In light of the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile’s (FIA) call for research into what is needed to make world motorsport championships grow towards 2025, this paper responds by offering a framework for improving spectator experiences at the service parks of the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) events based on five design principles of ‘the experience economy’: 1) theme the experience, 2) harmonise impressions with positive cues, 3) eliminate negative cues, 4) mix in memorabilia and 5) engage the senses. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on seven WRC events in the period 2009-15, the result is a comprehensive set of findings that, while tailored to meet the WRC’s challenges, also includes theoretical and methodological insights relevant to other sporting bodies on how to manage spectator experiences to competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** World Rally Championship, Authenticity, Experience economy, Spectator management
Introduction

Established in its current form in 1973, the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) has transformed from a little-known motorsport series to a global entertainment business. Yet, the challenge to attract people to the events is rising, as exemplified by the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile’s (FIA) call for research into what is needed to make world motorsport championships grow in the period up to 2025. From competing with other motorsports for fans the WRC has, since the early 2000s, struggled to beat action sports, multiplexes, theme parks and lifestyle events in the chase for the experiential sporting consumer – those who are willing to spend time, money and attention for memorable experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; 2007). As the fundamental economic offering of WRC events is not services or goods, but experiences, here understood as the physical impression of amusement, education, escapism and sense-based encounters with the sport, the research question is how can the WRC as spectator experience be improved? As a point of departure Berry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002, p.1) argues that:

companies must gain an understanding of the customer’s journey – from the expectations they have before the experience occurs to the assessments they are likely to make when it’s over. Using that knowledge, companies can orchestrate an integrated series of ‘clues’ that collectively meet or exceed people’s emotional needs and expectations.

An important stop on this ‘journey’ is the service parks which, since the late 1990s, have become a critical venue for combining sporting experiences with local culture and the promotion of the WRC as a championship (FIA, 2016, p. 38; see also Hassan & McCulloch, 2007; Hassan & O’Connor, 2009; Jenkinson & Sain, 2004; Jones 2005; Lilley & DeFranco, 1998; Mackellar, 2009; 2013a; Mackellar & Reis, 2014; O’Connor, 2005; 2010). During the rally, which lasts 3-5 days, competition cars come back from the stages and into the service park and get mechanical attention at given times. These sessions are open to spectators to watch, while they also use the other amenities the service park has to offer (food, drinks, music, competitions, merchandise, as well as being home to VIP guests). After the event is finished, the service park is dismantled. That means that although the service park does not contain any action related to the competition, even if servicing the rally cars within the time slot undoubtedly is part of an eventual win, it must still...
offer a motorsport experience which relates to what is going on out in the special stages and it must also differentiate itself from its event competitors.

From the mid-2000s until today, however, three types of experience-related criticism of the service parks have increased. The first is the lack of offerings on site compared with other action sport ‘theme parks’ like X Games (Rinehart, 2008) or the Indianapolis ‘Indy’ 500 (O’Kane, 2011). The second criticism is about the nature of these offerings. Studies of Rally Finland have revealed that, while spectators were satisfied with the special stages (the speed tests), the sanitary facilities and the selection of food for sale were below par (Laitinen, 2013, pp. 33-40; Mehto & Takala, 2012, pp. 37-38). The third criticism is about weak links between regional characteristics and the history of rallying at a given event, and that neither of these are used as part of the promotion of tourism. When the Acropolis Rally was left out of the 2014 season of the WRC, the reason was concerns about the financial condition of Greece, and doubts as to whether the Acropolis would fulfill the ever-growing economic requirements of a championship event. Consequently, despite the tourism-pull factor embedded in WRC events, the Greek rally was considered a financial hazard rather than a potential source of income (Georgakopoulos, 2014; see Davenport, 2008; Mackellar & Reis, 2014; ‘Mixed reaction to Corsica’s return’, wrc.com, October 9, 2015, for other examples).

Using data from ethnographic fieldwork at seven WRC events between 2009 and 2015 in combination with the theoretical framework of the experience economy, this paper aims to produce an applied response to these criticisms by fleshing out five design principles of the experience economy: 1) theme the experience, 2) harmonise impressions with positive cues, 3) eliminate negative cues, 4) mix in memorabilia and 5) engage the senses (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Although these principles are not equally important, they are parts of the same chain-link, which makes it vital to create a strong relationship between them in order to improve the spectator experience management at WRC events. Before discussing these principles individually in relation to WRC’s service parks, the methodology used in this paper is outlined.

