Motives for Korean Baseball Fans’ Behavioral Loyalty to Korean MLB Players

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One key area of success for Major League Baseball (MLB) has been expanding their markets globally. MLB has marketed itself strongly to countries around the globe, including such Asian countries as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China. They have expanded in these specific markets because the countries have fully developed professional leagues, the consumers’ familiarity with baseball culture, the consumption power of the domestic market, and the wireless infrastructure that makes MLB’s media content so easily accessed (Ito, Iwata, McKenzie, Noland, & Urata, 2016; Rowe & Gilmour, 2010). One key to MLB customizing its marketing strategies to suit the interests of baseball fans in these countries is glocalization (Cho, Leary, & Jackson, 2012; Giulianiotti & Robertson, 2012). MLB understands that it is even more attractive to these countries if it features some of their players. Korean baseball fans, for example, develop fanship for MLB by following Shin-soo Choo and his team, the Texas Rangers. In fact, MLB’s official website is available in Korean and Japanese languages.

A number of studies have found a variety of motives of sport consumers in their consumption (Ballouli, Trail, Koesters, & Bernthal, 2016; Kim, James, & Kim, 2013; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). Wann (1995) proposed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale that explains sport consumption is guided by eight motives—eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family. Trail and James (2001) developed the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption, attributing consumption to nine motivations—achievement, knowledge acquisition, aesthetics, drama, escape, family, skill, physical attraction, and social interaction. Despite research regarding sport consumers’ motivation, they sampled only American sport fans. There is still little knowledge on why sport fans watch and consume a sport occurring outside their countries’ borders, which represents a critical gap in the sport fan literature. With the rising number of foreign athletes competing in American sports, specifically MLB, along with foreign fans watching their favorite athletes from their home countries, this study’s aim is to contribute to the current literature by examining motivation for Korean baseball fans’ loyalty to Korean MLB players.

A sport consumer develops an attachment point to a variety of objects according to the sport context (Ballouli et al., 2016; Robinson & Trail, 2005). Identity theory suggests that a person plays multiple roles and that these roles determine one’s identification compared to other objects (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1979). The roles may be formed by different points of attachment. Given this, sport consumers can play a number of roles and identify themselves with a sport team, coach, community, type of sport, or level of sport (Robinson & Trail, 2005). For example, it is often observed that a sport fan will curtail his or her fanship with a favorite athlete if the athlete leaves the home team to which the fan still holds an attachment point. On the other hand, the fan may maintain the fanship because the attachment object is that particular athlete. That is, sport fans can continue following, by actively employing new roles based on new attachment objects, an athlete who leaves a home team of a domestic league and plays on a new team in, say, MLB. On opening day, 2015, MLB teams had 230 international players on their active rosters; given this, it is important that we understand how sport fans continue their fanship with the same ethnic athlete.

A number of studies have found the impact of sport consumers’ cultural characteristics on their identification with different objects of sport using diverse attachment points (Bae, Lu-Anderson, Fujimoto, Richelieu, 2015; Ha, Hums, & Greenwell, 2014, 2016). Ha et al. (2014) found that Asian Americans’ acculturation affected their identification with American football. No impact of ethnic identity on football identification was found. Similarly, Kim (2014) examined Korean immigrants regarding the relations of their acculturation pattern and an MLB team identification. The study found that integration, one aspect of acculturation, affected identification with a MLB team while it didn’t affect their identification with a Korean MLB player. Such results might reflect the fact that, at the time of the study, the MLB team had no Korean players. While these studies contributed to knowing how ethnic characteristics such as acculturation or ethnic identity affect sport consumers in developing their identification with sport team and/or athletes, the results could be only leveraged toward sport consumer behaviors of American market. Having
To meet this aim, the current study has designed a model in which Korean baseball fans’ five motivations of supporting a Korean MLB player affect their behavioral loyalty to the athlete. The motivations are social interaction (Wann, 1995; Trail & James, 2001), hedonic pleasure (Wann, 1995; Trail & James, 2001), ethnic identity (Ha et al., 2014), commitment to Korean professional baseball (Kim et al., 2013), and interests in MLB (Hong, McDonald, Yoon, & Fujimoto, 2005). Behavioral loyalty consists of short-term behavioral intentions in consuming merchandise and media contents relevant with a Korean MLB player and long-term behavioral intentions in following a Korean MLB player on social media and mass media (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). Each factor was measured by three questions. All the questions were asked via a 7-point Likert-type scale.

A sample of 294 university students in South Korea were provided self-administered questionnaires. The sample consisted of 202 males and 92 females. Their average age was approximately 21 years old. All survey participants had at least one favorite Korean MLB player, and for a majority of them (59.8%) that was Hyun-Jin Ryu, pitcher for the LA Dodgers (with six Korean MLB players being active in the 2016 season).

To analyze the data, this study employed structural equation modelling. The data was first analyzed via confirmatory factor analysis to ascertain the factor structure of study model. The measurement model achieved an acceptable fit for the data based on the selected approximation fit indices (p < .001, 418.04/120 = 3.48, CFI = .95, IFI = .95, NFI = .93, RMSEA = .09). All the model’s constructs showed acceptable levels of average variance extracted (AVE), ranging from .69 to .90 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Composite reliabilities were also satisfactory ranging from .74 to .91. In following comprehensive model testing, the test resulted in acceptable fit indices for the data of the sample (p < .001, 418.04/120 = 3.48, CFI = .95, IFI = .95, NFI = .93, RMSEA = .09). All hypothesized paths were found to be significant (p < .05). The standardized magnitude of hedonic motivation was the greatest (λ = .46) while that of social interaction was the least (λ = .14). Interestingly, ethnic identity had a negative impact on behavioral loyalty (λ = -.20). More details on magnitude and significance of each path will be shown at the presentation.

The study provides a number of theoretical implications to the existing sport consumer motivation studies. While hedonic motivation seemed to be universal and powerful in explaining sport consumers’ motivation, this study found the conceptual validity of sport fans’ commitment to domestic sport league and their interest in a new sport league in predicting international sport consumers’ motivations. It was interesting to see the negative effect of ethnic identity, though a number of studies have already reported similar results (cf. Ha et al., 2014). This result could be implemented so as to customize the MLB’s global strategies to expand their fan base. Their glocalization strategy should account for keeping the balance of domestic sport fans’ commitment to their sport league and their interests in a new sport league. Having a bilateral relation between two sport leagues would be better for these segments than a market-driven, one-way marketing strategy.