers and/or eventual users. Value exists ‘in-exchange’ and is represented by the market price equilibrium.

In sports business, manufacturers work to differentiate goods. Events act as the ‘core product’ (Li, Hofacre, and Mahony, 2001) while their ancillary services are consumed experientially as products. Although GDL perspectives have benefitted understanding of sports business practice it is aligned with, and reinforces, bias toward economic interests, resulting in the marginalization of social, material, and cultural elements of society.

As a counter to the GDL, Vargo and Lusch (2004) introduce ‘Service Dominant Logic’ (SDL), or ‘service thinking’ as a service-oriented perspective of value creation and economic exchange. Here service “the application of resources for the benefit of another” (Vargo and Lusch, 2006, p. 283). Here, resources – tangible and intangible – can be integrated in numerous combinations creating new relationships (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006), market dynamics, and the “co-creation” of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The basis of economic exchange thus shifts from the production and distribution of goods (GDL view), to the value creation process, and the requisite integration of resources and competencies. Goods and services now act as service-delivery vehicles where knowledge, skills and resources are embedded.

By reorienting focus to the knowledge and skills (operant resources) embedded in the service-delivery vehicles (operand resources), human agency, and resources become essential ingredients in value creation process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) while enabling organizations to broaden their potential for innovation. It further recognizes that no single producer is responsible for value creation. Market actors include, but not limited to, individuals, families, peer groups, businesses, charities, public sector organizations (Maglio, Vargo, Caswell, & Spohrer, 2009). Any entity with the potentiality to interact with another can configure a “service system” (see Maglio and Spohrer, 2008), broadly definable as:

a dynamic value co-creation configuration of resources, including people, organizations, shared information (language, laws, measures, methods), and technology, all connected internally and externally to other service systems by value propositions. (Spohrer, Vargo, and Caswell, 2008, p.5).

In a service system, actors (e.g. sports clubs, fans, sponsors, athletes, governing bodies) actively engage to co-create value by integrating their unique resources - e.g. knowledge, competencies, capabilities, skills etc – with those of another entity. Subsequently, ‘value’ is always determined by the beneficiary. As a result, the entire context of the integration of a firm’s offering leads to heterogeneous value creation and perception referred to as ‘value-in-context’ (Vargo, 2008).

More recently, concepts derived from network theory and relationship marketing (see Gummesson and Mele 2010; Penoloza and Venkatesh, 2006) emphasize links between and across network actors in service systems, introducing ‘service eco-systems’. This acknowledges dynamic network structures at micro, meso and macro levels (Vargo and Lusch, 2011) and extends the concept of service-thinking toward a view of markets as malleable configurations of service-systems (Vargo and Lusch, 2014). These contributions incorporates institutional elements, acknowledging the embedded nature of service systems within broader social systems or institutional logics, which actively influence how actors integrate resources within a particular context (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber, 2011).

In the study and practice of sports management, Woratschek, Horbel and Popp (2014) developed a conceptual evaluation of how service thinking might be integrated into the sports management field through their “Sport Value Framework” (SVF). The SVF is based on 10 “foundational premises” (FPs) (Woratschek, Horbel and Popp, 2014, p.14) that span the intra, micro, and meso levels of economic exchange. The authors also recognize the unique nature of the sports context – most notably that sporting activities are the core of sports management. The framework also re-emphasises the core tenants of service thinking, that is that value is always co-created in-use, in-context, and always through the interaction of stakeholder networks (i.e. firms, customers and other stakeholders) and their respective resources.

Additionally, empirical studies utilizing SDL have emerged recently in the sports management literature, offering insights into value co-creation process within some of the sub-contexts of sports management. Tsiotsou (2016) for example, combines SDL ecosystem perspectives with consumer culture theory (CCT) broaden our understanding of the context of the sports experience. This study also draws attention to how an experiential service eco-system can both create and destroy value, reaffirming the notion that co-created value is always value-in-context. The idea of value co-destruction in sport was first introduced by Stieler, Weismann, and Germelmann’s (2014) observation of a silent protest against governance changes in German football. The sports event again serves as the framing context in Hedlund’s (2014) explanation of how value is co-created through a feeling of consumption community membership, and participation in sport fan rituals and traditions, broadening our understanding of the dynamic relationship between fans, teams, the live event, and other stakeholders.

