The Traveling Fan – Factors that Influence the Attendance at Mega-Events in Global Soccer

Gerald Fritz, Johannes Gutenberg University

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(including questions)

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This study is focused on international soccer fans who feel attracted to mega-events like the FIFA World Cup or the UEFA EURO Championships. As these events take place only every four years while changing from one country to another, many fans consider a visit of the host nation as a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ chance while experiencing the matches ‘live’ at the stadia or at the Fan Fests. Preuss (2005) speaks of ‘event visitors’ who are attracted to mega-events and travel to the host cities because of the events themselves. It is common for these fans that they have to go through an individual negotiation process between motivational factors and factors of constraints. Though travel intentions may exist, actual travel behavior might not occur.

Although there has been various interest among scholars to research the variety of motivating factors which examine intentions to attend mega-events as well as factors which keep people off from travelling (Kim and Chalip, 2004, Neirott and Hilliard, 2006), evidence-based information about the actual attendance of mega-events remains underdeveloped in the literature (Funk et al., 2009). Constraints play an important role in a person’s travel decision making. Crucial factors such as monetary costs, long distance flights, family obligations, and risks provided by the host destination such as health and safety may be perceived as travel inhibitors (Kim and Chalip, 2004). One of the single most conceptual developments in explaining leisure constraints is the three-dimensional construct of Crawford and Godbey (1987). Based on their findings they developed the ‘hierarchical constraints model’ (Crawford et al., 1991). The authors proclaimed that people regularly negotiate between three defined dimensions of constraints. They claimed that intra- and interpersonal constraints are more proximal, whereas structural constraints are the most distal ones, and therefore the least important in forming leisure activity. Kim and Trail (2010) picked on the negotiation proposition in the context of sport consumer behavior. They focused on developing a model which explains the relationships among motivation and constraints in a sport setting and were interested in its implication for event attendance of sport fans. They found that the internal motivators ‘attachment to the team’, ‘coach’, ‘sport level’ and ‘sport’ led to the highest variance in attendance and functioned as the most important independent variables for sport event attendance. Gilbert & Hudson (2000) and Hudson (2000) described financial constraints as the ones which had the highest impact on skiing travelers. Additionally they found significant differences in regards to travel constraints among men and women. Funk et al. (2007) found that travel motives differ among gender and cultural backgrounds among individuals who travel to participate in an international running event.

This study shall give more insights into both existing motives of travel and travel constraints in the mega-event setting. It shall also examine if travel factors differ based on individual characteristics and demographics, and finally it shall explore the negotiation process of individual travel factors in global soccer, and therefore contribute to the body of knowledge in sport tourism.

During and after the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil, the author studied members of the ‘Fanclub Nationalmannschaft’, a commercial supporters’ club of the German Soccer Association (DFB) which has more than 50,000 paying members. By running its fan club, the DFB aims to activate German soccer fans to attend important tournaments and to support the German national team from group to knock-out stages. The DFB offers flights, hotels accommodation, transportation, and match day tickets. However, only about one tenth of the members of the Fanclub Nationalmannschaft finally traveled to Brazil cheering on the German squad winning their fourth World Cup Championships. By conducting a qualitative study, examining ‘event visitors’ (n=25) and ‘non-travelers’ (n=6), the author found out that 79% of the participants rated themselves as very committed soccer fans. They ranged between level 3 (attachment) and level 4 (allegiance) of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001). The majority indicated to be financially independent by having good jobs (61%) or being self-employed (26%). They were relatively old, ranging from 35 to 70 years (87%). Main travel motives were ‘attending solely the FIFA WC Brazil’ (51%) or ‘visiting both FIFA WC Brazil and touristic highlights’ (47%) such as the Copacabana, Corcovado, and Sugar Loaf. Among the ‘event visitors’ the main travel constraints were ‘work’, ‘costs of travel’, and...
‘family obligations’ which fall under the intra- and interpersonal dimensions. In contrast, the main travel constraints for ‘non-travelers’ were ‘lack of international language skills in Brazil’, ‘general infrastructure’, and ‘no personal Brazilian network’ which were all of structural nature depending on the host nation. It seemed that the higher the fans ranged on the PCM levels, the less influence structural constraints had on their actual travel behavior. This stands in contrast to the findings of Crawford et al. (1991). Finally, the sample showed no tendency of gender specifics in regards to travel factors. When it came to travel preferences to upcoming FIFA World Cups, the majority of participants expressed high reluctance to travel to either Russia 2018 or Qatar 2022. A nontransparent bidding process, ongoing corruption, and having no trust in FIFA was mentioned first and foremost.

In a second step, the author will conduct a quantitative study to reassess the results of his qualitative research and to allow statistical inference. He was given the permission by the DFB management to apply an online survey addressed to the members of the Fanclub Nationalmannschaft, Section Rhineland (n=4,500), examining travel motives and constraints regarding the UEFA EURO 2016. The German team already qualified for this tournament. However, it can be assumed that fans will not make travel arrangements before the final draw has taken place on 12th December 2015. By then, German soccer fans will know the venues where their team will play during the group stages. Due to the close distance between Germany and France, which are directly bordering, it is very likely that the demand for German team tickets will be much higher than for the former World Cup in Brazil. It can also be assumed that travel factors and individual characteristics of German fans intending to visit the UEFA EURO 2016 in France may strongly differ from those having visited the 2014 World Cup Brazil.

In January 2016, the author will conduct a first quantitative online survey, aimed to examine travel motives and constraints based on travel intention for the UEFA EURO 2016 France. The results shall be presented during the 2016 NASSM Conference.

In Mid-July 2016, all respondents of the first round of data collection will be readdressed for a second online survey, examining the actual travel behavior after the 2016 EURO has taken place. This will allow to compare travel intention with realized travel behavior as well as applying cross-comparisons with the findings of the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil.

Considering the aforementioned, this study has high relevance for rights holders, local organizing committees, national soccer associations, and tourism marketers to know who their targeted sports tourists are, how to characterize them, and, most importantly, how travel behavior can be induced in the mega-event setting of global soccer. Finally, the study has high value for the DFB to develop, market and improve service for its supporters’ club for upcoming international tournaments.