The Distant Fan and the Psychological Continuum Model: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis

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Marketing Saturday, June 6, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Richelieu)
Abstract 2015-248 4:30 PM

Globalization has created a large-scale global market place. With the aid of information technology, fans are now able to access sport products regardless of geographical proximity. For example, Kerr and Gladden (2008) introduced the concept of a “satellite fan,” defined as one who forges a psychological connection with a distant team primarily via media consumption (i.e. television). Consumers who are geographically distant from a focal team, for example, fans of the LA Lakers who live in China and have never been outside of China, may form a psychological connection to the team. One question to consider is what may be the strength of connection for the distant fan (not a displaced fan, but one who has never resided in or traveled to the home of the favorite team) who only consumes a mediated form of the focal product, following a favorite team via television, the Internet, social media, etc. Another question to consider is whether the consumer behavior of a distant fan is similar to or different than the behavior of a local fan (one that resides in geographic proximity to a favorite team).

Previous studies of sport fandom rarely address any geographical difference(s) between sport consumers. Among the few studies attempting to differentiate by geographic background, Wann and his colleagues (2006; 2008; 2011) categorized sport fans into two geographical dimensions of displaced/distant fan and local fan. In the work of Wann and colleagues the displaced fan is defined as those who had a previous connection, who did live in proximity to a favorite team, but now reside outside that team’s geographic market. In contrast, local fans are those who support a team in the local region (Wann, 2006; Wann & Martin, 2008). Previous studies have not, however, differentiated displaced from distant fans. Instead, the terms “distant fan” and “displaced fan” have been used interchangeably, largely ignoring divergent fan experiences (Wann et al., 2011).

Displaced fans are those that at one time did reside in proximity to a favorite team. We contend that distant fans should be considered as a distinct group, those who follow a favorite team to which they are geographically distant, and have not previously resided or been in physical proximity to the favorite team. Distant fans represent sizable portions of some team fan bases, especially when considering a global market. For example, a recent study including the finding that Manchester United has 659 million supporters globally, yet less than 0.1% of its fan base are from the city of Manchester (BBC, 2013). Previous researchers have demonstrated there can be different behaviors from local and displaced fans (Wann, 2006). There has been no assessment, however, of the unique experience of distant fans.

In the current study we utilize the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001; 2006) to investigate the psychological connection of distant fans to a focal sports team. We assess the strength of connection for the distant fan who only consumes a mediated form of the focal product, and attempt to identify motives driving each level of connection. The PCM has been employed as a theoretical framework for better understanding sport participation and sport spectatorship, including but not limited to: stage-based involvement in physically active leisure (Beantong & Funk, 2008; Beaton, Funk, & Alexanders, 2009), development of sport involvement in a Marathon (Beaton et al., 2011), development of identification with a new team (Lock et al., 2012), an individual’s attachment with a football team (de Groot & Robinson, 2008), and the role of online interaction on attitude change associated with in charitable sporting events (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2008). Only one project to date has addressed the topic of distant fans. Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008) studied NHL fans in Ontario who support a non-local (distant) team and identified six motives driving their support of a non-local NHL team. While Canada and the United States are different countries, there is much more to be learned with respect to the global market for professional sports teams based in the United States. Efforts by the top tier professional sport leagues in the United States provide anecdotal evidence that marketing to distant fans is a viable area for study. The work by Hyatt and Andrijiw is a start, but much more remains to be done.
The first purpose of the current study is to measure the strength of the distant fans psychological connection to a sports team based in the United States. Strength of psychological connection relative to the stages of the PCM will be assessed in a manner similar to the work conducted by Doyle, Kunkel, and Funk (2013). A second purpose is to determine what motives are associated with the different stages of psychological connection for distant fans.

The project will be guided by three questions:

RQ1: What stage(s) of psychological connection have Chinese NBA (distant) fans reached?
RQ2: Are there differences in the media consumption of a favorite NBA team across the different stages of psychological connection?
RQ3: Are there differences in the motives associated with the stages of psychological connection to a favorite NBA team?

The data will be collected via an online survey from Chinese fans who identify with NBA teams. The survey instrument will be derived from previous studies of consumer staging among the stages of the PCM (Beaton et al., 2009; Doyle et al., 2013), and will include a measure of involvement (Doyle et al., 2013). The survey will also include the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (Trail & James, 2001). Media consumption behavior in relation to the participant’s favorite distant team will also be measured. All survey questions will be translated into Chinese.

The data will be analyzed using SPSS 21.0. Cronbach’s alpha scores will be computed to assess evidence of reliability with the measures. To answer RQ1, the respondents will be staged based on the procedure developed by Beaton et al. (2009): (1) Calculate the mean score for each involvement facet; (2) Use the mean facet scores to create a ranked involvement profile; and (3) Place participants into different stages (p, 133). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post hoc testing will be utilized to determine whether there are differences in media consumption across the different stages (RQ2). To answer RQ3, ANOVA will be computed to investigate whether there are differences in the importance of particular motives at each stage of the PCM.

The project will be completed in Spring 2015 and the results will be included in the conference presentation. This study is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of distant fans based on the PCM. This research will also provide useful information for sport managers to better execute market segmentation practices and acknowledge related consumption motivations for global fan bases.