In other contexts, Kolyperas, Anagnostopoulos, Chadwick, and Sparks (2016) explore the communication and relationship between professional sports team organizations and their charitable foundations in the co-creation of value in a corporate social responsibility (CSR) context, yielding implications for the management and integration of communicative resources in sports management. From a consumer vantage point, and in the context of team sports, Uhrich (2014) develops a useful typology of value co-creation platforms. This conceptualization distinguishes between different spheres (customer sphere vs. joint sphere) and types (virtual vs. physical) of value co-creation platforms. The study also identifies five customer-to-customer co-creation practices that occur across these platforms - associating and dissociating, engaging and sharing, competing, intensifying, and exchanging – that provide useful insight into what sports consumers do to co-create value, and how they integrate their respective resources.

While other studies exist, the examples highlighted here offer important contributions to our understanding of what value is co-created through different contexts, and through the actions of different stakeholders. Further, insights into what sport customers do to co-create value with each other (see Uhrich, 2014), or how membership and engagement in sporting traditions and experiences (see Hedlund, 2014; and Tsiotsou, 2016) yields important considerations for sports business, management and marketing practice and policy.

At a basic level, the idea that market value is co-created (or destroyed) through the application and integration of resources (tangible and intangible) to the benefit of at least two entities, provides a useful platform to help transition our thinking about the nature and effect of business practice away from individual, economic interests. A focus on networked interactions between actors in the pursuit of a service system reveals the resources and capabilities essential for value creation, and provides warning to forms of integration that may destroy value. To date, the studies mentioned above have made important contributions to our understanding of economic exchange and value co-creation.

My argument here is that if SDL can positively influence the creation of economic value then the principles can also be adopted to nurture a form of value that is both beneficial to the economic interests of the contemporary sports organization, and to society more generally. This does not have to be a complex endeavour, but it does require a willingness to think differently. Through GDL a football club exists to supply the players, coaches and other resources needed to compete and deliver the sport of football. Through a SDL, the club is a community asset, and the game of football renders the broader service(s) that the club chooses to deliver through the use of its resources and network.

**Balancing Economic Interests with Social Concerns**

In this section, service thinking is considered in relation to the three dimensions of concerned markets. As noted earlier, service thinking argues that organizations, markets, and society are fundamentally concerned with exchange of service. This position highlights the application of competences (knowledge and skills) and use of network enables innovative reconfiguration and exchange of services for the direct benefit of an organization, market, and society.

I therefore suggest that if sports organizations are to balance the pursuit of economic interests with a commitment to delivering value more broadly to society, a deliberate and strategic application of their competencies, skills and network is required. This in itself requires a change of mind-set, and of operational practice/

In the following section, I present the three dimensions of socially concerned markets, and provide contextual illustrations aligned with the principles of service thinking that demonstrate how sports organizations might alter their thinking and practice in the pursuit of economic interests that at the same time yield positive impacts for the sports industry, and society more broadly. The reader should consider that these concerns are not separate, but co-existing dimensions.

**Concern 1: Market Relations**

In interested markets, buyers and sellers enter and leave the marketspace as strangers, while goods and services constitute the creation of value through exchange. The buyer extracts market value through purchasing, and the seller collects value through monetary compensation.

However, in sports markets evidence suggests this is not always the case, particularly when the product is inherently social (see Andreasen, 2012). In professional sport, market value often comes from experiencing the performance of athletes and/or their respective clubs. Fans, stadiums, history/heritage, past successes also contribute to value creation (or destruction!). Further, clubs are also consumers: They purchase athletes in transfer markets; and consume the sentiment of fans by leveraging their loyalty and data to secure broadcasting and sponsorship deals. The blurred lines between consumption and production highlights the unavoidably interconnected, or *related*, nature of markets.