Materials and Methods

Whereas research on this topic often focuses on quantitative explorations of motivational factors and attendance psychology, this paper desires to generate input on the qualitative understanding of factors that are conducive to the consumption of sport by drawing on data from a larger study with fieldwork conducted at WRC events in Norway (2009, pilot), Finland (2010), Wales (2010), France (2011), Argentina (2012), Monaco (2013) and Italy (2015). Ethnography
is normally understood as a researcher undertaking ‘research and writing about groups of people by systematically observing and participating (to a greater or lesser degree) in the lives of the people they study’ (Madden, 2010, p.1). Traditionally, this is done by spending a significant amount of time in the field, usually 12-18 months, doing participant observation in territorially circumscribed, small-scale societies (Stewart, 1998, p.68). However, for reasons usually associated with the causes and consequences of ‘globalisation’, ‘the lives of the people’ we study are now interconnected.

With a sport like the WRC, with 13-14 championship events, fans, and participant teams scattered around the world each year, a multi-sited approach is actually necessary to grasping various aspects of this interconnection. When it comes to organising the data, however, the relations between the sites in question cannot simply be plotted into a network. As the aim of using participant observation is ‘to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study’ (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p.92, emphasis added), participant observation of people’s experience of the WRC service parks becomes ‘an active process of knowledge construction, more akin to the construction of historical narrative than the more impassive or neutral “discovery” of facts’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.4). As noted by Cunningham and Kwon (2003, p.128), such a qualitative approach may ‘improve the efficiency of marketing communication between service providers and consumers, and, for that matter, possibly influence the entire marketing program of a sport organisation’ (see also Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Mackellar, 2013b).

To pursue this aim, the fieldwork for this paper consisted of participant observation at the WRC’s service parks. The field stays lasted for three to nine days (the parks are closed at night) depending on the rally. Of particular interest were the combination of local offerings (like the merguez sausages at Rally de France-Alsace), rallying features (team displays, sponsor activities, fun fair possibilities) and the overall image of the WRC as a global championship portrayed throughout the service park. Particular attention was given to the narrative relationship between the official PR material offered by the organiser with place-related activities (such as local businesses showing their products) and other visitors’ views on what the service parks had to offer. Finally, the relational network of localities were analysed as story bits of the entire WRC narrative. The emphasis on narrative was chosen because, as a symbolic community experienced through social interaction rather than identification with group categories like class, nationality, and gender, the commercial success of the WRC will depend on a cultural analysis of its comparative advantage vis-à-vis other action sport events.
Results

1. **Theme the experience**

   According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 48), theming an experience means, ‘scripting a story that would seem incomplete without guests’ participation’ (see also Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007). In one study of sports events, the attempts to tie experiential marketing with brand associations – ‘sporteinment’ – produced mixed impressions. While experiential marketing was important to satisfying casual consumers, committed fans responded by displaying neutral to outright negative attitudes, which at worst could lead to weakened attachment to the sport and resistance to promotional practices (Chavanat & Bodet, 2014, p. 339). It has been demonstrated that the basic offering at tennis tournaments is similar to that of the WRC, but at the same time differentiated by ‘the importance of reputed resources as the main attraction points of the other resources’ (Maltese & Veran, 2010, p.80).

   Unfortunately, in the WRC, this differentiation is unexploited, as fieldwork demonstrates that promoters have streamlined the event format at the expense of the WRC’s experiential diversity. As an example, the Norwegian and Italian service parks could easily have swapped places because little connected them to their respective cultural bases. In those cases where thematisation was evident other aspects of the service park were dwarfed and were not associated with the main theme. At Rally de France-Alsace 2011, the link to local hero (and multiple world champion) Sebastien Loeb, who was born in one of the small towns where the rally took place, was operationalised in the service park’s ‘Loeb land’-like character. Large facilities connected to Loeb Events (a company run by his wife) dominated the park while the interesting, but futile attempts to promote culinary specialties from the area were placed far from where most people were gathered. Looking for and using synergies from various offerings would provide an opportunity to make the experience more coherent.

