Understanding Long-Distance Fandom: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Soccer Fans.

Yiran Su, Temple University
Thilo Kunkel, Temple University

Abstract 2016-158
Friday, June 3, 2016
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(legacy South 3)

As China grows in purchasing power, international sport brands flood in to take a share in this huge market. As the marketing manager of Bayern Munich stated, “China is our focus market, it is estimated that we have over 90 million potential fans here.” (Verhoff, 2015). Although these brands reap lucrative short-term benefits via touring in China, they have also been criticized for putting less effort into their game and no interaction with the fans. Therefore, to expand brands to international markets, and succeed in a highly competitive industry, sport organizations need to understand their international consumer base of satellite fans (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). In the current study, an exploratory qualitative approach is utilized to address this gap by examining why satellite fans support international sport brands. In particular, given the importance of China as a market, Chinese satellite fans were interviewed.

Literature Review

According to Aaker (1991), a brand association is “anything linked in memory to a brand” (p. 109), which can be classified into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993). Conceptually, brand associations influence consumer loyalty, as they influence consumers’ perceived favorability toward a brand, the likelihood of brand selection, and consumption, and ultimately lead to thoughts and feelings about the brand’s relationship consumers themselves (Chaplin & John, 2005; Romaniuk, 2013; Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013).

Brand loyalty consists of two components. The attitudinal component of brand loyalty describes the extent to which an individual holds positive attitudes toward a brand. In sport marketing context, this positive attitude manifests in the form of durable attachment regardless of the performance of the team or athletes (Funk & James, 2006; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). The behavioral component of brand loyalty represents repeat purchase and usage of a certain brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Exiting studies of satellite fans’ brand loyalty focus on attributes of the sport brand. Kerr and Gladden (2008) conceptualized three levels of product attributes as antecedents that shape how satellite fans perceive an overseas soccer club. They theorized that team-related antecedents included success, star player, and head coach; organization-related antecedents include league, stadium, sponsor alignment; and market-related antecedents include geographic location, competitive forces, brand community, and international media arrangements. However, this conceptualization has not been supported with data, and neglects brand associations that would be classified in the benefits or attitude category of Keller’s (1993) framework. The following research questions are examined in the current research: RQ1: What are the antecedents of international sport brand support? RQ2: What attitudes and behaviors do consumer display toward international sport brands? RQ3: What constraints hinder behavior toward international sport brands? RQ4: What can international sport brands do strengthen the relationship with their satellite?

Method

In the current research, 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants that were in the age range of 20-34. Participants were asked open-ended questions, which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, about their support of a specific team, their attitudes and behaviors toward this team, and for their recommendations of how to strengthen the brand of their favorite team in China. All interviews were collected in Chinese language to ensure consistency. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were translated into English and then translated back to ensure data quality and remove ambiguities or discrepancies in meaning between two languages.

Findings
Findings outline antecedents of fan support, attitudes toward the brand, behavior toward the brand, constraints prohibiting behavior toward the brand, and consumer recommendations to further develop the brand in China. Antecedents of satellite fan support were represented by eight themes, representing three categories – team-related attributes, league-related attributes, and benefits. Team-related attributes were represented by three themes – star players (N = 15), success (N = 9), and coaches (N = 8). Participants identified specific individual persons (i.e., star player or coach) or a specific success (e.g., title) that initiated their support for a particular team. League-related attributes were represented by three themes – quality (N = 24), style (N = 11), and media accessibility (N = 5). Benefits were represented by two themes – empowerment (N = 11) and entertainment (N = 10). Attitude toward satellite fans’ favorite team was represented by one theme – self-brand connection (N = 22). Behavior toward satellite fans’ favorite team was represented by three themes – media consumption (N = 24), merchandise consumption (N = 23), and tourism intentions (N = 23). Constraints on satellite fans’ behavior toward their favorite team were represented by one theme – time constraints (N = 9). Fan attraction and retention recommendations were represented by three themes – access (N = 10), team performance (N = 8), and localization (N = 8). Actions that can be influenced by brand managers, include providing access via tour visits with interaction opportunities, a presence on Chinese social media pages (e.g., Weibo and WeChat), and developing local youth soccer camps.

Discussion

The current findings support the team-related attributes success, star player, and head coach theorized in Kerr and Gladden’s (2008) research. The current findings not only confirm but also extend existing satellite fans research. League-related attributes have not been conceptualized as important antecedents of satellite fan support of international teams. However, quality and style have previously been identified as important brand associations of domestic sport leagues (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). The benefit of entertainment has been identified as an important benefit of sport teams (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Yet, to our knowledge, the benefit of empowerment has not previously been linked to following sport teams.

Findings have been utilized to develop a model of satellite fan support for international sport brands. The model provides an overview of the antecedents, attitudes, and behavior of satellite fans. Team-related attributes, league-related attributes, and benefits represent antecedents to influence satellite fans’ attitudes and behavior toward an international sport brand. However, given a lack of geographic connection or cultural integration of the sport in their daily life, satellite fans’ behavior toward the sport brand is prone to be hindered by constraints.

Managerial implications provide guidance how international sport brands can influence satellite fans’ attraction and retention. Findings indicate that continued success is important to connect to satellite fans. Additionally, providing access and long-term investments in local sport infrastructure may be beneficial. Applying findings of this research may help international sport teams to develop their brand, increase their fan base, and gain reap sponsorship income in this highly lucrative market.