

# McDonaldization or IKEAization? Rethinking the consequences of recent societal changes and technological advances on sport and leisure

Tony Blackshaw

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

# Introduction

- The background of these ideas
- The McDonaldization thesis and its limits
- IKEAiZation

## McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1998; 2003)

- First thing to say about McDonaldization is that it not a description of reality, but a Weberian *ideal type* or analytical tool that we might use to try to understand those aspects of the world which remain for most of us agonizingly confused, contradictory and incoherent.

# A Definition of McDonaldization

- **The process by which the principles of the global fast-food restaurant McDonald's are progressively dominating more aspects of society – including sport - as well as having a significant bearing on the way that globalization works.**

# Weber and Ritzer

- The key distinction between McDonaldization and Weber's original thesis of 'Iron Cage' rationality is that Ritzer argues that the principal form of rationalization is assumed by the flexible, global corporation, best exemplified in the fast-food giant, rather than the more rigid, large bureaucracy of the state.

According to Ritzer, McDonaldization is distinguished by five essential dimensions

- **Efficiency**
- **Calculability**
- **Predictability**
- **Control**
- **Irrationality of rationality**

# Efficiency

- Efficiency refers to the effort to discover the best possible means to whatever end is desired'. A McDonaldizing society is a speeded up, time conscious and consumption based society and consumers expect to be served promptly and efficiently.
- In order to make this possible McDonalds and its customers strike a deal. The fast food corporation puts into place an inventory of norms, rules, regulations and structures to ensure that its employees perform as efficiently as possible and its customers react by dining in a similar manner. The 'drive-thru' window is the example Ritzer usually uses to illustrate this dimension.

# Calculability

- This emphasizes quantity – perhaps best personified in the ‘Big Mac’ burger - which is often accompanied with the loss of quality. Time is of the essence here. Just as the efficiency of McDonald’s staff is measured by the speed in which they can produce food and serve it to customers, so McDonald’s restaurants are designed to coerce customers not stay around for too long after they have finished eating. As we have seen, the expectation is that ideally they will buy ‘drive-thru’ and not come into the restaurant at all.



# Predictability

- Not only is it expected that McDonald's products and services will be the same the world over - a Big Mac is always a Big Mac - but so also will be the McDonaldization experience.
- In another book, Ritzer (2004) likens the predictability found in McDonalds restaurants to what Marc Augé (1995) calls *non-places*, which in marked contrast to places (those topographical sites loaded with substance) are merely repositories of liquid flows, or what he call 'nullities', globally conceived and controlled and lacking the distinctive substance – conversation, flexibility, localism, humanity - that make experiences, products and services real. In other words, McDonaldization is too superficial to be authentic.

# Control

- In explaining this Ritzer turns to technology and the example of French-fry machines: just as McDonalds employees are controlled by the bell that rings to tell them when the fries are cooked to just the right colour and texture, so customers are controlled by their inability to choose well-cooked fries.

# Irrationality of rationality

- In the process of rationally organizing its business McDonalds ends up removing all the things that make work rewarding and eating (read: sport and leisure) a pleasurable experience.
- The upshot of this is dehumanization: 'Employees are forced to work in dehumanizing jobs and customers are forced to eat in dehumanizing settings and circumstances. The fast-food restaurant is a source of degradation for employees and customers alike' (Ritzer, 2003: 141).

# McLeisure

- **Package Holidays**
- **Shopping Malls**
- **Convenience Foods**
- **Theme Parks**
- **Television**
- **Spectacular Sports**

# McSport

- According to Rojek (2005) ‘measuring and monitoring sports performance is now a standard feature of sports organization.
- Sports stadiums increasingly utilize standards of predictability as feature of design. For example, domes and artificial turf aim to minimize disruption caused by the weather.
- Processes of queuing and seating adopt ‘assembly line standards of efficiency and predictability’.

# The *homogenization* of sport and leisure

- The upshot of rationalization through McDonaldization is the *homogenization* of sport and leisure.
- Resistance is unlikely since the progressive accumulation of McDonaldization is an infinite process.

# Ritzer's metaphor is significant for two important reasons

- First, McDonaldization is not just another cunning business model. As Bauman (2000: 234) points out, 'there must have been a fertile soil for the seed, once sown, to grow so quickly resonance (indeed, a degree of mutual adequacy) between the changes in the existential conditions of ...individuals and the escape-from-uncertainty-through-designed-standards which McDonaldization is all about'.
- Second, McDonaldization shows us that the difference between consuming and leisure is getting more blurred and for many practical purposes has perhaps been already obliterated.