In contrast, service perspectives use mostly phenomenological approaches to the study of markets (Gummerus, 2013; Vargo and Lusch, 2010), arguing that the creation and dissemination of value occurs through two main mechanisms: (1) The continuous processes of experience and interaction (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004); and (2) the pursuit of social roles and life goals (Arnould et al., 2006). Value creation is subjective and largely determined by the judgement of the beneficiary (Holbrook, 2006). In the pursuit of economic interests, sports organizations traditionally act within a GDL, creating products/services that encourage exchange around the live event – i.e. ticket sales, hospitality, sponsorship, advertising, and merchandise.

The live-event provides a focal point for sports consumers, and for the sports organizations involved, the exchange opportunity exists for a defined period of time (i.e. a season) enabling strategic calibration of resources, performance measurement. The limitation here is that relatively few live-event opportunities exist in a typical season. A sports club may host 25 one-day lives events across the year, consisting of a mainly competitive matches (also friendlies, testimonials and special events) however how is the space used on the other 340 days? This is a simple example, but the point is to highlight that if clubs endeavour to fix periods of exchange, to more efficiently pursue economic interests they simultaneously disconnect, or *un-relate* themselves from broader market actors. In doing so, they paradoxically limit the economic reward of their actions. Of course, greater use of event facilities will raise costs for the club – i.e. more games leading to the need to replace surfaces more frequently – however such scenarios prompt management reflection on resource allocation, and may create new objectives – i.e. semi-artificial turf is more durable, and can be used over a longer period of time.

The contribution of network theory (see Gummesson, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) is the view of exchange as a dynamic process in which customers, suppliers and other market actors create value-networks (Vargo and Lusch, 2012). These have the capacity to grow, evolve, and provide new value creating opportunities (Chandler and Wieland, 2010). Through interaction and experience, different market actors, if encouraged, become *related*. Additionally, Vargo and Lusch’s (2011) idea of ‘value-in-context’ to reflect the embeddedness of resource integration practices (Chandler and Vargo, 2011) and structuration processes (c/f Giddens, 1984) that shape and reproduce service interactions further emphasise the embeddedness of resources in value creation. The ‘value-in-context’ approach directs attention to the motivations, social norms, expectations, and influence of actors, as well as highlighting contextual constraints.

An example of this can be seen in the work of Woratschek, Durchholz, Maier, and Ströbel (2017) who investigated the role of spectator motivations at public viewing events in relation to value co-creation. Among several key findings, the authors suggest that public viewing spaces at mega-events – i.e fan parks - enable the interaction between fans of different nationalities. The identification of *intercultural contact* as a key motivator to attend such events is an important finding, so is the argument that the majority of fans seek out peaceful encounters at public viewing events with fans and spectators of other nations and nationalities. This finding emphasises the importance of considering who and what shapes interaction between different stakeholders. Here, the public viewing event differs to the stadium experience and at-home spectatorship. Further, the intercultural aspect of the interaction indicates that there is a desire for social relationships amongst fans that transcends geographical origin. In many ways this examples evidences how spectators, when viewed through a GDL lens, become framed as consumers of public viewing, whereas from an SDL perspective, they are arguably producers of intercultural contact. This example evidences how social concern – in this case relating to social actors through intercultural contact – contributes to. and supports the achievement of economic interests.

To form such relations, it is important to learn which contexts are important to different stakeholder groups. Any stakeholder from within the network can initiate dialogue and interactions (Ballantyne et al, 2011) - essential to create and sustain relations. To facilitate this process, sports organizations can engage with broader market actors, such as cultural intermediaries – vloggers, bloggers, critics etc - to gain market insights into market trends, helping to identify more meaningful value propositions and strengthen market relations. Social media and related platforms can help proliferate initiatives, gain greater insights and further enhance the extent to which the organization is *related*.

Dolles, Gammelsæter, Solenes, and Straume (2016) offer an illustrative example of the relationship between context and value co-creation through a case-study of Molde Football Club. By differentiating between “direct and indirect use value”, they show the network-mediated benefits can be achieved through unique experiences that arise during a football match. For example, stadiums generate direct use value as they represent specific values and nurture excitement in real time, whereas indirect use value refers much broader to experiences ahead of the game, during intervals and after the match. Experience location (i.e. at the venue or elsewhere), traveling to and from the arena, and post-event media presentations provides alternative settings for indirect use value creation. Value creation thus transcends the live event into the daily life of supporters organically, and through artificial design.

