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# **RE-ENCHANTING THE CHINESE SPORT SPECTATOR – A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE ON SPORT MARKETING IN CHINA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The cultural and philosophical heritage of modernism underpinning general marketing management theory imparts profound implications for organisations operating in professional sport. This theoretical paper uses the context of China's professional football industry to argue that marketing may benefit from a more postmodern approach to marketing management.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this theoretical paper is to introduce the conceptual and philosophical differences between modern and postmodern approaches to marketing in an attempt to offer creative marketing solutions to practitioners operating in the professional football industry of China.

The paper starts by introducing modernism in marketing, before addressing the postmodern condition. A piece of primary research which has acted as the inspiration for the paper is then introduced, before linking these findings and interpretations to potential postmodern approaches to marketing.

It is hoped this research will influence decision makers in Chinese sport marketing, and also contribute to the relatively under researched area of postmodern approaches to marketing (Kozinets, 2002).

## **BACKGROUND**

The ideas, opinions, and beliefs humans hold in relation to consumption, markets, and culture are hinged firmly against modernist cultural and philosophical foundations (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Modernism is largely associated with 19th century economic industrialization, but in particular with the societal transition from feudalism to capitalism (Foster, 1990). This era of humanity signifies the positivist search for absolute truth (Goulding, 2000) through the search for a rationally constructed and technologically orientated world, based around a concept of what Lyotard (1984, 1992) terms metanarratives – overarching goals, or aims which direct future human action. For Firat and Venkatesh (1995:240) “[t]he postmodern quest is therefore to ‘re-enchant human life’ and to liberate the consumer from a repressive rational/technological scheme”.

## **MODERNISM AND MARKETING**

Modernist marketing developed in the second half of the 20th century, defining the basic principles of modern marketing and its role in society (Dholakia & Firat, 2006). The pioneering marketing theories of Alderson (1957, 1965) consolidated, and enshrined the marketing concept at the heart of modern marketing (Bagozzi, 1975; Kotler, 1972). The marketing concept signifies marketing's place in the modern order of human history by prescribing the relationship between institutions and their consumers and/or other stakeholders. This relationship has since been extended to an ever-growing range of institutions from firms, non-profit entities, government agencies, through to the arts, religion, and sport (Kotler & Levy, 1969).

The success of modern marketing, particularly in western society is evident through the rise and maintenance of the market economic system (Dholakia & Firat, 2006). This success is perhaps due to the marketing concept's ability to encapsulate the essence of modern culture's most valued institution – democracy. The marketing concept seemingly corresponds well with the promotion of the sovereign citizen whose needs are served by governing institutions. For Vargo and Lusch (2004), modern marketing's central principals have seldom been challenged, with the area of marketing still viewed as a way of provisioning that which is needed by consumers need – though now of services rather than through a framework of economic exchange.

### **THE POSTMODERN CONDITION**

Firat and Dholakia (2006) summarise that postmodernism is firstly a cultural phenomenon comprised of three consistent attributes; Firstly, postmodernism calls for the recognition that modernism's grand project of grand-narratives is problematic because of its privileged status within society and ignorance of difference; Secondly, postmodern thought rejects linear existence and the argument that postmodernism did not develop after modernism, but existed before, and during the modern era; Thirdly, postmodernism focuses on the present, rather than emphasis on the past, or the creation of a grand future (Firat & Dholakia 2006).

Kellner (1989) believes this development represents the postmodern turn in consumer society, where universal, exclusive grand narratives are replaced by a social reality constructed by consumers. For Firat and Venkatesh (1995:244), this has a liberatory effect, and challenges society to “practice unabashedly the [postmodern] conditions toward microemancipatory ends-as opposed to grand emancipatory projects”.

### **THE CHINESE FOOTBALL INDUSTRY**

The modern era, particularly within marketing, can be seen to have come to existence through the development of democratic, capitalist society in the west. Although China's recent economic performance is indicative of a shift from communism to more capitalist ideology, societal governance is yet to reflect this transition. Despite this, business activity across multiple industries signal the adoption of modern approaches to management, in more recently, marketing.

This is evidenced considerably in the setting of the professional Chinese football league. Acquisition of non-Chinese players and coaches on salaries which dwarf the nations GDP per capita as well as a rise in short-term operational marketing-driven promotional tactics (Economist 2009) signal China's adoption of modern marketing strategies. The question therefore is – is the adoption of modern marketing techniques suitable for China's professional sport industry? Or could a postmodern perspective offer an alternative approach to marketing.

### **INSIGHT FROM BRAND EQUITY**

Recent research conducted into the formation of brand equity within the context of China's professional football league provided some useful exploratory insights into the current drivers of brand equity from Chinese consumers.

A sample of University students (n=195) was used based on the idea that the student population of China represents the future middle class of the nation, and thus is important for research hoping to impact change, or contribute to long-term strategic development.

Using the consumer-based brand equity in sport model, as proposed and tested by Gladden and Funk (2001), survey data in response to specific brand benefits showed significant relationships ( $<0.001$ ) between the benefits of escape and nostalgia in the formation of brand attitudes such as knowledge, importance, and trust, while interestingly, Chinese consumers considered fan identification not to be of benefit. Additionally, the research indicated online platforms were most popular for both interacting, and learning about the sporting brand, while also for when it comes to purchasing products and brand extensions.

These specific results indicate to the author that current event experience, and marketing activity is not facilitating connections between supporters and teams, nor is it tailored to the needs and behavioural underpinnings of the Chinese sports consumer. Further, the technological preference of consumers would add further weight to the call for a postmodern critique of sport marketing in China.

### **A POSTMODERN APPROACH**

A postmodern orientation to marketing positions consumers demands that the relationship between the marketing organization and its consumers changes. Rather than having separated entities forced together through economic exchange relationships, participants (managers and consumers) become partners in the construction of needs, wants, desires, and visions (Kozinets, 2002). Here, marketing is not distanced or detached from the consumer, rather it transforms to become a process to empower consumers to construct their own realities, most prolifically through the construction of consumption communities (Cova 1997, 1999, Kozinets 2002).

While the goal in modern marketing was linked to consumer satisfaction, the new postmodern condition redirects marketing to reposition its goal from satisfaction to empowerment (Cova 1999, Kozinets 2002) – emancipating them from the modern

regime, and reenchanting the consumer as an active determinant of their own, and the organisation's equity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

This can be facilitated by immersing the postmodern consumer into textual, multifaceted, hedonic experiences (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Cultural themes nurture impressive immersion into experience, thus rather than adopting marketing regimes fostered under modernist, western approaches, the invocation of a cultural theme requires the presence of a community of participants which cannot be individually evoked, nor individually experienced (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

The conceptual shift from satisfaction to empowerment, and subsequent operationalisation in marketing practice could be achieved through the use of technology, such as social media platforms, and gamification of sporting brands. This would allow for postmodern approaches to marketing to exist both during live sporting events and in non-event periods, ultimately facilitating the development of a sporting community. In this author's opinion, this approach would link consumers through shared values, thus empowering them through the nature of consumption and existence within a community of value, rather than simply as an element of exchange.

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