Chapter XIV
Online Questionnaires and Interviews as a Successful Tool to Explore Foreign Sports Fandom

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation and advances in communications technology have greatly expanded the potential marketplace for professional teams, especially for those sports internationally popular. As a result, many team brands profit from millions of satellite fans, or supporters, worldwide. However, the reasons satellite supporters identify with their team remain largely unexplored. Therefore, this chapter describes three studies designed to examine the team identification of these supporters and highlights how mixed methods can be successfully employed online to engage with distant sports fans.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and advances in communications technology have greatly expanded the potential marketplace for professional teams, especially for those sports internationally popular. Moreover, professional team sport, like other forms of popular culture, has become a marketable commodity subject to the logic of the marketplace. As a result, sports teams are commodified, courtesy of the ‘Faustian pact’ that exists between mass media and professional sport, and tailored to appeal to indirect consumers, either through television or, increasingly, the Internet. Due to this global exposure, Spanish football club, Barcelona F.C., is believed to have 70 million supporters worldwide, while English rival, the Liverpool F.C., claims to have 28 million fans (Rice-Oxley, 2007). Indeed, global powerhouses such as Real Madrid and Manchester United could have as many as 350 million supporters (Henriksen, 2004).
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The increased importance of these foreign consumers, especially with respect to the contribution they could make to a team’s brand equity, led Kerr and Gladden (2008) to coin a new term, the ‘satellite fan’, to encompass these individuals. However, given that the strength of their loyalty is unknown, Kerr (2008; in press) suggested, it was perhaps more prudent to refer to these individuals as ‘satellite supporters’. The objectives of this chapter, therefore, are threefold: to describe the evolution of a series of studies designed to understand the team identification of satellite supporters; to briefly discuss some key findings from these studies; and to highlight how online research methods can successfully contribute to sports fan research, especially as researchers seek to engage with distant participants.

BACKGROUND

In a competitive sports marketplace, satellite supporters represent significant revenue streams. For instance, 20 percent of merchandise sold through the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) official website are to overseas fans (Eisenberg, 2003); Japanese baseball fans were expected to spend $USD500 million on New York Yankees tickets and souvenirs in support of their countryman, Hideki Matsui (Whiting, 2003); and Real Madrid now earns 60 percent of merchandise revenue from international markets, up from 10 percent only five years ago (Jones, Parkes, & Houlihan, 2006). Furthermore, the greater the degree of identification between an individual and their chosen team, or “the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected” (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, p. 3), the more likely they are to attend their team’s games (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Fisher, 1998; Wann & Branscombe, 1993); monitor their team in the media (Fisher, 1998; James & Trail, 2005); purchase team merchandise (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Greenwood, 2001; James & Trail, 2005); and to both recognise (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Lascu, Giese, Toolan, Guehring, & Mercer, 1995) and purchase (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000, 2004) products from team sponsors.

The complex nature of sports fandom also has implications for the choice of suitable methods. While studies on the sports fan have traditionally favoured quantitative methods, there is now greater acceptance of a qualitative approach. Furthermore, mixed methods, Jones (1997b) claimed, can provide “a fuller understanding of the sports fan”. Although the use of mixed methods to explore sports fandom is becoming increasingly popular, its adoption is still relatively limited. In addition, although there have been attempts to examine sports fans through the Internet, using for instance online surveys (Nash, 2000), online message boards (End, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Mitrano, 1999), and online ‘interviews’ (Heinonen, 2002; Mitrano, 1999; Silk & Chumley, 2004), it is still a relatively recent approach.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

Although satellite supporters might prove to be the future lifeblood of a sports franchise, and despite the increased attention paid to team identification (notably, Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Jacobson, 2003; Jones, 1998; Kolbe & James, 2000; Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997), the reasons these foreign consumers identify with their chosen sports teams remain largely unexplored. Indeed, Richardson and O’Dwyer (2003) claimed, research on factors that contribute to a fan’s original choice of sports team would be a welcome addition to the field.

The series of studies presented in this chapter therefore seeks to address the imbalance. This chapter reports the results of research on the team identification of satellite supporters. Furthermore, it seeks to validate the use of online
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