Reaching Out to Diverse Ethnic Communities: Perceived Organizational Culture of the LA Dodgers and its Impact on Korean Fans

Na Ri Shin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Doo Jae Park, Eastern Illinois University
Jon Welty Peachey (Advisor), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Introduction

Sport spectatorship produces myriad reactions and perceptions in individuals, including how individuals perceive themselves as a part of particular racial/ethnic community (Armstrong, 2008). Psychological attachment to racial/ethnic groups can help fans identify with a sports team or a player, which leads to potential consumption of related products (Nadeau, Pegoraro, Jones, O’Reilly, & Carvalho, 2011). Thus, there is a functional element to sport spectatorship based on spectators’ appreciation and interpretation.

Among the top five Asian American ethnic communities in the US, Koreans are considered as possessing high cultural attachment toward Major League Baseball (MLB) because of Korean players in the league (Kim, 2015). The Korean community has been involved in baseball spectatorship since the 1990s when the first Korean MLB player, Chan Ho Park, signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers (Joo, 2012). That LA has the largest Korean population across the US seemed to influence the Dodgers’ recruiting of Korean players (Cho, 2009). However, Koreans’ interest and attention mainly gravitated toward Korean players rather than the team (Kim, 2015). Thus, from a marketing standpoint, Korean fans with commitment to a Korean player may abandon the team whenever the player is traded to another team. That is, recruiting a star player may contribute to short-term benefit but it may fail to generate long-term effects.

A previous study found that Korean fans of the Dodgers connect to a Korean player but also have significant identification with the team (Authors, 2015). This identification could be evidence of potential long-term fanship to the team that could be related to the Dodgers’ marketing strategy to establish and promote its organizational culture. However, previous work has not examined how organizational culture is related to ethnic fan identification in sport. Thus, the purpose of this study and central research question is to explore how the Dodgers’ perceived organizational culture has influenced Korean fans’ identification with the team.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

All organizations have cultures (Desphande & Webster, 1989). Organizational culture not only includes physical artifacts that distinguish its identity (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), but also denotes shared norms, values, and assumptions in relation to its function (Schein, 1996). Decisions and actions made by an organization are determined by cultural influences (Kerby, 1975). Thus, it is possible to understand characteristics of an organization by examining its organizational culture. In the sport management literature, organizational culture has been studied in the inner-organizational context such as its relationship to resistance to change (Slack & Hinning, 1992), job satisfaction (Wallace & Weese, 1995), and leadership styles (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2014). However, Armstrong (2013) made an interesting argument that the role of culture in sport organizations has significant importance in generating effective marketing practice, which is an external context of organizational culture.

To guide this study, the Competing Values Framework (CVF) (Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005; Parker & Bradley, 2000; Quinn, 1988) was adopted. The CVF examines the competing demands between an organization’s internal and external environments as well as control and flexibility (Cameron & Quinn, 2005). The CVF’s conceptual layout includes four different types of organizational culture: (a) Human relation model (group culture); (b) Open system model (development culture); (c) Internal process model (hierarchal culture); and (d) Rational goals model (competitive culture). This framework has been applied in the sport management literature to analyze sport organizations because of its strength and appropriateness in conceptualizing organizational culture (Coyler, 2000;
Method

The current study is in progress and will be completed before NASSM. The data collection method for this qualitative study is a semi-structured personal interview (face-to-face and Skype). Participants have been recruited through snowball sampling and on-line advertisements. The authors first made contact with an individual from a Korean newspaper company in Los Angeles, who introduced the authors to individuals who are fans of the Dodgers. Also, recruitment materials were distributed on the Korean American Journal’s official Facebook page. To be selected, individuals had to identify themselves as a fan of the Dodgers. Interviews are being conducted in English or Korean, according to the participant’s preference. All interviews are being audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Korean have been translated by the first author whose native language is Korean. Data analysis consists of identifying a priori codes and themes based on the theoretical framework and literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In complement, an inductive analysis of open, axial, and selective coding is being employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Dependability and credibility are being enhanced through establishing intercoder reliability between the authors. Member checks with participants are being conducted, where they are reviewing their transcripts and study interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At present 12 interviews have been conducted, with eight more to be completed by the end of 2015.

Findings and Discussion

Preliminary data show Korean fans perceive the Dodgers to be a better team to root for because there is more team spirit, namely, ‘team culture’. The perceived organizational culture includes factors from both the Open system model and Human relation model of the CVF. Participants recognized the historical fact that the Dodgers had recruited the first African American player, the first Mexican American player, and the first Korean player in the MLB. Because of this legacy, they perceived the Dodgers as an innovative entrepreneur. Being innovative and entrepreneurial is an important factor of the Open system model. They also perceived that the Dodgers care for minorities, including the Korean community. One participant said “The Dodgers establishment has always rooted for the minority. The underdog.” External representation of an organization is an objectified marker in sports culture that becomes a ‘visual hooks’ (Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). The Dodgers’ annual event for Korean fans, the Korea Night, serves as a visual hook. Through this event, participants felt the team cares for Korean fans and gives them focused attention. These perceptions are related to factors such as warm and caring, and establishing a personal relationship, which depict the Human relations model. All of these factors act as a catalyst to build more fanship for the Dodgers.

Theoretically, this study shows the applicability of the CVF in analyzing perceived organizational culture of a sports team and its influence on fans’ identification with the team. The implications suggest fans identify with a team through perceived organizational culture, and this identification will contribute to long-term fanship. Practically, this study suggests sports teams can obtain benefits through active promotion of strategically managed organizational culture. Future research directions will also be discussed.