Globalization in Professional Sport: A Comparison of Chinese & American Basketball Fans

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The saturation of the American sports market and rapid growth of income in international markets have made international expansion a lucrative option for American sport organizations. Major League Baseball opened the 2002 and 2008 regular seasons in Japan, the National Football League played a regular season game in London in 2009, and the National Hockey League opened the 2008-09 season in Europe. Rapid international growth is especially apparent in the sport of basketball though. Basketball is beginning to compete with soccer as the most popular sport in the world (e.g. Polumbaum, 2002), and markets in Europe and Asia are booming for both the American-based National Basketball Association (NBA) and these countries’ domestic leagues. In particular, China represents a promising market for the sport of basketball. In fact, the NBA estimates that it has 500 million fans in China, and over 1 billion Chinese viewers watched NBA games during the 2006 season (Thompson & Fong, 2006). More than 50,000 retailers carried NBA merchandise in China, and 51 Chinese networks and TV stations broadcast games during the 2007-08 season (Balfour, 2007).

Because of this global expansion in sports marketing, there is a great need for cross-cultural research on sports fans. To date, sport management is lacking in cross-cultural research as well as insights on the drivers of interest in international sports and leagues. Funk, Mahony, and Havitz (2003) specifically called for the sport management field to look at sport consumers outside of the United States. An extensive review of the literature revealed only one comparison of sport spectators in two different countries (Won & Kitamura, 2007), and no existing studies that compared American fans with international fans.

The purpose of this research was to develop a model for cross-cultural sport spectatorship, and then to compare American and Chinese basketball spectators with this model. Means-end theory (e.g. Gutman, 1982) guided the development of a conceptual framework, and structural equation modeling was used to test the relationships between "focal attributes" and "expected consequences" that drive spectators to watch basketball. Focal attributes referred to the concrete features of basketball games, while expected consequences referred to abstract motives for watching sporting events in general. Constructs were adapted from previous motivation literature (e.g. Wann, 1995; Trail & James, 2001; Funk, Mahony, Nakazawa, & Hirakawa, 2001) and two pilot studies conducted in China and the United States. Back-translation was used on all items in the instrument. The constructs included three focal attributes (Interest in Players, Interest in Basketball, and Entertainment) and four expected consequences (Social Interaction, Community Pride, Family Interaction, and Nationalism).

Self-administered questionnaires were collected at professional basketball games during the 2008-09 season. The American sample included 201 respondents at NBA games, and the Chinese sample included 660 respondents at Chinese Basketball Association games. After conducting structural equation modeling, the measurement model provided a good fit in both the U.S. (CFI = .958, TLI = .933, SRMR = .045) and China (CFI = .964, TLI = .943, SRMR = .033), and was invariant in the two countries. The structural model also provided a good fit in the U.S. (CFI = .944, TLI = .921, SRMR = .057) and China (CFI = .941, TLI = .916, SRMR = .047). The results showed that the paths from Community Pride to Interest in Basketball, Community Pride to Interest in Players, and Social Interaction to Entertainment were significant in the American sample. The paths from Community Pride to Interest in Players, Social Interaction to Interest in Basketball, and Social Interaction to Entertainment were significant in the Chinese sample.

This study demonstrated that means-end theory could be beneficial to sport management researchers. The ability to model the relationships between attributes and consequences for sports spectators provides an advantage over simple motivation research. Means-end theory models the relationship between attributes and consequences, while motivation studies simply show which motives are important to sports fans. Leagues, sponsors, sporting good manufacturers, and other sports organizations are increasingly pursuing international business opportunities, yet there are still a limited number of studies that have examined international sports. Sport organizations will need to focus on global development in order to maintain growth, but previous research has not adequately examined how
sport consumers differ around the world. This study should enhance the body of literature on cross-cultural sport consumer behavior.

This study also has implications for sport marketers. The results indicate that a hybrid global-local marketing strategy may be more effective for organizations marketing to basketball fans than either a purely homogenized or localized approach. Spectators from around the world share certain preferences for basketball, but other preferences are unique to each culture. Leagues should adopt global marketing strategies that focus on these shared preferences, and then adapt their strategy slightly to fit consumers in individual markets. Although basketball spectators exhibited similarities in the two cultures, the differences that were identified indicate that fans are not homogenous around the world. A hybrid marketing strategy would allow these organizations to reap the benefits of standardization by maintaining a global brand image and minimizing costs, while also adapting their tactics slightly to capture consumers’ unique cultural preferences. Additional sport management recommendations will be discussed throughout the presentation.