Where in the World are the Minor League Fans? Effects of Proximity and Competition on Minor League Fandom

Dorothy Collins, Lake Erie College
Katharine Reifurth, Aurora University

Marketing - Fan Identification (Professional Sport)  virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Session: Team Identification II
Abstract 2020-208

Sport management researchers have noted the uniqueness of minor league baseball in America (Madrigal, 1995; Shapiro, Ridinger, & Trail, 2013). Research shows minor league teams benefit from the brand associations made by consumers to their parent major league organizations (e.g., the Akron Rubber Ducks benefit from their affiliation with the Cleveland Indians) both financially and in terms of local pride and quality of life (Agha & Coates, 2015). Distance between major league teams and their minor league affiliates varies widely, with some located in the same cities but others located over 2,900 miles away (Fulano, 2017; Gaines, 2011). Not only does proximity differ greatly amongst teams, so does the level of in-market competition from both other baseball teams, and other sports. This direct competition may affect fan identification with the minor league team, as location and existence of other sports teams has proven to affect identification levels (Kolbe & James, 2000; Reifurth, Bernthal, Ballouli, & Collins, in press). This study examines the unique identities created by consumers of minor league sports with specific interest in the impact on this identification of major league affiliate distance and sport competition in the city in which the minor league team exists.

Researchers conducted field observations and unstructured interviews at 54 major and minor league baseball games during the 2019 season. Researchers utilized data collected at both major and minor league games to gauge differences in how consumers identify with the teams at various levels of sport. Coding of themes and evaluation of behavioral patterns were analyzed, first by each individual researcher and then confirmed or discussed at length with the fellow researcher to ensure limited affects of researcher bias on the results. While data analysis is still ongoing, preliminary findings include evidence of a geographic “sweet spot” for minor league teams in relation to both parent team location and location of competing sports teams in the area. Location of the minor league teams also seems to affect the level of comfort and affinity for the minor league team (and park) as a gathering place for fans located far away from the major league affiliates. Finally, the data demonstrates that some fans use minor league attendance as a surrogate for attendance at major league games, when the major league affiliate is on the road, too costly to attend, or too far to attend. Further analysis of the formation of these various affects on the minor and major league identifications will be discussed.

The findings of this study will inform professional sport teams of the importance of location and existence of competition on the overall identification of fans to both major and minor league affiliates across the country. Practitioners will be able to utilize these results to better promote identification to their specific sports team as opposed to fans of the sport in general, improving their chances of continuously securing the psychological and financial support of fans.