2. **Harmonise impressions with positive cues**

   To enhance people’s impressions of the WRC, ‘the “takeaway” of the experience’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p.52), the ‘the unique interaction of activity, people and place’ (Weed & Bull, 2004, p.37) at a given WRC event needs to be embedded into rallying tradition. One of my Argentinian informants said that:

   Rally Argentina is unique because of the people. I guess you are thinking that is the same all around the world, but here it’s a friendship celebration where you can join your best friends and wait happily many many hours playing cards, eating *asado* (barbecue) and drinking Fernet with coke just to see a few minutes of an exciting spectacle.
For commercial purposes, this means strategic exploitation of the experiences related to the event. A study of the flow-on benefits at Australian WRC events in 2009 and 2011 concludes that ‘while fans may return for another rally event, there is currently little evidence they will return at other times’ (Mackellar & Reis, 2014, p.25). Fieldwork at rallies in Monte Carlo, Argentina and Finland in particular, revealed that this is relevant because sports tourists to an increasing degree seek experiences specific to the event.

3. **Eliminate negative cues**

Prior research has revealed that WRC organisers, partly as a result of the broadened event profile, similar to the development which has taken place with X games, need to cater for other spectator groups than the hard-core fans in order for rallies to be sustainable events. As a result, following Pine and Gilmore (1998, p.55), we need to eliminate anything that distracts attention from the theme. A representative for the British WRC rally underlined the importance of this element:

> We use a three-step approach on Wales Rally GB and see the service park as being one of our key first steps as it is free to enter therefore potentially attracting the type of visitor who may be keen just to see what all the commotion is about as well as the hard-core fan. A free to use park & ride service allows easy access and once on site we provide a full range of activities such as simulators, funfair rides, interactive exhibitions, car club displays and much more. We also encourage our commercial partners to provide something which is interactive and appealing to the public whilst also trying to think of basic necessities such as a range of catering offerings and good standard of welfare facilities. We allow spectators to get as close as physically possible to the cars so that they can see what is being done in service and really feel the power as they head in and out.

When I did fieldwork at Rally Monte Carlo, however, these basic necessities were seemingly low priorities. While the rest of the event used famous sites along the special stages (speed tests) to promote the event, the service park – located in Monaco harbour – was reduced to a gathering spot for the teams. Left with the pricey cafes across the road, the service park visitors were not given any incentive to linger, let alone immerse themselves in an experience of WRC’s oldest and most renowned rally.

4. **Mix in memorabilia**

The acquisition of memorabilia, or tangible artefacts of the experience that people want to remember and converse about (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p.57), is a global trend that has lasted since the early explorers came back with something
for their masters and something for themselves. As with car culture in general, demonstrated by the increasing number of motor heritage events of which there were more than 900 in the UK alone in 2012 (Kaminski & Smith, 2014, p.232), nostalgia in the WRC works as ‘motive, as socialisation tool, and forms an integral part of the norms and rituals of various social worlds’ (Fairley & Gammon 2005, p.183). It is essential, however, that the nostalgia is not rooted in a wish to revert to the past, but is rather, as Paul Connerton (1989, p.2) puts it, a consequence of the way we experience the world with reference to what we are not experiencing.

At most WRC service parks, there were merchandise shops offering items related to the specific event or to the currently active WRC teams: t-shirts, hats, key rings and so on. On the one hand, this is a natural part of the experience economy, as it helps distinguish the event from other events, in the way that concert-specific t-shirts help distinguish one show from another (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p.58). On the other hand, it makes the offer quite homogenous. Apart from the odd 1:43 car from past times here and there, there are few items likely to enhance feelings of nostalgia among the spectators at the specific site. While vintage team jackets from the WRC are found only on trading sites like eBay (the UK edition of eBay even has its own category named ‘rally clothing’), the commercial infrastructure of Formula 1, by contrast, has numerous retro shops – licensed and non-licensed – both during races and online.²

5. Engage the senses

In the view of Pine and Gilmore (1998, pp.59-60), experiences layered with phenomena that engage the senses in a positive way are more memorable than those without sensorial stimuli. Conversely, sense-evoking operations that clearly detract from the experience will work against the attempt to use this principle as a strategic asset. The Wales GB rally representative said it like this:

Being one of the oldest rallies in the WRC and with our strapline ‘Rally of Legends’ we are keen to promote this side of our event. We have displays of Group B Rally Cars, as well as a designated ‘Rally Legend’ with Ari Vatanen 2 years ago and Petter Solberg last year. They take part in interviews at our service park as well as carrying out a number of other key roles.

Among these other roles is driving exhibitions with older rally cars, whose sight and sound make up a large part of the cultural fascination for the sport among fans. An Estonian informant borrowed a quote from Formula 1 driver Alex Zanardi to argue in favour of the Audi S1, which was used in the WRC 1984-86, as the most

terrific car in WRC history: ‘Listen to the sound of the engine. Isn’t that an answer? If you don’t understand it, that it is not my problem.’ Rather than separate elements like sound or livery, however, informants argue, it is the relative diversity between cars, especially when they were driven in a certain way, which accounts for the sensorial part of the WRC experience. Fan preferences for sensorial diversity should consequently be added to the service park experience.