# The limitations of Ritzer's thesis

- The notion that employees and customers simply acquiesce to the roles ascribed to them by McDonaldization is open to theoretical reductionism; that is Ritzer reduces practical knowledge to theoretical knowledge and ignores the fact that whatever it's dark side, leisure, like culture, is praxis (Bauman, 1999b).
- On the one hand, Ritzer seems to assume that we do not have the necessary skills to outwit McDonaldization and we passively accept its authoritarian powers and, on the other, that we do not want products and services with a human face. He also ignores the possibility that people might seek alternatives to the irrational, antisocial and dehumanizing affects of McDonald's



## The two foremost criticisms of McDonaldization

- First, just like Weber, Ritzer assumes that modernity is a 'disenchanted' world, which is characterized by a *deficit of meaning*.
- But by turning away from everyday life to theory, both Weber and Ritzer choose not to focus on the freedoms and the opportunities that modernity offers us by focusing instead on its ostensible deficits.
- Contrary to what Weber and Ritzer suggest contemporary modernity is characterized by a *surplus of meaning*.

## The two foremost criticisms of McDonaldization

- **Second, McDonaldization is simply not sophisticated enough to be the principal driving force of the consumer society. It appears to be because Ritzer tells us everything that matters about consumerism for McDonaldization. But he never gets far with saying what matters about consumerism for ordinary men and women.**

# IKEA

- 'IKEA' stands for **I**ngvar **K**amprad **E**lmtaryd **A**gunnaryd.
- Ingvar Kamprad is the name of the man who founded the company in the 1940s, who grew up on a farm called Elmataryd, in a village in Sweden called Agunnaryd.

# IKEA and neat capitalism

- Through this term Rojek (2010) identifies the knowing, deliberate attempts by entrepreneurs such as Ingvar Kamprad to offer clever but cool solutions to pressing social, cultural and economic questions.
- Rojek's use of the term 'neat' here is intended to express the self-aggrandizing manner in which contemporary capitalism is promulgated and practised, especially the way in which it sells itself as offering '*savvy stateless solutions*' to the problems of society and the world by drawing on the sentiments of popular imagination.

# The success of the IKEA brand

- In 2005, IKEA had 202 shops in over 32 countries and was printing 145 million catalogues in 48 editions and 25 languages
- It had 410 million customers worldwide, 1 million of whom visit its shops everyday; and employed 84,000 staff
- Between 1994 and 2005 its income increased from \$4.3bn in 1994 to \$19.4bn, representing a growth of more than 400% (Bailly, Caudron and Lambart, 2006)

# IKEAization

- Notwithstanding its axiomatic power as the contemporary modern business model *par excellence*, IKEA has also become the paradigm for understanding changes in all areas of contemporary life.
- IKEAization has changed the way that people consume. It has helped realign our economic social class system. It has changed the way we interact. It has become part of our social and cultural fabric.

IKEAization is distinguished by seven essential dimensions

- **Home (another word for Community)**
- **Democracy**
- **Incalculability and Unpredictability**
- **Provincialism**
- **Protestant Work Ethic**
- **Cool**
- **Freedom**

# Home

- First, IKEAization emphasizes the essence of the notion **home** in a modern world in which it cannot help but be missing (Bauman, 2001). It answers the ultimate question modernity poses us: how can one find a home when the things that make it so – continuity, warmth, comfort, safety – are always on the cusp of being taken away? The essence of the IKEA brand is the idea that feeling at ‘home’ is a nourishing antidote to a thoroughly individualized modern life.



# Community

- In IKEA stores consumers find the ‘full package’ of a particular (working-class?) way of life, to quote Richard Hoggart (1966: 33), whose ‘core is a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local: it is embodied in the idea of, first, the family, and second, the neighbourhood’.
- IKEAization is in this sense an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991) or ‘fantasy community’ (Bauman, 19988) which offers a form of sharing that allows us all to enter emphatically into it.

# Democracy

- Unlike McDonaldization which seeks uniformity by trying to absorb disparate personalities, IKEAization recognizes that this is an impossible task.
- Here lies IKEAization's moral aspect: not only is it keen to promote its social and environmental image, but that it is democratic. No *apparent* stratification as such; no fixity of social class, no patriarchal, racial or age hierarchies: it is open to all-comers.
- As Donald Sassoon puts it: IKEA is the place where 'workers and burghers alike buy the contents of their homes' (2005: 147).

Modern men and women 'are beings for whom being is a question' (Heidegger)

- To paraphrase the philosopher Susan Nieman, to this end IKEA operates with the assumption that we want to determine our own world, not merely be determined by it; and not only that, but we also want to stand above the things we consume.
- With this in mind IKEAization helps us plan our desires around the way that we actually want live.

# Democracy and leisure

- What this means is that leisure forms, such rock concerts, for example, which were once just the preserve of the young, are now open to everyone. As John Harris (2009) recently put it in his cogent assessment of the annual Glastonbury event in England: “Glasto’ is now everybody's property, holding out the promise of fun for all the family. You can slum it and position yourself at the cutting edge, or take the kids and a picnic.’ For ‘Glasto’, as for IKEAization, it is cool rather than hierarchy that underpins its positioning status.