Service thinking conceives all actors to have an active role in creating value (Ballantyne et al., 2011) – including consumers. The value-in-context conceptualization emphasises the duality principle, and acknowledges interplay between agency and structure (Vargo and Lusch, 2012), rejecting determinism, and instead directing attention towards the ingenuity and innovative capacity of market actors engaged within their own networks. Encouraging fans to interact with their favourite sports club is a simple ways to create positive experiences and nurture positive relationships.

Digital media formats and information technology systems enable greater communicative reach, the users of these technologies are generally young, educated members of the population with the disposable income to purchase, renew and maintain digital devices (Robinson and Robertson, 2010). Digital platforms, for example, could help customers better evaluate the business practice of their favourite clubs, nurturing opportunities to learn (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000), and facilitate value creation through simultaneous, and continuous interaction with clubs and other stakeholders (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This is particularly important for social change activities operated through sport as over time it may normalize accepted forms of behaviour (Scott, 2000) within specific network configurations. Sport England’s ‘This Girl Can’ campaign is a good example of this.

Also consider the role of staff at live sporting events. Stewards, hospitality, events, security, and many others, occupy key operational roles at sporting events. Aligning social media would allow fans to showcase good practice from staff, nominate and show appreciation to those who contributed to a positive experience – i.e their favourite steward – while also providing real-time feedback on any other indicator of quality/positive experience.

Through a service thinking mind-set, digital channels allow sports organizations to move beyond short-term transactions, however this also requires a mind-set change regarding the nature of customer relationships (Karpen, Bove, & Lukas, 2012). Customers are resource integrators, and help co-create value, thus their agency is not just transactional. Further understanding the diversity of views, and emotions shown by fans through social media is essential. The use of ethnographic research methods to observe practices and interactions by fans within the service environment could help provide a better understanding of their ‘lived experience’ (Gurrieri, Previte, & Brace-Govan, 2013) allowing other stakeholders to engage with them and thus maximise value creation.

Service thinking thus helps identify how concerned markets can be realized in practice, by encouraging us to think alternatively about the possibilities nestled in our digital systems, platforms, and the agency of a broader range of stakeholders – i.e. the customer – that may previously have only been considered from a transactional exchange perspective.

**Concern 2: Markets that Affect and Influence**

The second dimension of concern draws attention to those things that *affect and influence* market activity.

Service thinking asks us to think critically and creatively about resources and capabilities by distinguishing between operand resources (physical: raw materials, capital, infrastructural), and operant resources (human: skills, knowledge, routines, cultures, competencies). Although it tends to focus heavily on operant resources, human knowledge and skills are acknowledged as fundamental to producing favourable outcomes (Arnould, Price & Malshe, 2006). Thus, mapping the social structures around stakeholders to identify associated networks enables understanding and the capacity to enact change within communities (Musso, Weare, Oztas & Loges, 2006).

Similarly, service thinking highlights how market actors exist within broader service systems, and incorporate *networks of networks* while multiple social and contextual factors - i.e. institutional logics (c/f Giddens, 1984) – shape norms and influence behaviour (Layton, 2011). While creating opportunities to influence and relate market actors, networks of networks remove barriers to action (e.g. peer and family resistance), and build capacity for further support. For example, in sport, sponsors are embedded in broader supply-chains and thus facilitate access to sporting and non-sporting organizations locally and internationally who bring a vast array of resources, competencies, and technologies from other industries.

Although corporate social responsibility (CSR) is sometimes seen as a marketing tool rather than being an embedded feature of a sports organization’s culture and mission (Pharr and Lough, 2012), their location in geographical communities, and networks of networks have the potential to affect and influence market configurations through the co-creation of provisions that provide positive social impact.

