Sports Fan Engagement and Egocentric Social Network: A Case Study on Chinese Minor League Soccer

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Soccer is one of the most popular sports in China with over 26 million players in the country (Kunz, 2007). After the extensive Chinese Soccer Association management corruption scandals in the early 21st century, the Chinese professional soccer league is attempting to rebuild its reputation and return to a position that reflects the ‘Golden Era’ of the late 20th century, when soccer fandom in China was booming.

This paper focuses on the community that exists around a Chinese soccer club because sport brand communities are considered a distinct market category (Bagozzi, 2002) and provide data related to customer marketing information (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008). In order to learn the consumer insights and their reasons for participating in brand communities, researchers have created many scales and conducted much research across many industries; however, no paper has tested the fan engagement scale (FEC) in the sports domain. In addition, the sports brand community in China, which is nurtured in collectiveness and Confucianism in Chinese culture (Nisbett, 2003), might differ from other brand communities.

Our research analyzes the attributes of the ego network and fan engagement in the brand community in order to understand the dynamics of each, the relationship between the two, and how the characteristics of fan ego network and fan engagement collectively contribute to brand communities. Further, this is the first paper to focus specifically on the Chinese Minor League Soccer fan community.

Ego network analysis helps us to uncover the patterns behind social interactions and to predict the behaviors of the actors in the network (Renfro & Deckro, 2001). Based on the attributes of the club fans’ ego networks attributes that will be collected in the survey, this paper focuses on network size, tie strength, composition, homophily, and heterogeneity of the fans’ ego networks. In addition to ego network analysis, we will also analyze sport fan engagement. The instruments of the fan engagement scale that is used in this paper are based on the customer engagement scale from Baldus (2015). In addition, two other dimensions, fan welfare and companionship, are added to the scale with assistance from an expert panel.

The community that exists around a Chinese Minor League Soccer club is the focal point of this essay. In order to examine the characteristics and relationships between sport fan engagement and egocentric network, we distributed a survey to the members of this soccer fan club. Included in this survey are the following items: fan basic information, game attendance, degree of support, a 13-dimension fan engagement scale, and the egocentric network attributes for alters of respondents. Thus far, we have collected 123 surveys.

Finally, we will analyze the data through UCINET and R. Through UCINET, we will be able to identify factors that influence the fan-to-fan interactions by analyzing the egocentric data. Cluster analysis will be applied to uncover the fan engagement dataset through R. Along with this analysis of the customer engagement, this paper also tries to understand how the characteristics of fans’ ego networks influence fan engagement.