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Introduction

In June 2004, because of financial problems, it was announced that the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes, a Japanese professional baseball team, would be merged into the Orix Blue Wave. The announcement that the Buffaloes would disappear caused controversy. Not only did Buffaloes’ fans petition the Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), responsible for administrating professional baseball businesses, but also the Japanese Professional Baseball Players Association (JBPBA) were against the decision. The JBPBA struck for the first time in Japanese professional baseball history. To no avail, the Buffaloes were merged into the Blue Wave as planned. Simultaneously, a new team, the Rakuten Touhoku Golden Eagles, was established in order for NPB to compensate for the disappearance of the Buffaloes.

This controversial event asks the question who owns a professional sports team. In a managerial sense, a professional sports team is the property of a company. However, this does not mean that sport fans are irrelevant to ownership of a team; they may ‘possess’ a team that they do not own (Fay, 2006). Applying Fay’s concept of possessions that are not legally owned to sports marketing, a sports team may be fans’ shared possession and they feel the team they supported is theirs. This possessive feeling is psychological ownership (Furby, 1978; Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, 2003).

Psychological ownership is defined as “state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of it is ‘theirs’” (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, p. 299). We presumed that the concept of ownership could promote our gaining an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between sports fans and teams, although prior studies have paid little attention to ownership, focusing on identification with a sports team (e.g., team identification or team loyalty). Pierce et al. (2001) conceptually differentiated ownership from identification. Whereas identification focuses on definition of self, who am I, ownership is based on possessive feelings, how much do I feel this team is mine (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001)? This viewpoint may enable us to investigate effectively relationship between a team and fans. This is because presumably possessions influence fans’ behaviour, particularly, the construction and maintenance of the self (Belk, 1988).

Belk (1998) notes that consumers (fans) construct their selves or identity, in part, through their relationship with their possessions. Thus, the more actively fans become involved in a team, the more they extend themselves to a team and construct their identity (extended-self) including that team. In the aforementioned case of the Buffaloes, it was assumed that fans identified themselves with a part of themselves (i.e. The Buffaloes team is a part of mine, even though I do not legally own the team). Psychological ownership can satisfy an individual’s motivation for efficacy for control of possessions, construction of self-identity, and having safety (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, 2003). When the Buffaloes disappeared, presumably fans felt they lost efficacy, self-identity and a place where they can feel safe. The purpose of this study is to investigate sport fans’ psychological ownership of a professional sports team during a transition event. Specifically, we attempt to qualitatively gain an understanding of the relationship between a sports team and sports fans by conducting longitudinal interviews where we focus on changes of psychological ownership for the Buffaloes.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted at two times with each subject, before the Buffaloes merged and after. The interview protocol had six criteria: (a) the discourse on becoming a fan, (b) the experience of watching games at a stadium, (c) how involved in the Buffaloes, (d) how involved in the Buffaloes after the team was merged, (e) how involved in the merging team (the Blue Wave) or the new team (the Golden Eagles), and (f) the bond between self and the Buffaloes. Five interviewees who had been actively involved in the petition for prevention of the merger were subjects of this study. Their involvement in the petition could be considered to represent a tight bond with the Buffaloes.

All interviewees extended their selves to include the Buffaloes team or players. One respondent formed his identity by publicly demonstrating himself to be a Buffaloes fan in his workplace. Through this he extended his Buffaloes self-concept from the private to the public domain (Tian & Belk, 2005) and attempted to fill the gap between his actual self and ideal self (Sirgy, 1982), and between the self he recognised and the self seen by others (Mittal, 2006). Three of the interviewees extended themselves not only to the Buffaloes but also to the players. They reported that they would refuse to support the merging team and in fact, one
of them mentioned that he held hostility toward the merging team. However, all interviewees expected that they would continue to support their favourite players, even if they transferred to the merging team or the new team. It can be interpreted that the fans constructed selves at diverse levels (Mittal, 2006) or extended their self to different objects (Belk, 1988), although fans felt the Buffaloes team was theirs (i.e. psychological ownership). Players are more important elements in terms of the construction self-identity than other Buffaloes’ properties.

While the interviewees would make an effort to cherish their memories related to Buffaloes by keeping merchandise, they struggled to take a control of their emotions related to the team. For the subjects, the Buffaloes have been psychologically proximal in their daily life; therefore, they felt the loss of the precious possession, a loss of self. The interviewees were unsure how to face the loss of the team, because they were suddenly deprived the team being central to them and this was beyond of their control.