**The Case of Barnet FC**

An example of this is Barnet Football Club. Barnet are a fifth tier English professional club (a the time of writing) with a relatively small fan base and limited range of commercial partners. The club has access to tangible facilities – stadium and training facility – and full time staff responsible for non-sporting operations. Barnet’s primary sponsor is Toshiba, and in 2016, following Toshiba’s decision to sell its medical systems division to Canon, Barnet embarked on a plan to offer world-class radiology services to the club’s athletes and local community, working with Canon. This included establishing the UK’s first integrated Medical Imaging Academy for radiology professionals. Both the core service and education initiatives are housed within Barnet’s stadium, ensuring that the facility is used beyond the sporting calendar. Additional revenue generated by the venture satisfied Barnet’s economic interests, while the innovative use of existing facilities provided sport science, and broader medical training - services that were scarcely available previously in their geographical vicinity (West London). This partnership created positive change for local residents - employment, education, and new healthcare services – while supporters and other club stakeholders benefitted from increased financial security.

Normally, sports clubs agree ‘inventory packages’ with commercial partners in exchange for payment, value association and shared visibility (economic interests). The Barnet example is different. Their service-thinking approach enabled the club to fuse their operand resources (i.e. facilities, location), with the operant resources and unique capabilities of Canon’s medical technology division, accessed indirectly through an existing partnership with Toshiba – or a network within their network. Over time, Barnet and Canon’s integration will create opportunities for medical care, knowledge sharing, learning and dialogue. These exchanges may lead to new opportunities as a result of the interaction (Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, & Payne, 2011).

Sustaining such relationships and ensuring a high levels of value co-creation over time requires further consideration however. Barnet’s associated business function with Canon created a change to the clubs business model, naturally influencing how the club is perceived by stakeholders, and non-stakeholders. This symbolic alteration of business practice is perhaps a necessary, but not entirely sufficient condition to sustain a dual presence in concerned and interested markets over time. The Barnet and Canon partnership also necessitated the club to consider new ways of allocating additional revenue - should this be reinvested in the club, or the new business? What is the economic cost of partnership with Canon? This may be an upfront payment, percentage of future revenue, discounted club access, or a combination of all. Considerations of HR systems, recruitment, and new roles would be needed, as would consideration of how the partnership is represented in marketing campaigns. The club’s marketing department would also need to capture and measure data to evidence the partnership’s economic and social ‘added-value’, information which could attract other partners. Thus, alterations to the club’s business model should be intimately connected other more explicit functional areas. Failure to align club resources and business practices with the requirements of operating in interested and concerned markets could jeapordize the club’s ability to sustain activities in both areas. Such partnerships could be seen as cosmetic actions in the absence of positive change to more explicit functions of the business.

The above considerations are also important given that for a sports organization, their chosen partner is likely to operate in a different industry. For example, it is acknowledged that when collaborating with public and voluntary sectors, factors such as resource constraints, and conflicting priorities limit or inhibit collaboration (Loeffler, & Bovaird, 2016; Russell-Bennett, Wood, and Previte, 2013). A diverse range of perspectives also exists across actor networks (Dibb, 2014). Curating collaborative efforts that work for both, or all parties, require research, discussion and understanding of the foundation and structure of existing networks. A market actor’s priorities, goals, beliefs, and resources should all be of interest as the ability to increase capacity for collaboration, and to positively affect and influence market configuration lies hidden between the attributes of different actors. A service view on business practice requires a rethinking of roles and relationships among network actors (Sweeney, 2007).

**Concern 3: Markets that worry**

The final dimension of concern proposed relates to that which can worry us. When such situations arise, a particular configuration of actors and their interests becomes problematic. When markets and/or their effects lead to worry, efforts to relate others to the concern in order to have them troubled emerge (Geiger et al, 2014). This can relate those who have little to be concerned about, and those with opposing views (not worried).

To illustrate, consider the efforts of Liverpool fans in 2016. Fenway Sports Group (FSG) – Liverpool’s owners - proposed increasing ticket prices at Anfield’s new main stand from £59 to £77 for the forthcoming season. In protest, roughly 10,000 Liverpool fans exited the stadium during the next home game on the 77th minute (13 minutes early). Beyond the live event protest, there were several hundred thousand social media impressions criticising the club’s ownership group. The team manager/coach supported fans’ decision and publically questioned his club’s owners (and his employers!) need for the price increase. A reversal of the board’s proposal, and an explicit commitment to freezing ticket prices at the current level for the next two years, subsequently followed.

