Globalized Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA): Culture as an Antecedent Affecting the Consumer Behavior of the LPGA Events Filled with International Golfers in the Leaderboard

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With the extensive dissemination of globalization in recent decades, cross-border movement of sport labors has increased tremendously and become an irreversible presence. In particular, over the last two decades the LPGA has positioned itself as one of the most globalized sport organizations and has experienced sharp surge of international golfers, specifically those from Asian countries. Although international golfers significantly contributed to the competition and diversity within the LPGA tours, the organization has perceived the trend as somewhat a threat to the continued success of its tours and sponsors. For instance, in fall 2008 the LPGA announced the widely-criticized and short-lived “English-only” policy that required foreign players to demonstrate the ability to communicate in English (Shipnuck, 2008). Whereas language barrier may be a main deterrent to the attractiveness of the tour, cultural barrier is another issue that the LPGA should have considered. In many Asian cultures, emotional expression and self-promotion are not respected and valued (Choi, 2010); therefore, adequate language proficiency would not solve the lack of interpersonal interactions and socialization among some international players on the field as these introverted traits are closely related to the culture they are from.

Good performances by Asian golfers are often apparent in the broadcasted LPGA programming since the cameras primarily follow those golfers on the top of leaderboard, specifically after the cut-off or in the final two rounds. A reality is that audiences might not be able to watch their favorite golfers’ play on TV unless the golfers play well. Likely due to this and other reasons, the number of TV viewers of the LPGA tours within the U.S. has been declining in recent years; in 2011, the tournaments were watched by 12.73 million viewers, which was decreased to 11.61 million by 2016 (Statista, 2016). Among many factors, better performance by international golfers might have contributed to the decreased viewership. Despite the increased participation of international athletes in many North American professional leagues, the event viewers and players are still primarily domestic and their demographic backgrounds are of high congruence. The dominance of international athlete group in the LPGA tours is in fact a unique phenomenon that is rarely found in other professional sports.

Considering the unique characteristics of the LPGA market environment, a critical question remains about the extent to which research findings derived on consumer behaviors of traditional professional sport leagues would be applicable to the LPGA tours. It is very likely that the ethnic mismatch between spectators and tour-leading athletes in the LPGA would potentially influence consumer behaviors. Previous researchers found that culture extensively influences cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior of an individual, provides a common frame of reference among members that make up the group of people to share similar thoughts, attitude, emotion, and behavior, and helps shape one’s own way of perceiving and evaluating the world around himself/herself (Hall, 1989; Hofstede, 1980; Torelli & Cheng, 2015, Triandis, 2004). By a modified application of the theory of reasoned action, this study is designed to investigate the impact of culture on consumer behaviors of the LPGA events; in particular, this study tests the hypotheses that multiculturalism beliefs, cultural familiarity, and perceptions of ethnically diverse LPGA would act as antecedents influencing the formation of consumers’ attitude toward the LPGA events that is one of the precursors of consumption behaviors.

Development of the research hypotheses was based on a comprehensive review of literature. According to Hofstede (1980), countries can be categorized by cultural values of four sets of bipolar dimensions: individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance. It is noticeable that all four dimensions of cultural values are placed at the opposite between the U.S and a majority of Asian countries. Similarity-attraction theory and social identity theory argue that people are attracted to and behave positively toward others who possess similar attitudes and values (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel, 1981). These findings suggest that cultural discrepancy between leading
golfers and the general fan base of the LPGA would work reversely on consumption behavior since common traits are hardly found between these two groups. Nonetheless, cross-cultural experiences would help understand and enhance the acceptance of cultural differences. Willard-Holt (2001) showed that the level of cultural familiarity, degree of cross-cultural acceptance, and the level of adaptability of an individual to other cultures were found to be significantly correlated. As the Asian population in the U.S has been increased faster than any of other ethnic groups over the last decade, with 46% increase (East-West Center, 2016), American consumers have more convenient opportunities to access and understand various Asian cultures and become familiar with them.

Multiculturalism is a state in which cultures of non-dominant ethnic minority groups are granted the same recognition and accommodation as the culture of the majority group within a society and multiculturalism belief is the degree of an individual’s support for multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995). Previous studies found that people with stronger multicultural attitude are more inclusive and supportive of minority groups and their cultures (Breugelmans & Van De Vijver, 2004) and their perceived intergroup threat would be attenuated by multicultural belief and further translated into positive attitude towards minority people and culture (Ward & Masgoret, 2006). Furthermore, perceived image toward a product or service is widely considered a precursor to a consumer’s attitude and actions (Kotler, 1997). In the sport context, perceived image of sport events has been found being closely related to cognitive and affective components that ultimately influence the formation of sport consumption (Kaplanidou 2010; Hallmann, 2012). For instance, Jin, Zhang, Ma, and Connaughton (2011) argued that perceptions of residence toward Green Olympic games was one of the antecedents that attributed to the formation of attitudes toward hosting mega sport events and following behavior.

The following hypotheses are to be tested:
H1: Multiculturalism belief will positively influence consumers’ attitude toward the LPGA.

H2: Cultural familiarity will positively influence consumers’ attitude toward the LPGA.

H3: The positive perception of the LPGA’s diversity practices will positively influence consumers’ attitude toward the LPGA.

H4: Consumers who have more positive attitudes toward the LPGA’s diversity practice will have stronger behavioral intentions to consume the LPGA.

Based on a comprehensive review of literature and a test of content validity by a panel of experts, a survey form has been formulated to measure multiculturalism beliefs, cultural familiarity, perceptions of ethnical and cultural diversity of the LPGA, attitude toward the LPGA events, and consumption intentions. Targeting on the LPGA fans, data are currently being collected via an online survey tool. Confirmatory factor analyses will be conducted to verify the factor validity of concepts in the proposed model and examine their convergent and discriminant validity, which are followed by calculating their internal consistency coefficients. Structural equation model analyses will be conducted to test the research questions and the hypotheses in the proposed model. It is expected that findings of this study will contribute to the general understanding of cultural influence on sport consumer behavior, and provide empirical and practical evidence for marketers of the LPGA to enhance consumers’ attitude toward international golfers, such as developing cultural awareness campaigns to educate consumers and formulating cultural interaction programs to enhance cross-cultural appreciations.