Studying Asian Sport Consumer Behaviors: A Conceptual Review on Cultural Differences

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The 21st century has witnessed remarkable and rapid economic growth and industrial development throughout the world. Not unlike other industries, the sport industry has benefited in many ways from globalization. More countries are participating in international sport events, which in turn has increased the opportunities for athletic participants, as well as event organizers, employees, and marketers (Thibault, 2009). Likewise, Asia as a whole has gradually evolved into an ever-increasing destination for major multi-sport events (Dolles, 2008). Many Asian countries have hosted a variety of major global events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2002 FIFA World Cup co-hosted by Korea and Japan.

Alongside the recent growth of Asia’s sport industry is the ever-increasing research on Asian sport consumers and events. Thanks to the knowledge acquired from sport consumer research conducted in the Western countries (e.g., the United States), scholars have been able to borrow and modify models and scales so as to better understand sport consumers in Asia (e.g., Wang, Zhang, & Tsuji, 2011; Won & Kitamura, 2007). However, continuing to apply models developed in Western countries that endorse personal independence and individualism might eventually hinder research on sport consumer behaviors from obtaining a rich and deep understanding of “true” Asian sport consumers (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In fact, numerous studies in psychology, consumer behavior, and marketing have discovered fundamental psychological distinctions between individuals in the West and East, and have demonstrated empirically how these distinctions could lead to different attitudinal, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997; Morris & Peng, 1994). Failing to recognize these differences could result in misunderstandings with regard to Asians’ sport consumer behaviors as well as the behaviors of consumers as a whole (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Culture-related and cross-national studies (Hofstede & Hoppe, 1980; Triandis, 1988; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988) have frequently employed the concepts of individualism and collectivism to explain differences between Western and Eastern cultures. In general, individualistic cultures are associated with Western countries while Eastern countries are considered collectivistic cultures (Singelis, 1994). The main characteristic that distinguishes the two cultures resides in interpersonal orientation: people endorsing individualistic cultures emphasize personal goals, whereas individuals from collectivistic cultures give priority to in-group goals (Triandis, 1988). Another cultural distinction proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) is self-construal. Having an independent self-construal, individuals in the West generally see themselves as unique and autonomous entities and set distinct boundaries between their own self-view and other people. In contrast, individuals in the East generally hold an interdependent self-construal and perceive themselves as interconnected with others and place emphasis on integrating the various components of situations to form a harmonious whole (Moore, 1967; Northrop, 1946). The distinction between interdependent and independent self-construal is not a trivial one when studying Asian sport consumers. For instance, interdependent self-construal suggests Asian sports consumers’ consumption decisions could largely be determined by their need to belong with family and friends, and decisions to attend sporting events can be a group process.
After considering these cultural differences, we identify three domains – information processing, attribution style, and interpersonal relationship – that could inform future studies on Asian sports consumer and marketing. We discuss the three domains individually and provide a brief example illustrating how each of them can affect marketing strategies. First, regarding information processing, independents are inclined to think analytically, focusing on isolated pieces of information or objects, whereas interdependents are predisposed to process information holistically, paying attention to the interconnections among different pieces of information and considering the whole social situation or context (Monga & John, 2008). Therefore, Asian sports consumers could be more receptive to brand extensions than their Western counterparts are. Second, dispositionism, a type of attributional style deeply rooted in Western societies, ascribes the locus of behavior primarily to individuals’ personal attributes such as attitudes and motives. The dispositionism bias is decreased among interdependent individuals who often can recognize the spectrum of situational variables that could also contribute to others’ behaviors (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Therefore, Asian sports consumers could appreciate ads that promote a player’s effort leading to his/her athletic success/performance, whereas ads emphasizing athleticism would be more effective in Western markets. Finally, regarding interpersonal relationships, in Western cultures, the independent self considers his or her relationships to others as volitional and based on individual choice. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, the interdependent self considers interpersonal responsiveness and care for others as obligatory and based on a moral code instead of individual choice (Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, it is unsurprising that Western fans bask in the reflected glory and cut off reflected failure (CORF) as a way to feel achievement vicariously and protect self-view, respectively (Cialdini et al., 1976). However, interdependent Asian consumers would engage in less CORF because negative emotions are supposed to be shared by group members. Based on these three domains, this conceptual paper proposes the following:

• Proposition 1: Asian sports consumers tend to engage in holistic (vs. analytic) processing, which could affect their consumer decision-making process.

• Proposition 2: Asian sports consumers tend to adopt the situational attribution style (vs. dispositional), which could affect their consumer decision-making process.

• Proposition 3: Asian sport consumers tend to form close interpersonal relationships with others (vs. self-focus), which could affect their consumer decision-making process.

As these propositions indicate, this study has implications for sport organizations such as teams, leagues, sporting goods companies, and sport event committees in Asia. Furthermore, recognizing cultural differences in the three domains can help sport marketers to better understand Asian sport consumers, which in turn can result in their developing more effective marketing strategies. As this paper focuses on these cultural differences in the broad context of Eastern vs. Western cultures, we expect that it will serve as a foundation for future studies on cultural differences to better understand Asian sport consumers.