This example illustrates how a strategy focused purely on economic interests can foster value co-destruction. Although the ownership group reversed their decision, reputational damage, loss of trust, and a negative impact on brand sentiment threatened the fans’ relationship with the club, and the perceived equity of sponsors and club partners by proxy.

A lack of understanding in terms of the social structures and institutional logic within the market is evident here. The club’s owners, and appointed executive board, failed to appreciate the nature of fan support. Sophisticated modelling of pricing strategies may have indicated an ability of fans to pay the increased price, however, the model did not take into account ‘the worry’ that such an increase may incur. At an individual level, increasing a ticket price from £59 to £77 may only lead to a slight fall in demand and perhaps not even revenue (depending on market elasticity). The price rise however represents a perceived exploitation of supporter loyalty. Liverpool FC’s market research strategy was likely no different to that of any other organisation, however the issue is that the market research failed to consider the *worry* that might result. Examination of the fans’ social systems and structures could have balanced insight from traditional econometric models.

For example, a Liverpool supporter may have family members who support another club (such as Everton). It is unlikely that a price increase would cause the fan to switch allegiance and it would not have been arrogant of the club’s commercial team to assume that. However if the ‘other’ team were offering supporters provisions perceived as valuing fan loyalty more than Liverpool’s offering to fans, then a tension may be created and *trouble* the Liverpool fans. This could easily be proliferated through social media, thus involving others in the *matter of concern*.

This highlights how the GDL approach often fails for sports organizations. Fans cannot be assumed to be rational decision makers, orientated solely by consumption and economic exchange. Recognizing *the potential to worry* is essential to formulating a market strategy that allows economic interests to be achieved without negative social affects, and if possible – the creation of positive ones.

A service thinking perspective encourages practitioners to consider the limitations of mass marketing research tools originally conceived to deliver economic descriptions of the market (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). These tools render fans/consumers as recipients of value produced by the firm. A service perspective redefines fans as agents, not targets (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Karpen et al., 2012), allowing them to help develop self-customized experiences informed by the type of value truly sought by actors (Zainuddin, Previte, & Russell-Bennett, 2011), their resource integration capabilities, and their specific contexts (Karpen et al., 2012). This requires practitioners to move away from aspiring to create ever more accurate consumer profiles, and instead focus on service design as a means of exploring ways to implement customization and one-to-one approaches (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009).

Communication and delivery is also important. Referring back to the Liverpool example, fans originally discovered the club’s proposal through a routine discussion with supporters groups regularly delivered by club’s middle management – the price change was simply an agenda item. Information could have been communicated to a small number of fans that represent supporters groups in the first instance, with an insistence by the club for discussion. This would have relocated the power behind the communication to members, removing institutional control over the message. This did not happen, and before Liverpool FC could execute their own social media plan, the news had already ‘gone viral’, gaining attention of fans, non-fans, other clubs, sponsors, and the media – *worrying* other market actors.

**Discussion**

In this article, I have introduced the concept of concerned and interested markets to the debate surrounding how economic and social value can be achieved in sports business and management. This is not to criticize studies that have adopted traditional economic and/or GDL perspectives but rather to offer insight into alternative market conceptualisations.

I have sought to highlight the ability and potential for sports organizations to balance economic interests with social concerns, and suggest service-thinking as a management technology to reconcile the tensions and complexities created by the traditionally contested nature of operating in such spaces.

**Practical Implications**

Service thinking enables sports organizations – along with organizations in other industries – to consider that their idiosyncratic resource configurations have the potential to shape the markets in which they operate, making it possible to achieve economic interests through a commitment to social concerns.

If value is co-created in context, then an active commitment to nurturing broad market relationships - market relatedness – coupled with deliberate and strategic commitments to service and experience design allows organizations to create and participate in spaces of economic and social value – i.e. ‘fan parks’, or public viewing spaces amongst many others.

