(Re)imagining the Long-distance Love: Exploring the Oversea Official Supporters Clubs of the English Premier League Teams

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Globalization has fostered a large-scale global market place. With the aid of media technology, fans are now able to access sport products regardless of geographical proximity. The globalization of sports has also dramatically changed the landscape of sport fandom, particularly with the growth of “distant fans” or “satellite fans”, who forge a psychological connection with a distant team primarily via media consumption, and who not only represent a sizable fan base but also contribute abundant revenue to sports teams (Kerr & Gladden, 2007). Professional sport teams and parent leagues aspire to expand their global market through a variety of means such as establishing supporters clubs overseas. Supporters clubs have drawn increasing interest as a topic of research in sport studies especially in the area of sociology and culture studies (Fletcher, 2010; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006; Parry & Malcom, 2004). However, there has been little research on the topic in sport marketing.

Supporters clubs generally consist of fans of a particular team who are interlinked by shared identification with and passion for a team. Similar to a small group brand community, official supporters clubs are “strongly sociocentric, highly involving and sustained social groups” (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, p. 47). Supporters clubs are either independent entities formed by fans voluntarily or are part of a team’s official supporters club program.

In recent years, official supporters club has become an increasingly popular tool utilized by the English Premier Leagues (EPL) teams to expand their global market. For example, in 2016 the Liverpool Football Club reported having over 200 Official Supporters Clubs all over the world in over 50 different countries (Liverpool.com, 2016). Arsenal reported over 64 official supporters clubs located in different regions of the United States (Arsenal.com, 2016). The official supporters clubs are recognized by and officially affiliated to the EPL teams. The teams normally charge the supporters clubs a membership fee, for which the clubs receive a variety of benefits such as official status, ticket access, and discounted merchandise.

Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy, and Kirchner (2009) suggest that official supporters clubs present an additional source of revenue and contribute to long-term customer loyalty in a manner similar to other relationship marketing strategies. In addition to bridging the fans and sports teams, official supporters club also provide a terrain for fans to foster a sense of community and group identity. Members from these small group communities develop shared identification, rituals as well as in-group favoritism with a high degree of autonomy. Previous researchers studying the small group community have demonstrated that a group’s image can be increased through “encouraging interactions with like-minded customers and identification with the group in a social context offered (and sponsored) by the firm and the brand, but controlled and managed primarily by the consumers themselves” (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, p. 60). Finally, it is noticeable that oversea fan bases are currently the major target of the EPL official supporters clubs. Teams like Liverpool no longer accept applications to join the supporters clubs from the local fans in the UK (Liverpool.com, 2016).

Various scholars have written about the influence of geography on the experience of fandom (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Kerr & Emery, 2011; Pu & James, 2015; Silk & Chumley, 2004; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996); they have also demonstrated that fans who follow a favorite team which is geographically distant are often possessing distinct features in terms of the formation, progression and maintenance of their fandom compared to those who support a team in the geographically proximal region in which they reside. For example, distant fans are considered to be constrained with the capacity of building enduring social connections since they are often isolated from like-minded fans (Wann, 2006). Previous researchers have identified the salience of social connection and the derived sense of community in maintaining and strengthening the connection between the individual consumers and the
consumption objects such as the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Postmodern consumer behavior theories such as neo-tribalism further highlight the “linking value” in improving a consumer’s experience based on reinforced bonds between individuals within a group (Cova & Cova, 2002). To the professional sports teams who are determined to expand their global fan base, one of the major challenges is how to maintain these distant fan’s commitment and loyalty with the team when normative social interactions are largely absent. We contend that an official supporters club serves as an alternative form of small group community for those distant fans where they are not only connected to the sports team, but are also able to gain “linking value” through interactions between fellow fans. The current study was designed to assess the experience of distant fans participating in an official supporter’s club, and to gauge whether a “linking value” is experienced. The study is guided by following questions:

**RQ1:** How do fans perceive their belonging and membership in the supporters clubs?
**RQ2:** How do the supporters clubs influence the fan's loyalty and commitment to the team?
**RQ3:** How do the fans perceive their relationship with other members in the supporters clubs?

The exploration of the official supporters clubs will be informed by semi-structured interviews and participant observations, which have been proved to be effective tools in studying group of individuals when the major research question is concerned with their “lived experience” within the group (Ellis, 1992; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). 8 Official supporters clubs of the EPL teams including Arsenal, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspurs located in multiple American cities were selected and interviews will be conducted with key informants who hold membership in the supporters clubs. Some of the interview questions include “Why did you join the supporters club?”; “What’s your experience of being a member of the supporters club?”; “How does the supporters club influence your connection to your favorite team?” and “How do you perceive your relationship with other members in the supporters club?”. The researcher will visit the supporters clubs regularly for participant observation. The study is currently in process and the results will be presented.

Through analysis of the interviews and observation data, we will contribute to the body of literature on the nested group identities by examining the reciprocal relationship between subordinate and superordinate groups (Heere & James, 2007; Lock, 2014). The exploration of official supporters group may also provide implications to the consumption community research such as brand community (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2002) and tribal marketing (Cova & Cova, 2001; Goulding, Shankar & Canniford, 2013). In relation to globalization theories, we may further current knowledge of the “glocalized” experience of fandom, which involves the transplantation and readaption of foreign soccer culture into a new cultural milieu (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006). Finally, we will provide managerial and marketing implications pertaining to the globalization of professional sport teams especially in terms of the strategies on the creation and retention of distant fans who are generally constrained of social interactions with fellow fans.