Major League Baseball Televised Games Watching Experience and Its Effects on Chinese Professional Baseball League Games Attending Intention of Taiwanese Spectators

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Baseball has been regarded as the national sport of Taiwan for the glory it brought to the people, especially during some of the country's most difficult phases (Hu & Tsai, 2008). It became Taiwan's first professionalized team sport (the Chinese Professional Baseball League, CPBL) in 1990, attracting attention from people of all ages. A strong relationship among the league, the fans and the society was hence established. In 2006, Nielson’s survey showed a significant increase of Major League Baseball (MLB) TV rating in Taiwan while the attendance and TV rating of CPBL dropped considerably. Since then, the impact of sport globalization on local sport’s development has raised more and more concerns (Koo, 2007). Numerous studies suggested that the decline in CPBL interest was partially due to the excess media exposure of Taiwanese players in the MLB (Fu, 2006). Many baseball fans have shifted their passion to MLB to watch the players already popular in the country and becoming well known by the rest of the world (Lu & Cheng, 2008). However, the relationship between interest in MLB and CPBL attendance is yet to be conclusive. In order to fully examine this relationship, there is a need to shed light on the perceived attributes of MLB televised games.

Past studies have suggested the application of “Theory of Planned Behavior, TPB” proposed by Ajzen in 1985 in analyzing behavioral intention (BI) of individuals (Hsu, 2006; Lu & Cheng, 2008). The theory states that behavioral intention is influenced by attitude toward the behavior (AB), subjective norm (SN), and perceived behavior control (PBC). In testing this theory, Hsu (2006) found that AB, SN and PBC together counted for 43% of the total variance of college students’ CPBL games attending intention. The explaining capability of the 3 elements reduced to 30% in Lu and Cheng's (2008) study investigating 500 spectators from 5 CPBL games. It appears that factors of the TPB as well as the attributes of MLB televised games needed to be further examined to better understand their contribution on spectators’ behavioral intention. The purposes of the study were, therefore, to investigate the MLB watching experience, the perception on MLB televised games attributes, the relationship between MLB watching experience and CPBL games attending intention, and the predicting power of selected variables on CPBL games attending intention of Taiwanese spectators.

The researchers surveyed 100 spectators attending 2008 CPBL pre-season games for a pilot study. Data collected in this stage were used to validate the instrument, “MLB Games Watching Experience and CPBL Games Attending Intention Survey”. The instrument was modified to include 4 parts: the MLB games watching experience scale, the CPBL games attending intention scale, the past professional baseball watching patterns section, and the demographics information section. It was then distributed to another 400 spectators of 4 CPBL regular season games with different team combinations. A total of 350 subjects completed and returned their questionnaires with a valid response rate of 87.5%. The results showed that about one quarter (24.0%) of the respondents had never watched an MLB televised game. For those who had watched MLB games, 50.8% of them watched only occasionally, 34.6% did that frequently, and 14.7% never missed a game. The MLB games viewers of this study identified 4 attributes of the games they watched, including entertaining value, cultural diversity, educative information and sense of involvement. Comparing their perceptions on the attributes, significant differences were found on the overall and each of the 4 factors. Those who watched every MLB televised game had significant stronger perceptions on the overall and individual attributes than occasional viewers. Respondents who had experience in watching MLB games were less likely to attend CPBL games in the future than their counterpart. The more a respondent watched MLB games, the less frequent he/she attended a CPBL game. However, a further analysis indicated that those who had never missed an MLB televised game had a significant stronger intention to attend a future CPBL game than those who had watched MLB games frequently but not those who only had done that occasionally.

To explore possible influencing factors of CPBL games attending intention, the researchers examined the effects of MLB program attribute perceptions (entertaining value, cultural diversity, educative information and sense of involvement), past CPBL games attended, and the 3 integral elements (AT, SN and PBC) of Theory of Planned Behavior. The results showed that each of the MLB program attribute perceptions had a significant positive correlation with CPBL games attending intention. Also, the more frequent a respondent had attended CPBL games the more likely he/she would attend future games. Furthermore, AT, SN and PBC factors were all significantly positively correlated with CPBL games attending intention. Stepwise regression analysis was then performed to determine the predicting effects of the above factors on the dependent variable (CPBL games attending intention). Among the entered variables, SN, PBC, and the educative information and cultural diversity attributes of the MLB televised games were found to be significant predictors with educative information factor showing a
negative effect. The 4 variables collectively counted for 46% of the total variance of CPBL games attending intention. Hu and Tsai (2008) stated that Taiwanese audience preferred to watch MLB games with Taiwanese players starting. They called it "sports-fan ethnocentrism," a feeling that supports players of their own nationality but does not have to hinder the enjoyment of games played by foreign players outside the country. In this study, spectators who had no MLB viewing experience did show a stronger interest in CPBL games. However, they only represent less than one quarter of the spectators. It is the frequent MLB viewers that the CPBL administration should concern most. They did not show a solid attachment to baseball like those who would not miss an MLB game did. Their MLB experience prevented them, to a certain degree, from going to future CPBL games. The study also found that the subject norm (SN) and perceived behavior control (PBC) were significant factors behind spectators' behavioral intention, inconsistent from Lu and Cheng's (2008) results. They argued that AT and PBC were more important factors. With respect to the attributes of MLB televised games, the effect of the cultural diversity element fits into the above ethnocentrism argument. Spectators who valued the various ingredients provided by MLB games probably were also able to look for worthy aspects existing in CPBL. As to the negative influence yielded by the educative information perspective of the MLB games, a possible explanation could be that the more knowledge a viewer was explored to during MLB games, the less he/she would need to get from CPBL.

Given the results of the study, it is recommended that CPBL administration directs more attention to improve the league’s game quality in coping with MLB competition pressure. Additionally, the team owners need to come up with strategies to promote globalization within CPBL to keep up with international baseball trends valued by the fans. Keywords: Professional baseball, MLB, CPBL, game attendance, theory of planned behavior.