As the Barnet example shows, accessing a ‘network of networks’ opens opportunities to engage with new market actors, and benefit from new shared resource capabilities. This yields more versatile innovations, building economic resilience, while also contributing positively to society, aiding long-term sustainability at an organizational and social level.

*Re-thinking the Sports Organization*

Service thinking draws attention to the resources and capabilities that constitute sports organizations, while at the same time, revealing the different areas of society that sports organization affect. Thus, we should consider the sports organization as a collective of multiple, co-existing entities. A football club is a *team* of players, coaches, sport scientists and medical staff. They compete in competitive, financially contingent spaces, and form the basis of public live events. Sports organizations are also *brands* with distinct attributes such as a stadium, logo, kit, star players, history etc. They are also a *club*, that is an institution with local historical significance and a responsibility for providing access to leisure, entertainment, social cohesion, and employment.

These different dimensions of the sports organization co-exist however by separating them in this discussion each element allows practitioners to consider the unique resources, capabilities, and networks of each, while considering the different ways they might be combined.

**Future Research**

The unique nature of sport coupled with the various circumstances of business requires sports managers to reconcile the challenges caused when seeking to act in both concerned and interested markets. Commercial objectives are important for the survival of any organization irrespective of broader social concerns, however as highlighted in the case examples, failure to recognize, and consider those concerns in business decision making could limit or destroy value, affecting the sustainable operation of the organization. Engaging in the contestations and complexities of purposeful activity in the pursuit of socially concerned markets raises important questions for future research. Introducing new services and value propositions on the one hand might be a simple resource reconfiguration with minimal additional cost to the organization however externally investors and consumers, conditioned to a GDL perspective, might view it as an opportunity-cost taking funding away from the athletic/performance side of the club. Thus, research into how sports organizations justify, and gradually legitimize thinking and behaviour over-time to their different stakeholder groups would make an important contribution to the theory and practice of socially concerned markets. Suchman’s (1995) ideas around managing legitimacy, and Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway’s (2006) discussion of legitimacy as a social process would be a good starting theoretical starting points, while studies such as Coskuner-Balli, and Ertimur’s (2017) study of American ‘s legitimation offers applied insight into the deliberate and social processes of legitimization in new market spaces.

As highlighted in this paper’s discussion, ‘network’ and the relational nature of business plays an important role in performing markets and sustaining market value. A service thinking approach requires managers and organizations to critically and creatively about the product and nature of value creation. As Woratschek et al (2014) highlight, managing a service platform (value network) is fundamentally different to managing a production process (value chain). Further research is therefore needed to explore how organizations interact and engage their value-network to *relate to*, *affect and influence* other market actors. This may draw attention to the knowledge (gaps), capabilities (gaps), and inherent organizational expertise that exists within different contexts and the practices deployed to activate and integrate such resources in the value co-creation process. For example, how might the identity, personal experiences and educational background of club employees be reflected in broader network engagement, and to what consequence?

It would also be useful to see studies emerge that explore the resource and network configurations of sports markets in different geographical contexts, as this may help contribute to discussions around how the resources and capabilities residing in foreign ownership models, global competitions, transfer markets and media rights – but to name a few- might be differently configured to help balance economic interests with social concerns.

Perhaps most significantly, a limitation of this paper is that the illustrative examples provided are derived from information visible ‘externally’ to the organization. Studies that permeate organizational boundaries and provide empirical contributions from ‘inside’ the organization are of crucial importance if we are to understand how a service thinking approach might affect positive social impact while satisfying economic interests, or not.

**Conclusion**

Traditional business and management thinking is grounded in a GDL, and exists largely for the purpose of satisfying economic interests. Since its emergence in 2004, scholars and practitioners alike have embraced the SDL as a means of understanding how co-creation might lead to a more sustainable form of market value creation, albeit still for the primary goal of satisfying economic interests.

My argument in this paper is that the principles of service thinking can assist organizations balance economic interests with social concerns, leading to *concerned markets.* By understanding the nature and effect of how actors are related, affected, influenced, and worried/troubled within market spaces, sports business, management, and marketing practice can maximises market value potential, satisfies economic requirements, and has a positive impact on society more generally.

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