**Discussion**

What the criticisms of the WRC service parks have in common is that the cultural aspects of the championship have been insufficiently addressed as part of spectator expectation prior to, during and after a visit to the service park during WRC events. This lack of experience coherence and of utilisation of local diversity has a negative impact on the event and the local community in which it is held, as well as on the championship as a whole. Following Girginov (2010, p.407) who addressed the need for senior sport managers to ‘consider their job not only as ensuring the survival of the organisation, but essentially as steering the socialisation process that takes place in and through sport’, this paper therefore argue that a qualitative approach enables the researcher to generate a relevant response applicable both analytically and managerially.

Findings from this study show that staging the service park experience right, and targeting the efforts according to the event’s consumer diversity thematically, may boost the spectators’ overall impression as it helps minimise the negative impact from other parts of the event. A key mechanism for this is how one deploys one’s strategic resources – assets that other competitors cannot easily duplicate (Birchall & Tovstiga 2005, p.20; see also Verhoef et al. 2009). A study of three French tennis tournaments found that they shared ‘a globally identical base of strategic resources’ yet displayed various solutions for attracting spectators (Maltese & Veran, 2010, p.80). At the BNP Paribas Masters, for instance, ‘a more “experience-based” production of the event combining the staging of a high level of sport with peripheral and entertaining shows’ was emphasised (Maltese & Veran, 2010, p.75).

Similarly, the localities of each WRC rally – although they are part of the same championship – represented by service parks embody intangible value by their relationship to place, people and motorsport history. On the one hand, there is no simple relationship between place and event. Research into Formula 1 Grand Prix revealed that the events have had mixed impacts on the destination image (Heng, 2014; McCartney, 2005). On the other hand, according to Palmer (2010, p.867), who did research on the storytelling of the bicycle race of Tour de France,
the precondition for using this cultural uniqueness as strategic asset is that ‘the particular meanings that develop in relation to a sports event, site or locality do not occur “naturally”, but are the product of considerable cultural work by the producers and users of these sporting spaces.’

What is more, unlike the criticism of touristification, discussed by Hinch and Higham (2008, p.120), improving the relationship between spectators, WRC event organisers and local communities does not necessarily corrupt the cultural essence of the attraction. For example, Rally Germany was awarded a prize in 2011 by the local wine producers, as they profited from the event’s promotion of the region to the world (Næss, 2014). Thus, to exploit the service park as part of the WRC experience, the five design principles of the experience economy can be utilised as described above. As illustrated by research on Indy 500 and the 24 Hours Le Mans Grand Prix (O’Kane, 2011), the aim is not to savour what one is nostalgic about right now, but to learn how to create new moments to be nostalgic about in the future.

Conclusion

Based on ethnographic data from seven WRC events between 2009 and 2015, this paper has argued that the current situation of the WRC service parks would benefit from a coherent adaptation to five design principles of the experience economy. Through this framework, the service park as a distinct championship feature, and one which is pivotal in creating memorable spectator experiences, could combine the concept of identical structures, regardless of event, with the attractiveness of local offerings. In order to achieve this, a creative use of the championship’s general features must be coupled with local narratives about the role of motorsport in the community in question. Rallies do not require physical infrastructure like stadiums, but vanish when the event is over, so the cultural affiliation between theming and impressions on the one hand, and place and sport on the other, is an important area for further investigation.

References


Maltese, L. & Veran, L. (2010). ‘Managing and Modelling the Combination of Resources in Professional Sporting Events’. In S. Butenko, J. Gil-Lafuente, & P. M. Pardolos (Eds.), Optimal Strategies in Sports Economics and Management (pp. 59-87) Berlin: Springer Verlag
Rinehart, R.E. (2008). ‘ESPN’s X Games: Contests of opposition, resistance, co-option, negotiation’. In M. Atkinson & K. Young (Eds.), Tribal play: Subcultural Journeys Through Sport (pp. 175-197). Bingley: Emerald

Address for correspondence:
Hans Erik Næss
Faculty of Management
Westerdals Oslo School of Arts, Communication and Technology
Christian Krohgs gt. 32
0186 Oslo
NORWAY
E-mail: hans.erik.ness@westerdals.no