# Incalculability and Unpredictability

- **IKEAization does what McDonaldization could only dream of: it outstrips the imagination of any consumer.**
- **IKEA mirrors what the Arcadia group do in the fashion industry. It offers individually tailored products that mirror the aura of designer clothes on the high street at cheap prices; the trick being to offer luxury and style on the cheap without stripping away what makes it special.**
- **This approach always has an eye for a new market, and not only that, but an acute awareness that people have little time and patience when they shop these days. Topman has recently struck a deal with Rough Trade records to sell 'indie' music in its stores (Bray, 2009). The message is an IKEAized one: come to Topman and find the coolest clothes and coolest new sounds before either hit the mainstream.**

# Provincialism

- **IKEA might be a global brand, but unlike McDonald's, there is something inherently provincial about its character and this is a cause for celebration. In other words, its lack of USA hegemony is a key part of the appeal of IKEAization.**

# The popularity of IKEA

- 'In 2004 a Stockport town councillor in Lancashire, Britain, bragged that having an IKA store was an honour for the town. At Mougins, in the south of France, local people started a petition which read: 'If you are fed up with making a 200km round trip, lasting two hours, just to shop in your nearest IKEA, then seize this opportunity (maybe the last) to bring a new IKEA to the Alpes-Maritimes department. This is remarkable: people organising a petition, which collected more than 2,000 signatures, standing up for their rights and organising because a furnishing store lacks an outlet within 100km. Of course success on this scale has its downside. When the firm opened a store in Saudi Arabia in 2004, it offered a \$150 cheque to the first 50 shoppers through the door. There was almost a riot, with two deaths, 16 injured and 20 fainting fits' (Bailly, Caudron and Lambart , 2006) .



# Protestant Work Ethic

- Simmons argues that IKEA's customers have developed a disciplined and diligent commitment to picking up their own furniture, carrying it home and making it themselves
- Yet at the same time, and what goes unnoticed by Simmons, is that IKEAization offers the tantalizing prospect of maximum Puritanism for the minimum of sacrifice - another underlying irony
-



IKEAization also caters for those looking for something more...

- **IKEAization recognizes that the real pleasure of consuming (and leisure) lies in its ambivalence: the enthrallment of the search and the exhilaration of discovery.**
- **IKEA customers not only get off on acquiring stylish new furniture but also the anticipation and thrill of gaining new knowledge and skills in the process of putting together their acquisitions.**

# Protestant work ethic and leisure

- This can be seen in Baudrillard's (1989; 1990) idea of the 'into', which suggests that the point is not to just have a leisure interest, but be 'into' leisure, which he suggests is a new form of 'voluntary servitude'.
- This dimension of IKEAIzation can be seen in the imposition of the strict and punishing regimes in sport, exercise and keep fit, which provides us with a broad range of elaborate ways for refashioning the body. In these ways we assert our freedom, refuse our physical limits and transform our bodies (just like our homes) into what we want them to be.

# Cool

- The cool attitude is the mindset of KEAization
- As we have seen KEAization comes without any hierarchies and it is as incalculable as it is unpredictable

# Cool and IKEAized leisure

- The cult of cool, of cultivating a cool appearance criss-crosses all aspects of IKEAized leisure: rappers justify their lyrical extremities with it; some football fans found their identities on it; consumers always seem to be on the look out for guides to living that tell them the coolest ways to live and how to pose and what the coolest music to listen to and where to shop for the coolest clothes and what to eat and drink in the coolest restaurants and where to go for the coolest holidays.

# Freedom

- What all this suggests is that the technologies associated with IKEAization facilitate freedom rather than control.
- In an IKEAizing society control is barely noticeable. It is this last dimension which perhaps best exemplifies why it is precarized IKEAization rather than progressive McDonaldization that is 'the most seminal of the many present-day trends'.

What Bauman (1988: 61-62) said of consumerism generally and what can be applied to IKEAization specifically...

- **What makes the freedom offered by IKEAization more alluring still is that it comes without the blemish which tainted most other leisure forms [for example, public sector leisure facilities]: the same market which offers freedom offers certainty. It offers the individual the right to a 'thoroughly individual' choice; yet it also supplies social approval for such choice, thereby exorcizing that ghost of insecurity which...poisons the joy of the sovereign will. In a paradoxical way IKEAization fits the bill of the 'fantasy community' where freedom and certainty, independence and togetherness live alongside each other without conflict. People are thus pulled to IKEAization by a double bind: they depend on it for the individual freedom; and they depend on it for enjoying their freedom without paying the price of insecurity.**

# McDonaldization or IKEAization?

- In the language game of leisure, McDonaldization and IKEAization share the family resemblance of being consumerist.
- However, the key difference between the two is that where in the former consuming is firmly located in the *fixed* 'design-standards which McDonaldization is all about', in IKEAization the relationship is not one way: the reason for consuming is located in a cultural discourse between our own aspirations and the *fluid* and *flexible* design-standards of IKEAization.